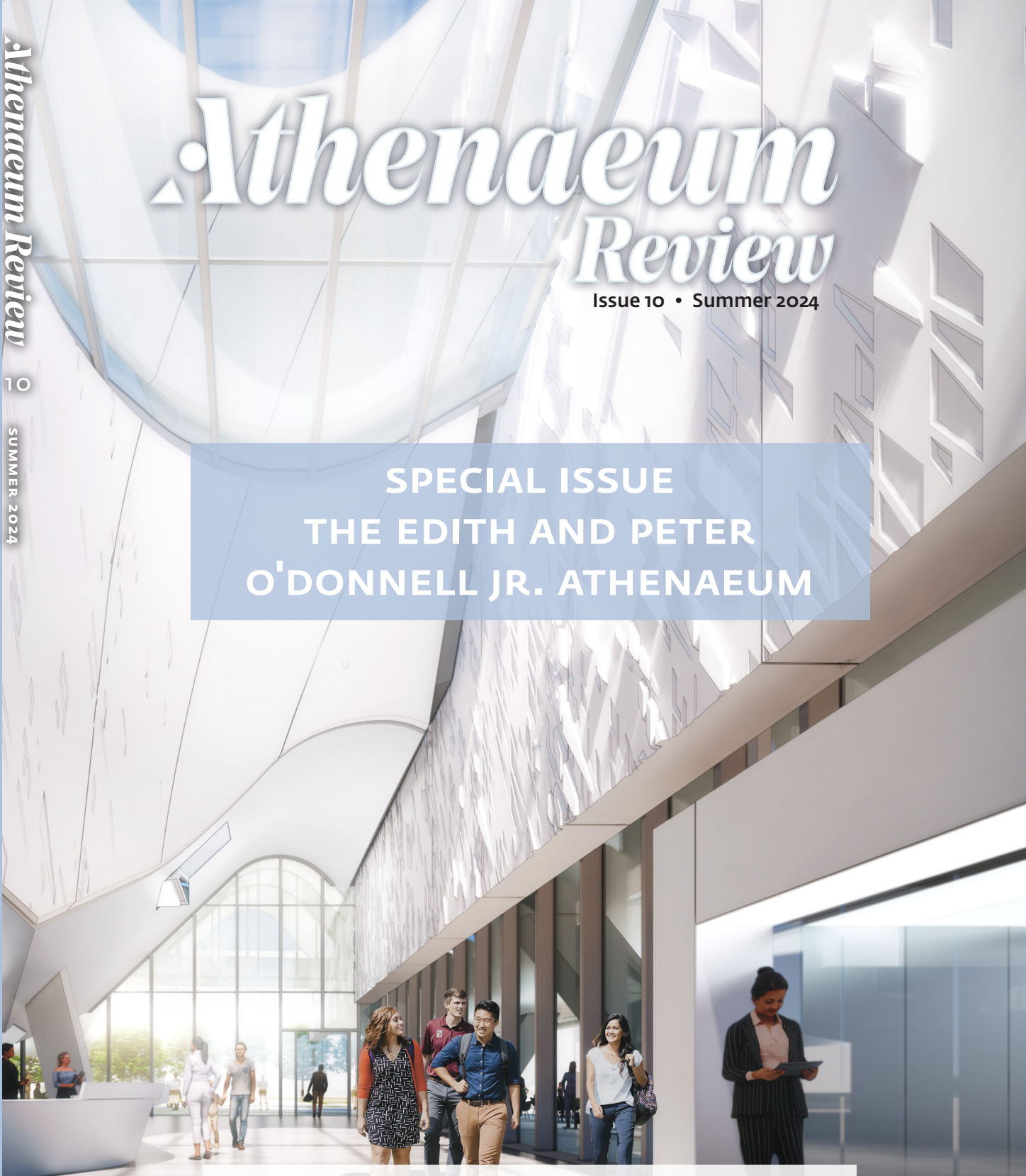
Athenaeum Review 10 SUMMER 2024

Athenaeum Review

Issue 10 • Summer 2024

SPECIAL ISSUE
THE EDITH AND PETER O'DONNELL JR. ATHENAEUM



Journal of the Harry W. Bass Jr. School of Arts, Humanities, and Technology
and the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History
at the University of Texas at Dallas

Athenaeum Review
Issue 10

Summer 2024

Athenaeum Review publishes essays, reviews, and interviews by leading scholars in the arts and humanities. Devoting serious critical attention to the arts in Dallas and Fort Worth, we also consider books and ideas of national and international significance.

Athenaeum Review is a publication of the Harry W. Bass Jr. School of Arts, Humanities, and Technology and the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History at the University of Texas at Dallas.

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ISSN: 2578-5168 (Print)
E-ISSN: 2578-5176 (Online)

Front Cover: Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum. Photo: Morphosis.

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The Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum

The Arts and the University

Literary Lives

Contributors

Brian Allen is an art historian living in Arlington, Vermont. He was the curator of American art at the Clark Art Institute and director of the Addison Gallery, Phillips Academy and the museum division of the New-York Historical Society. He received his BA from Wesleyan University, his MA from Williams College, and his PhD from Yale University. He has written art criticism for many journals, and is the art critic for *National Review.*

David Carrier is a philosopher who writes art criticism. He has published books on Nicolas Poussin's paintings, on the art writing of Charles Baudelaire, on the abstractions of Sean Scully, on the art museum and on the prospects for a world art history. And with Joachim Pissarro, he has co-authored two books on what they call wild art, art outside the art world system. Currently his writing appears in *Brooklyn Rail* and *Hyperallergic*. His recent books include *Philosophical Skepticism as the Subject of Art: Maria Bussmann's Drawings* (Bloomsbury, 2022), *Art Writing On Line: The State of the Art World* (Cambridge Scholars, 2022) and *In Caravaggio's Shadow: Naples as a Work of Art* (Thames & Hudson, forthcoming in 2025).

Robert Crossley is a biographer, editor, and literary critic whose latest book is *Epic Ambitions in Modern Times: From* Paradise Lost *to the New Millennium.* His recent essays on literary subjects have appeared in *The Hudson Review, Raritan, The Sewanee Review, The Massachusetts Review*, and *Southwest Review.* He is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Arne Emerson is a Partner at Morphosis with more than 27 years of experience. Since joining Morphosis in 2009, he has led the design and management of a broad range of award-winning building and planning projects around the world, including the Perot Museum of Nature and Science in Dallas, the new headquarters for Eni in Milan, two new US embassies in Beirut, Lebanon and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and the on-going multi-building Athenaeum cultural masterplan on the UT Dallas campus. Arne is also a frequent lecturer on the work of Morphosis and a committed educator and guest critic at various schools of architecture in the US and Europe.

Julia Friedman is a Russian-born art historian and writer. She began to study art history at the Hermitage Museum, in St. Petersburg, where she grew up. After receiving her Ph.D. from Brown University in 2005, she has researched and taught in the US, UK and Japan. In 2010 Northwestern University Press published her illustrated monograph *Beyond Symbolism and Surrealism: Alexei Remizov's Synthetic Art*. The same year she became a regular contributor to *Artforum*, and in 2017 she began writing for *The New Criterion*. Since then, she has written extensively about the effects of partisan ideologies upon art history, museums, public art, and liberal arts education. In 2020 she was interviewed for the Netflix documentary *Bob Ross: Happy Accidents, Betrayal & Greed*, and in 2021 was a guest on William Shatner's talk show *I Don't Understand,* discussing what makes something art. www.juliafriedman.org

A. Kendra Greene is the author and illustrator of *The Museum of Whales You Will Never See*, and the forthcoming modern bestiary *No Less Strange or Wonderful*. She became an essayist during a Fulbright grant in South Korea, completed her MFA at the University of Iowa, and in between has been lucky to research within any number of collecting institutions and work for years at a time with the Museum of Contemporary Photography, University of Iowa Museum of Natural History, Dallas Museum of Art, and Nasher Sculpture Center. This Fall she is both a MacDowell Fellow and an American Library in Paris Scholar of Note.

Amy Lewis Hofland leads the Crow Museum of Asian Art of the University of Texas at Dallas and teaches in the Hobson Wildenthal Honors College. The Crow Museum is part of the soon-to-open O'Donnell Athenaeum Arts and Performance complex on the southeast corner of campus. Hofland holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Texas at Austin and a Master of Arts degree in art education from the University of North Texas. In addition to her work at the Crow Museum, Hofland teaches at UTD, and is a noted author, speaker and community leader.

Amit Majmudar is a poet, novelist, essayist, and translator. The former first Poet Laureate of Ohio, he is also a diagnostic nuclear radiologist in Westerville, Ohio, where he lives with his wife and three children. His forthcoming books include *The Great Game: Essays on Poetics* (Acre Books, 2024) and *Three Metamorphoses* (Orison Books, 2025).

Jonathan Palant is Associate Dean of the Arts and Director of Choirs at the University of Texas at Dallas and is conductor of both Credo, a 130-member community choir, and the Dallas Street Choir, a musical outlet for those affected by homelessness. In late 2017, the *Dallas Morning News* named Palant one of nine "Texan of the Year" finalists, and in 2016, Musical America named him one of their "Innovators of the Year" for establishing the Dallas Street Choir. Both Palant's book, *Brothers, Sing On! Conducting the Tenor-Bass Choir*, and *The Jonathan Palant Choral Series* are published by the Hal Leonard Corporation. Dr. Palant holds degrees from Michigan State University, Temple University, and the University of Michigan.

Nils Roemer is Dean of the Harry W. Bass Jr. School of Arts, Humanities, and Technology; Director of the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies; Stan and Barbara Rabin Distinguished Professor in Holocaust Studies; and Arts, Humanities, and Technology Distinguished University Chair at The University of Texas at Dallas. He received in 1993 his MA from the University of Hamburg and in 2000 his PhD from Columbia University. He is the author of *Jewish Scholarship and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Germany: Between History and Faith* (2005), *German City, Jewish Memory: The Story of Worms* (2010) and numerous articles, and the co-editor of several volumes, including the academic journal *Germanic Review*. His special fields of interest are the Holocaust as well as European and Jewish cultural and intellectual history.

Jan Schreiber was Poet Laureate of Brookline, Massachusetts from 2015 to 2017. His books of poetry include *Digressions* (1970), *Wily Apparitions* (1992), *Bell Buoys* (1998), *Peccadilloes* (2014), and *Bay Leaves* (2019). A collection of his criticism, *Sparring with the Sun*, was published in 2014, and a new one, *Breath Lines*, will come out in 2025. His translations of *The Poems of Paul Valéry* appeared in 2021. An advisory editor of *Think* journal, he teaches in the BOLLI program at Brandeis University and runs The Critical Path, an annual symposium on poetry criticism.

Benjamin Shull is a writer and editor in New York.

Isabelle Stuart is a PhD student at the University of Oxford, where she researches modernist poetry recitation practices.

Michael L. Thomas is an Associate Provost, Director of the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, and the Richard R. Brettell Distinguished University Chair at UT Dallas. He also serves as the managing curator of the DMA galleries at the UT Dallas Athenaeum. He has excavated in Italy for 29 years where he co-directs two projects: the ongoing Oplontis Project in Torre Annunziata and the Mugello Valley Archaeological Project which is now in publication phase. A collaborative and interdisciplinary project between UT Dallas and UT Austin, the Oplontis Project is a leader in the implementation and utilization of Digital Humanities. His publications include studies on Etruscan architecture and archaeology, Roman art and architecture, Roman villas, Roman wine trade, and Roman numismatics.

Mai Wang is an assistant professor of literature at UT Dallas, where she teaches Asian American and Chinese diasporic literature. She holds a PhD in English from Stanford University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University.

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THE ATHENAEUM

INTRODUCTION

There's something palpable about expectation. It allows you to visualize what is yet to come. I'm expecting many good things in the days ahead at the Bass School and at UT Dallas, driven in part by the momentum of the growth of the arts at the University.

This is a historic time for the University with the fall 2024 introduction of the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum to the world. The opening of Phase I and the groundbreaking of Phase II of the O'Donnell Athenaeum on Sept. 24 showcase the magic of what's possible when we come together to expect the best, and bring it to life with imagination, focus and fortitude. Thus, it gives me even more joy to invite you to read this special issue of the *Athenaeum Review*.

You'll learn more about the O'Donnell Athenaeum – designed by architectural firm Morphosis – as a cultural and arts district, and about the vision that drives the creation of spaces as activators of thought, creativity, experience and connection. It's exciting to see how the big ideas and the tiniest of details interact to breathe life into design. As Arne Emerson, design partner with Morphosis, told me, "The basis of the master plan is that the arts district is a place where life happens all the time." You can read more about Arne's thoughts on interconnectedness and the convergence of architecture and its surrounding landscape in my interview with him.

The pages that follow include contributions by Crow Museum of Asian Art Senior Director Amy Lewis Hofland, who illuminates the ethos of the second location of the museum – Phase I of the O'Donnell Athenaeum – and its "primary role as teacher to the more than 35,000 students, faculty and staff at the building's footsteps." Phase I also includes two galleries dedicated to works of art on long-term loan from the Dallas Museum of Art. Dr. Michael Thomas – Director of the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, Richard R. Brettell Distinguished University Chair and Professor of Arts, Humanities, and Technology – discusses in an interview how the landmark partnership between UT Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art was forged as well as the "From Texas to the World" theme in the inaugural exhibition, which marks the opening of Phase I. The excitement of shaping the future of the arts is also driving the planned construction of Phase II. Dr. Jonathan Palant, Associate Dean of the

Arts and Director of Choral Activities, writes about the "dedication to excellence in both technology and acoustics" that lies at the heart of the Bass School's new performance hall and music building and the thoughtful design that "promises to create an environment where musical excellence can truly flourish."

There's more for you to enjoy in these pages. My hope is that you'll discover ideas worth sharing and be inspired and enriched by the range of perspectives within. Like the O'Donnell Athenaeum, this special issue of the *Athenaeum Review* invites engagement and dialogue from all directions. Expect good things.

Dr. Nils Roemer

Dean of the Harry W. Bass Jr. School of Arts, Humanities, and Technology
Director of the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies
Arts, Humanities, and Technology Distinguished University Chair
Stan and Barbara Rabin Distinguished Professor in Holocaust Studies

Building to Inspire

Arne Emerson and Nils Roemer in Conversation

Nils Roemer: You were born in 1971 and grew up in small places in Wyoming and Montana, removed from the urban bustle that now dominates your life in Los Angeles. Most of your portfolio has been in urban centers, not in rural areas, with the exception of projects like Vals, Switzerland. How much have those earlier impressions had a lasting influence on your work?

Arne Emerson: You know, those places have had a big influence on me, but I didn't realize it until later in my career. Particularly the landscape around where I grew up. Montana, where I went to college, is called "Big Sky Country" for its wide plains and mountains. The eastern parts of Wyoming, where I was raised, have fewer mountains, but similar beautiful open spaces. Growing up, I remember being fascinated by the contrast of the flat plains with the grain silos. There's a very strong horizontality in the landscape, with moments of verticality that are strikingly architectural—an empty plain with two or three grain silos, or a barn. In that rural context, they were monumental pieces of architecture and engineering that marked the landscape.

I think this somewhat austere environment sparked me to start looking out for other things that were interesting—but the starkness of it also made me yearn for something else, or somewhere else. Twice a year my family would leave our hometown of Casper, Wyoming, to go to Denver, the big city. This was a major event in my childhood and it planted in me a life-long love for cities and urban spaces. I loved going to the city—I liked what it had to offer—the pedestrian malls, towers, freeways. I just liked the urban-ness of it.

Now that I've had a chance to travel and work in some of the world's major metropolises, I realize that as a kid I had barely scratched the surface of what a city could be. Denver was the biggest city I had seen until I was in college and went to Los Angeles on a studio trip. I didn't have the opportunity to travel outside the country until I was in my late twenties, and I finally made it to Europe to experience the architecture, art, and culture that I had studied. I went to Berlin first. ...

NR: Interesting choice.

AE: Yeah, it was great. When I was in school, we had a study abroad program but I was never able to afford it. So, I never really experienced any major cities until I was probably 28 or 29. I suppose I had a little bit of an arrested development when it

came to understanding cities and how they influence architecture and culture, but as soon as I started traveling, I got a bit obsessed—and even more so, once I began working for Daniel Libeskind and had the chance to work on projects around the world.

NR: Your projects are on a scale that really shapes landscapes. The Athenaeum is very indicative of a style, where the inside and outside are intertwined. Natural light will be a constant fixture and constantly change the inside of the buildings.

AE: The idea of interconnectedness and the convergence of architecture and landscape has always interested me. Buildings are part of their environment—they need to be thought of as a part of the city, or a campus *and* the city in the case of the Athenaeum. Some of the most important spaces on campuses are the spaces in between the buildings, the walkways, plazas, green spaces. For the buildings within the Athenaeum to be successful, they need to be connected to these exterior spaces, they need to bring the outdoors in to the building. That is the reason why the buildings incorporate so much glass and are lifted up to create covered exterior and interior spaces—inviting the public in, creating that sense of connectedness, creating interesting spaces to learn, meet up, and study.

If I would have grown up in a city, I don't think I would have had that same sensitivity for that. Being from a rural area has very much informed my understanding and approach toward architecture and the desire to integrate landscape, architecture, light, and materiality much like what we're doing at the Athenaeum.

NR: Denver becomes really transformative for you twice. You attribute your interest in architecture to a shopping mall visit with your mother.

AE: It's true—I think the first key time was when I was quite young and visiting Denver with my family, on the 16th Street pedestrian mall. There was a guy that walked by us, he had a roll of drawings and a certain physicality; he was well-dressed and looked confident, which intrigued me. I remember asking my mom, do you know what he does? Maybe an engineer or an architect, she said. Once home, I looked up architecture and aesthetics in our encyclopedias and wrote a paper. After that I was in love with the idea of wanting to be an architect, although I had no idea what it meant at the time. There wasn't really any great architecture in Wyoming or Montana that I was aware of as a kid, but that propelled me with enough curiosity to get me to architecture school. Of course, once I got to school then everything changed, when I started to learn what architecture was really about. But that initial spark is what carried me through to where I got into architecture school.

NR: You were a first-generation student at Montana State University without a great many preconceived ideas about what architects are. Yet today you are a partner in one of the major architectural companies. There's a interesting story behind all of that. Once you graduated, you were trying to land a career in L.A., but then realized that there were more opportunities for you in Denver. Denver was good to you one more time.

AE: Well, ironically, yes. When I was in school there were a handful of architects I was really excited about. One was Daniel Libeskind, one was Morphosis, there were others, but those were really the two firms that introduced me to the world of

architecture. This was the early 1990s, pre-internet. Books were the only way to understand what was happening in the world, without traveling. The writings of Thom and Daniel and a few others were hugely influential to me, and I realized that I needed something bigger… beyond Montana, bigger than Wyoming. So, when I graduated in 1995, I sent out resumes to offices in New York and L.A. I couldn't get to New York, so I drove to L.A. and I actually tried to interview with Morphosis. There was a small recession in 1995, so I wasn't able to get a job. I returned to Denver, where I had some friends, and started working at a local architecture firm.

Even though I loved Denver, it was somehow too small for me after my pilgrimage out to Los Angeles. It felt like there weren't as many people in Denver who were open to experimenting or doing anything new or bold. In fact, it was quite conservative, so I was kind of turned off by that mindset and just wanted to escape. As a young designer I wasn't happy—I was either going try to move to the coast or go back to school. But in 1999 that all changed; Daniel Libeskind was selected to design the extension to the Denver Art Museum. His office was based in Berlin, in Charlottenburg, and they needed to partner with a local office in Denver. They interviewed our firm and we were selected as their joint venture partner. I was fortunate to be one of two people to be put on that team. That moment was also pivotal for me.

I dove into the project headfirst and was working incredible hours. I was a sponge—it was exactly what I was looking for at the time: big ideas, creativity, and collaboration. It was a museum and a masterplan that became a cultural nexus within the arts district. Daniel took a liking to me and asked me to work for him. I was with him for almost a decade as one of his main designers. That experience—working with such a great thinker as Daniel—opened me up to the world and how buildings and cities are important in shaping our built environment. That was pretty transformative.

NR: Daniel Libeskind was part of this rebellious group of architects that was celebrated in in the big landmark exhibit with Gehry and Eisenman on deconstructionist architecture. Have some of those aesthetics stayed with you? The emphasis on this multiple perspective, the blurring of inside and outside?

AE: One of the most influential things I learned with Daniel was how buildings and master plans can shape a city and the built environment—the spaces we experience every day. Up to that point I had been more focused on just the building itself. With Daniel it became more about the city. For example, how do the surroundings inform the building? How does it inform the architectural gestures, the circulation patterns, the scale and massing and relationships to the surroundings? How does the building actually sit within the surrounding buildings or a skyline or a flat plane? The whole notion of buildings, city, and urban context I learned, completely transformed my ideas of the transformative potential that architecture embodies. I then started looking at design much more holistically. Buildings are actually a living, breathing part of, and an extension of a city, and vice versa. I started to look at how you can take that inspiration from a city, whether it's a view corridor, whether it's a circulation pattern or surrounding buildings, whatever that is, and how that can start to shape the building.

Daniel's work is very intuitive and sculptural. Instead of talking about pragmatics, even though we did, the design

process was informed by intuitive moves at all scales—both exterior and interior—and how a building can respond to its surroundings in unique, non-traditional, and abstract ways. That intuitive process gave me the confidence to not be afraid to approach a design from different perspectives—pragmatic, intuitive, sculptural. One of his favorite quotes was "why does it have to be 90 degrees, where there are 359 other possibilities." Shaping space is one of the most important things we do as architects.

NR: Thinking about the Denver extension, it's always struck me that it created very unique spaces that were also meant to facilitate a certain engagement with the art. There are kind of the widenings and the closings. There's also like a certain functionality to the interior of the spaces, that are not just simply housing something but are kind of trying to orchestrate a certain form of engagement and activity in them. Libeskind's Jewish Berlin Museum has this in different ways.

AR: Absolutely.

NR: This also shapes our Atheneum.

AE: Both the Denver Art Museum and the Athenaeum have these great unexpected spaces and serendipitous moments that are created when you liberate yourself from the conventional. For the Athenaeum, we started with the idea of creating interesting exterior spaces for learning, performance, events, and everyday campus life that connected back to the campus. We thought of these spaces as the connective tissue between the campus and the new buildings within the Athenaeum.

When we stepped back and thought about the entire new cultural district as a whole, that's when the buildings really started to take shape. It became a collection of buildings, an arts complex with outdoor spaces that connect with rest of the campus. Responding to context is very much integral to the way Morphosis approaches design; on this project, we started thinking of the Athenaeum buildings as creating a campus within a campus. If you have more than one building in a project, you can put as much importance on the spaces between buildings as the buildings themselves. Those spaces became the baseline for how we started to define the Athenaeum.

During the interview for the Athenaeum, I presented an arrow from the campus mall continuing down into the site. This extension, I said, is your biggest asset. We have this great conceptual drawing showing the cultural district in context with the larger parts of the campus, traversed by a network of site flow lines marking circulation paths from pedestrians and cars. The converging pathways organically suggest the best fit for an outdoor arts plaza activated by movement through campus, lined with smaller spaces between the buildings. These spaces create an opportunity for unexpected moments—a sculpture garden, or outdoor performance areas. They can become as full of life as the inside of the buildings will be—where education happens, where creative moments happen.

Here is the influence of working with Daniel, not only in understanding how to connect to cities and campuses, but also the idea of these flow lines and open, active exteriors for studying, events, or hanging out. The ground floor of all the buildings in the Athenaeum are lined with covered outdoor spaces, with these beautiful dancing columns. By the buildings lifting up, you also get a connection between the lobby to the outside. You begin to blur the

Museums and performance halls are what many architects dream of designing.

line between landscape, architecture, and campus, underscored by the gentle undulation of the façade inwards and upward into the building. There is a porosity to the buildings and master plan that creates connections.

NR: Thinking about the master plan required you to envision the campus almost like a miniature city. The drawing that you just mentioned, it could also be just a snapshot of the city. It's just mobility, and where the master plan is no longer about building, but part of an extended community and how they are servicing this community. The porosity of interior and exterior spaces, the flow of light, all help to approach the Atheneum from an almost functional perspective, and to describe it as a place of sharing of knowledge and ideas, less of a kind of guarded and secluded space. Porosity is therefore not only an aesthetic choice but gives a functionality to the building. We have some art objects that can withstand the sun. They will be not just exhibited in the interior, but visible from the outside. Similarly, you will see the choir or orchestra rehearsing from the outside. It's really something about creating a space that facilitates that, but almost without borders of sorts, would you go along with that?

AE: Absolutely. The Atheneum will be the new cultural heart of the campus. Sometimes art and art museums can be imposing or intimidating to people. At UTD, it is first and foremost about the campus, the students, and the faculty, and the museum and learning that should reflect that community. We didn't want the building to be this kind of enclosed, edified box with an imposing door, where you go in and you're not quite sure what's happening. Instead, we had this idea of really challenging that model of museums, and pushing to open everything up, by lifting the building up and creating these welcoming sheltered exterior spaces that can be used for art, poetry readings, or any kind of impromptu performances and/or festivals.

We also want you to be able to see into the building, to be enticed inside by what you might glimpse from the plaza. When you're walking up directly from campus, you have a view of windows into some of the most interesting, active spaces of the buildings. There is also a lightwell located in the center of the Crow galleries. By designing with transparency and light, this creates a strong connection between the art, visitors and passers-by, the campus and larger community. The art is on display.

The basis of the master plan is that the arts district is a place where life happens all the time. They're not static buildings that are just another part of the campus. They're really there to create life and energy and inspire creativity and learning. So, I think that porosity is incredibly important to the design and the kind of ethos of the Athenaeum.

NR: Multiple entry points also facilitate this. It's not that there's only one way to enter through the lobby. The many visible and physical entry points also create diverse perspectives and experiences of the buildings.

Let's turn our attention to the design process itself. Your team approaches the

design process as a very integrative process of solving both aesthetic and functional problems in conversation with the various stakeholders, while staying with the overall building requirement and of course budget. The creative process both emerges from the vision and the constraints. Morphosis has a particular iterative design process. There's no real contradiction between the aesthetic vision and its functionality, because ultimately, it's all problem-solving. Would that be right?

AE: Architecture is functional art; it has to exist in the real world, it has to deal with gravity, with heat, the elements, it has to be safe—the fundamentals. By understanding that you can combine the functional requirements with your creative vision—that's where I think the difference lies between good architects and great architects. It's in not being afraid to confront and accept the constraints, and better yet, actually using the realities as the driver of the design rather than trying to compensate for them. Every architect is given the same kind of bricks and mortar, the same ingredients; it's about how you combine those ingredients to bake that cake. We're all starting out with the same thing, so I think that the ability to be creative, redesign, and not be afraid to make changes is important to the creative process.

I'm interested in working with the larger vision, understanding constraints and needs and to solve all of that creatively in a constant conversation with the client. And you're right, we never stopped designing. I look at the Phase One museum, where originally we had the bar and the main building forms completely separated, with a big skylight bisecting the two completely. In the end, we had to merge the two. We simplified the structure and created this beautiful barrel vault, which then we've continued into the performance hall. These larger moves that initially were instigated by cost cutting, value engineering, actually only work to make the project better. And if they can't, we'll start over and redesign the whole building. We are constantly iterating and exploring to make sure we're really developing the right idea.

We toured several performance halls in Utah, California, and Texas and saw good and not-so-good examples. Ultimately, you need flexible spaces for music education and for multiple types of musical performances. The Bing Hall at Stanford was not that—it was designed for one type of performance, and doesn't necessarily work well for world music or for jazz or rock or anything else, from what we understood. We have been able to apply the lessons learned through that process to design the performance hall to be specific to the UTD music program and their needs. I think we've been able to design a space that is incredibly functional, intimate, and will sound amazing. We're also making sure that wherever you're sitting, you have this intimate connection between you and the performers. By letting the constraints of acoustics, site lines, circulation, and flow drive the design, we've been able to design a functional and beautiful performance hall.

NR: We made some interesting choices because of that, for example, when we reduced the number of seats on the side because of the acoustics. For all of us, it is important to have a beautiful building and its functionality to give everyone a great experience. We have wonderful student performers, and great faculty and other musicians, who will perform in the hall, and we want to give them a stage that makes them sound as good as they can be.

AE: This new building will be your new center of gravity for music on campus—for studying, classes, and performances. This is going to be supporting everything for the

music program. So it has to function and be great on all levels.

NR: To get us there involves, however, an incredible attention to myriad details. Over the last few years, you're probably spending the better part of your time addressing the unique challenges that come with the museum and exhibiting spaces, and now with the performance hall and music program. There's an infinite amount of really small critical details that we have to get right, because otherwise, well, art objects will not be moved through the museum, students will not get to their instruments, etc. Did you anticipate this, or did this take you by surprise that it's just an avalanche? Did you anticipate that it would get so granular in terms of the problems of museums, performance halls, the size of storage for drums and trumpets?

AE: Absolutely. It's the beauty of what we do. I think why I love architecture so much is because you know, when we did the master plan, it was just a big idea—all the details were still to come. We didn't have a lot of connection yet with you, with Jonathan Palant, with Amy Hofland. We were focused on the big ideas and setting the basic parameters—the building sizes and heights, along with these big ideas of porosity and connectivity that would drive the big picture. But the details you refer to are what turns a good idea into reality—they are what make the building come alive and be functional.

I think everyone has been so great to work with, because that's when the designs come to life. Architects work the best with parameters and constraints. We need to know the different functionalities—percussion storage, rehearsal rooms, recording studios, classrooms. The criteria of what the music program requires is what we use as the key design drivers.

Everyone in our office wants to be a part of these projects, so I'm trying to accommodate that. We often share the work with the rest of the office so everyone understands the great cultural work we are doing at UTD. Museums and performance halls are what many architects dream of designing. And right now, we've got both happening right next to each other on the UTD campus, so it's incredibly rewarding and educational. And it's fun and engaging, because we're constantly being challenged by you and your team and by the budget and pragmatics these buildings require. We're constantly collaborating to figure out how to make it better.

I've been doing this for almost thirty years, so I understand the process, but what makes it exciting and challenging is every design is totally new. This museum is different than any other museum that I've done. This performance hall is completely unique. You decided it was important enough to make an entire music building and performance hall, it has education, music, performance, culture. It's gratifying and it's great to work on because your team are collaborative, and there's so much that we don't know and that we learn from you. I find that's the best part of the process, when we have you and Jonathan, provost Musselman, Vice President for Facilities and Economic Development Calvin Jameson, and Amy Hofland and her crew. What's great about you all as a client is that everyone from top to bottom cares, because it's ultimately about education. This project is larger than all of us in a way. I think we all understand that we're building something that's going to take on a life of its own and outlive all of us.

NR: This process has been also, I think, really rewarding for all of us, and has allowed us to take early on a certain degree of ownership in what's to come. There's a strong understanding amongst us that we work here in the service of our students.

This building is for them, therefore we want to get this right.

But really also for me, it's been a great learning process and I truly admire how your team works with constraints—as something that actually has thrusted us forward.

AE: You can't be shackled by the constraints! You've got to just accept those and then take those as challenges to inspire the design.

NR: There are constraints, but then there is also the possibly enabling and accelerating tools of generative AI. Is AI ever going to replace architects?

AE: AI will never replace architecture, because of the kind of engagement with stakeholders, the need for conversation, the collaborative, integrative process of designing. It depends on human involvement. Architecture remains human-centered. Generative AI is only another powerful tool, one that will probably change the industry like CAD software did several decades ago. But Thom Mayne, the founder of Morphosis, embraced digital designing in the 1990s in an enthusiastic, optimistic way that enabled our unique iterative and collaborative design process. We're excited to embrace the opportunities that AI brings with a similar sense of optimism and curiosity.

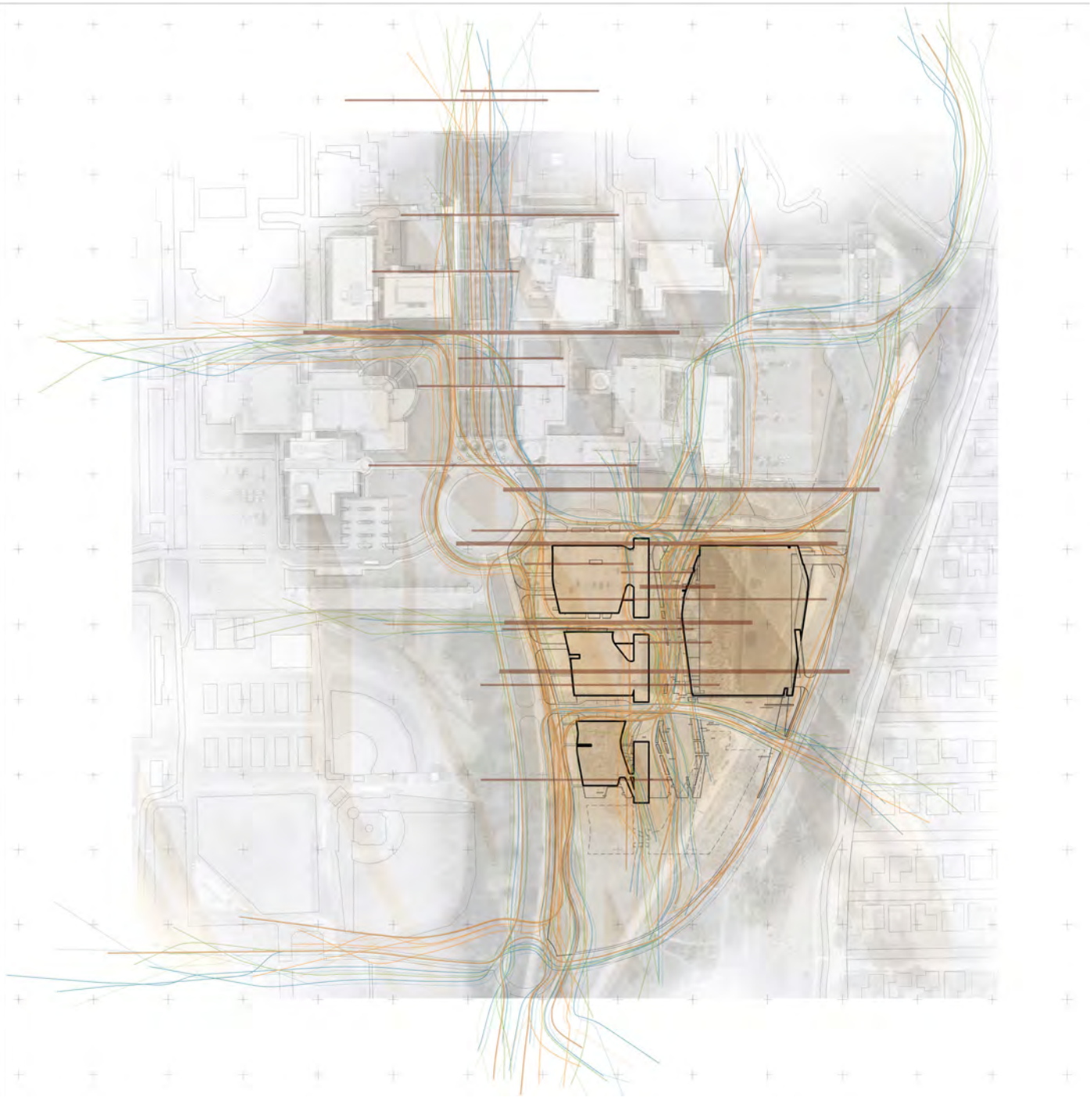
That said, a robot will never be able to replace a Miles Davis or a John Coltrane. Ever. Because there's a human touch to that kind of art form—I think architecture has this too. There are new tools that we have, but we're using them in a way where we're controlling AI and we can harness it, instead of allowing it to take over. I just don't think any technology will ever be able to take over the architectural creative

Shaping space is one of the most important things we do as architects.

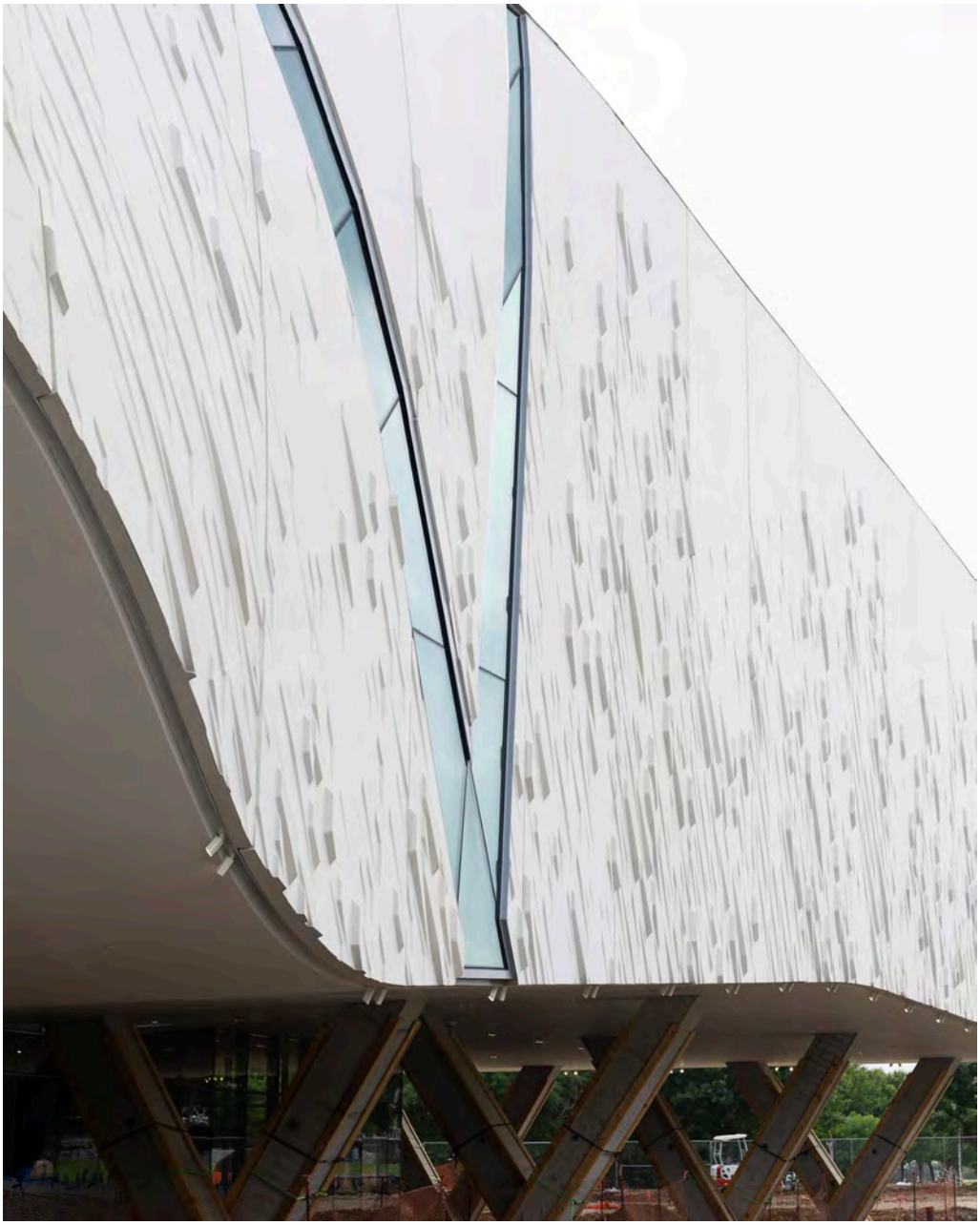
process. It may be able to replicate parts of it, but it's never going to take over fully because there's a certain soul involved. It remains a human-centered process, and that is also where the fun is. What's great for me is working with people like you that make it actually fun, because you like what's happening, and you like the process and you're open to it.

NR: Back in the days in Denver when you were visiting the shopping mall and you saw that man walking around, something really important happened for you. Hopefully these buildings will create a lot of these potential moments for our students—something that captures them and really makes them all of sudden go back and say, I really want to know more about this, and develop their passion. If our Athenaeum buildings will do some of that and create an environment for these formative experiences, then we all should be very happy with the outcome. I think this will be wonderful to watch in the future.

AE: That's a great way to wrap it up. These buildings are here to teach, right? They're here to inspire and teach and influence. What's great is everything that will happen inside these walls, once they're filled with people and life and music and art and culture. To me, that's the most exciting part. If you can inspire even just one person to go on and do something great or new or brave, then we've done our job.



Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, rendering of flow lines. Photo: Morphosis.

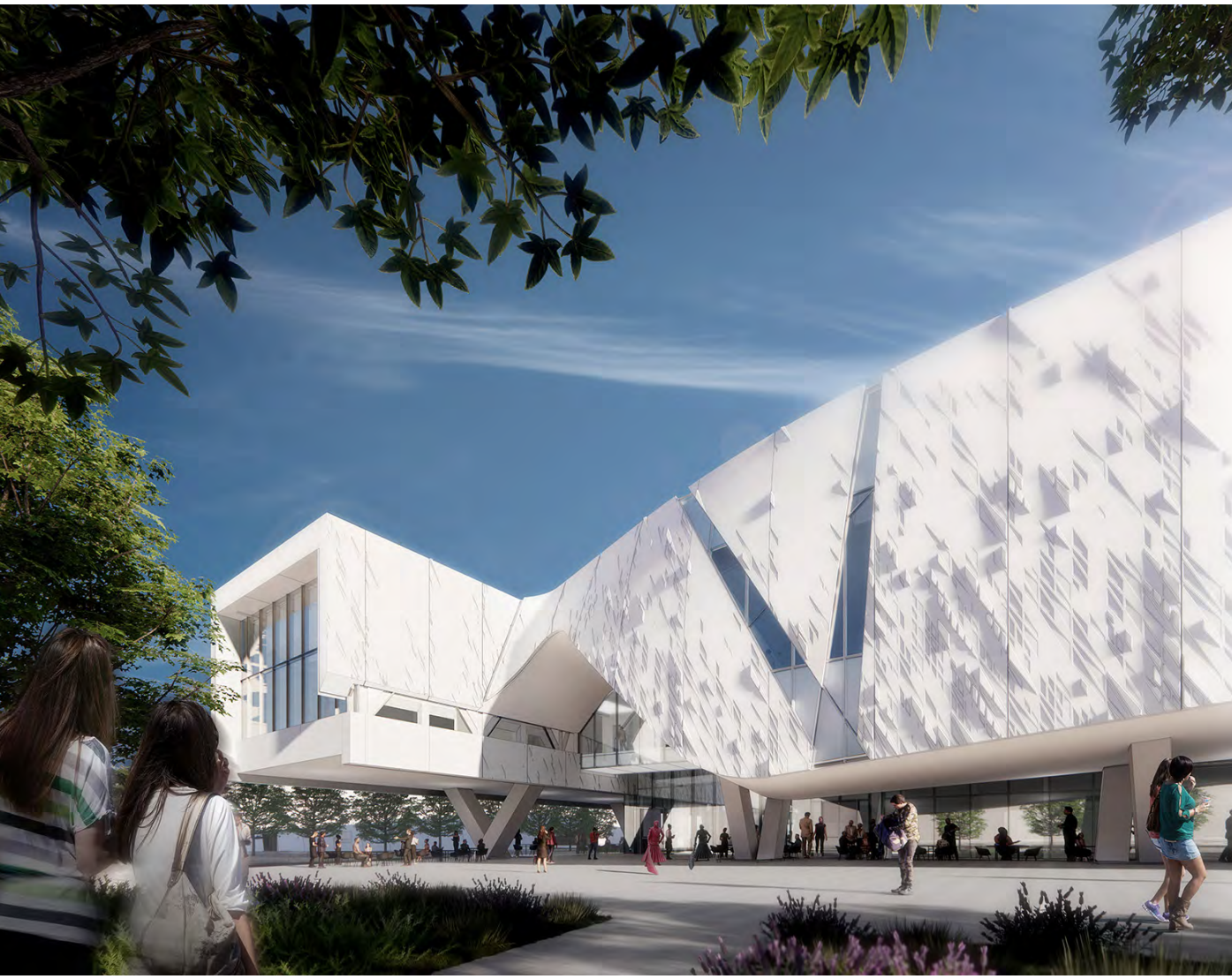


Crow Museum of Asian Art, Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum. Photo: Kristin Blackmar.

Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, plaza rendering. Photo: Morphosis.

Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, model. Photo: Jasmine Park.

Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, Brettell Reading Room. Photo: Arne Emerson.



Crow Museum of Asian Art, Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum. Photo: Morphosis.

Crow Museum of Asian Art, Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum. Photo: Morphosis.

The Dragon's Pearl

A New Museum for The University of Texas at Dallas

Amy Hofland

This fall, the University of Texas at Dallas will unveil Phase I of the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum. The first of two art museums will be the Crow Museum of Asian Art, along with other collections. This new home and second location for the arts of Asia (our location on Flora Street in the Dallas Arts District will remain active) is the footprint of a burgeoning Asian art museum for our region. The collection of the Crow Museum, while catalyzed by the Crow family over four decades of collecting art they loved, is now an assemblage of many collections given and acquired over our twenty-five year history. The new museum, in its campus gown, takes on a new primary role as teacher to the more than 35,000 students, faculty, and staff at the building's footsteps.

The building is a vessel of access and invitation. Designed by a team from Morphosis Architects of Los Angeles, led by design partner Arne Emerson, it has landed on the southeast edge of the campus as a sculpture of luminous white precast concrete with a glimmer of feldspar in the mix, subtly gilded and stunningly beautiful. There is a play on many things: inside/outside, carved/uncarved, open/closed, transparent/opaque, light/shade, looking out and looking in, but more than anything, this building is a place to step into and to feel held. Morphosis listened to our wishes to create a museum for everyone. Access points are visible at the ground floor, and before you enter you can see yourself in the building—at study, at play, engaged and alive.

The Crow Museum is been a place where, we believe, works of life come to art, rather than the older adage that works of art come to life. Now that you're here, in this essay, I wish to welcome you and introduce you to a few examples of works in the collection. In this virtual extension of the new museum on campus, I invite you to explore the very popular theme of dragons. Dragons in Asian art are mythical creatures: tremendously powerful beasts, full of meaning, with vast dominion over one of the most important aspects of life—the weather.

Unlike the dragons of the West, the dragons of East Asia are benevolent, compassionate creatures, combining the best attributes of several animals: the talon of the eagle, the head of the lion, and the body of the serpent. Dragons are strong, physically and mentally. In Chinese legend, they represent the ultimate creative force, only attained through enlightenment. They rule the rain, the sun, the clouds, and the sky, all elements of survival to an agrarian civilization.

In folklore, the dragon is born in a tale of scarcity. A young boy, facing drought and famine, goes off searching for food for his ailing mother. After many days of a treacherous search through dry land, he encounters a bright green patch of grass. He races home to feed his mother and returns to the patch of grass again for food. As he is digging in the grass, much to his amazement, the boy uncovers a large shiny pearl. He takes the food and the pearl home to his mother. While the grass wilts, the pearl offers quite the opposite: a miracle of an abundance of rice. In this tale, anything the pearl touches is multiplied. The boy and his mother share the rice and food with their neighbors and, as humans do, some want more: greed is the moral lesson of this tale. The boy, wishing to protect the pearl from theft, swallows it. Within moments and in a blaze of lightning and thunder, he feels an insatiable thirst. He is hot. And then the boy is transformed into a mystical, serpentine form: a dragon who ascends into the heavens to protect the earth.

In art, the dragon, reigning over earth and sky, evolves to represent the highest power in the land—the emperor and his family. Status is physically symbolized by the number of claws on the dragon's feet: five for the emperor, four for the officials, and three for a lesser class of leader in the court. Dragons often appear next to, or even surrounding a pearl (sometimes flaming), which is an allusion to the legend. Pearls represent wisdom and knowledge, and dragons are believed to be constantly engaged in an unquenchable quest for knowledge of history, literature, art, and other information. The dragon, like the boy, is always thirsty for more. As all good moral legends suggest, we should be like this, too.

Just as the lotus is a cross-cultural symbol of enlightenment in Asian art, the dragon reigns in imagery from China to Japan to Korea. The Crow Museum has almost seventy works of art with references to dragons, either in image or calligraphic script.

Figure 1. *Seated Buddhist Figure of a Lohan*.
China, Ming Dynasty, 1479.
Crow Museum of Asian Art, 1979.12

This Ming-dynasty Daoist monk from China (Figure 1), dated by inscription to the year, is an object with stories to tell. Stiffly posed, he sits alert, eyes intensely open, with a dragon in his right hand and a pearl in his left. The dragon reaches out, arm extended and poised to capture this treasure of enlightened knowledge. This simple and symbolic exchange, set against the stoic form of the monk, is his life's work. Dated and inscribed cast-iron images of this time are rare: one of the yet-to-be researched treasures of our collection, a pearl waiting to be grasped. The seams of the construction of the cast iron section tell us of the maker's process, something that refinement would have disguised. (Originally, a coat of gesso paint was traditionally applied to hide the seams.) This lesson of learning is the only thing this simple monk wants us to know: sit still, pay attention, be quiet, listen and learn.

Dragons also commonly appear in Chinese textiles, often on robes worn by the emperors and their families—imagine a crest indicating status and wealth (Figure 2).

This traditional 18th-century Tibetan cloak, fashioned from a Chinese style of robe, presents several "main-character" dragons playfully holding several pearls of wisdom and knowledge. As a monk's "dancing robe," which would have been worn for special occasions, it offers imagery of dragons over water and mountains—dominion over all. The splendor of gold with highlights of blue and red reflects extravagance and elegance fit for a king. The scales on the bodies of the dragon suggest snakes, and we see the powerful taloned limbs winding up into a fiercely countenanced lion's head topped by the antlers of a deer. He who wore this robe exuded power and protection, and a capacity to know and to govern wisely with that knowledge. The pearls are literally "in hand."

In our Japanese collection, we have several rock crystal spheres presenting this dynasties-old theme of dragon and pearl (Figure 3).

Rock crystal spheres from Japan were intended to be a feast for the eyes and for the mind. The rock crystal, a sedimentary stone quarried from the mountains in Japan, was polished through a painstaking process of abrasion. Imagine using a large rock tumbler and many long hours of work to abrade the material. The rock crystal shown here is the second-largest in the world, and among the "top ten" works in the Crow Museum today. The sphere is designated as "flawless," a visual puzzle of refraction and play that reverses the image as you peer through its glossy surface. Artisans formed the bases with equal complexity–this sphere is nested upon a base of silver gilt. Dragons weave in and out of the lacy waves and bubbles of ocean, actively swimming, straining, grasping, and chasing one very large pearl. In this work of art, the sphere is the pearl of wisdom and knowledge, and like the dragon, we are all in the role of seeker on a quest that is never-ending.

In our collection, dragons adorn painted ceramics, bronze bells, temple sculptures, and even roof tiles. Auspiciously, they protect all who encounter them, declaring, "Welcome, the dragon says. I will

Figure 2. Imperial Robe.
China, Qing dynasty, 18th century.
Crow Museum of Asian Art, 1984.23

Figure 3. Rock crystal sphere on stand with dragons.
Japan, Meiji period, 19th century.
Crow Museum of Asian Art, 1983.15

protect you." Dragons have pounced through time and daringly reign over popular culture today in anime, film, and the popular "How to Train Your Dragon" book series.

And back on campus, I offer that this new museum is the shiny white pearl we all seek: a precious treasure, decades in the dreaming, years in the making, and now ours for the knowing. Hold it wisely, dragons.

About the Crow Museum of Asian Art of The University of Texas at Dallas

Founded in 1998 by Trammell and Margaret Crow, the Crow Museum of Asian Art of The University of Texas at Dallas inspires and promotes learning and dialogue about the arts and cultures of Asia through its exhibitions, the research and preservation of its collections, artistic and educational programming, and visitor experience and engagement. The downtown museum, in the heart of the Dallas Arts District, is free and open to the public. It offers an array of beautiful spaces and galleries in a serene setting for quiet reflection. In 2019, the Crow family gifted the collection to The University of Texas at Dallas in honor of its founders and to ensure its preservation and care in perpetuity. A second location, designed by Morphosis Architects will open in Fall 2024 as Phase I of the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, a planned multi-phase arts and performance complex dedicated to enriching the arts on campus. Learn more at crowmuseum.org.

From Texas to the World

Common Ground at UT Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art

In April 2023, The University of Texas at Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art announced a landmark multi-year partnership to celebrate the opening of the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum. Phase 1 of the O'Donnell Athenaeum, designed by Morphosis Architects, includes not only the Crow Museum of Asian Art as its resident museum, but also two galleries that will display significant works of art on long-term loan from the Dallas Museum of Art, in exhibitions curated by UT Dallas faculty members and guest curators.

The inaugural exhibition in this series is From Texas to the World: Common Ground at UT Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art*, curated by Dr. Michael Thomas, who is Director of the Edith O'Donnell Institute of Art History, Richard R. Brettell Distinguished University Chair and Professor of Arts, Humanities, and Technology. From Texas to the World focuses on artworks which came to the* DMA*'s collection through the generosity and vision of Eugene and Margaret McDermott, Cecil and Ida Green, Erik Jonsson, Rick Brettell, and Bonnie Pitman, all of whom have contributed to UT Dallas as founders and members of the academic community.*

Athenaeum Review *interviewed Dr. Thomas about* From Texas to the World*. This is an edited excerpt of the conversation; the full interview can be heard on the Athenaeum Review podcast.*

Athenaeum Review: Could you speak about how this show came together?

Michael Thomas: When I first arrived here in 2019, Rick Brettell was still alive, and we already had the research center at the DMA (which we still have). We had just received the news that UTD had been given the spectacular Crow Museum, which is really one of the great collections of Asian art, with a lot of variety, and a really good sampling across Asian culture. I also wanted the Athenaeum to have exhibitions outside of Asian art. So I started a conversation, and I found out that the DMA had an interest in expanding north, and had the idea of a footprint in the northern suburbs of Dallas.

So we came up with this idea, and it took about four years—much of it was interrupted by the pandemic, but we ended up with an agreement that was signed just barely a year ago between Agustín Arteaga, director of the DMA, and President Benson, here at UT Dallas. The new Athenaeum has two distinct exhibition spaces: the main body of the museum is all for the Crow Museum, and then there is what we affectionately call the bar gallery, which is rectangular. It looks like a bar that juts out into the space. Two galleries there are now dedicated to this UTD-DMA partnership.

I've taken on the role of managing curator of this space, so it's my job to try to find faculty members who are interested in looking to the DMA's collection and curating exhibits, and this is going to be an annual rotation. The first rotation fell on me, and we didn't have a lot of time to do it. In talking with the President and some other members of the UTD community, there was some desire to try to highlight connections between the Dallas Museum of Art and UT Dallas. All three of the university's founding families, the Jonssons, the Greens and McDermotts, played a part in both institutions, and our other big connections were faculty members, namely Rick Brettell who was director of the DMA, and then came here to UT Dallas and was the founding director of the O'Donnell Institute, and Bonnie Pitman, who was also director of the DMA and was a scholar-in-residence here and part of the O'Donnell Institute family, and is now affiliated with the Center for Brain Health at UT Dallas as well.

We ended up looking specifically at pieces that were tied to these people that had ended up in the DMA's collection. The McDermotts and the Greens are responsible for an amazing amount—they both have funds that had been used for purchases over the years, and the McDermotts actually gave a lot of important pieces from their private collection to the DMA, and obviously acquisitions happened under the directorships of both Rick Brettell and Bonnie Pitman.

One of the things I noticed as I was going through the collection, is that there were a lot of Texas artists. Rick Brettell became a champion of regional artists, and specifically Texas artists, and one of his last projects was the planned Museum of Texas Art, which would have been in the old Dallas Museum of Fine Arts space in Fair Park. Rick really looked at a lot of Texas artists—the DMA already collected Texas artists, but he really made it a priority, and Bonnie followed suit.

The title of the exhibit is *From Texas to the World*, and the galleries are split evenly between the "Texas gallery," largely pieces that came in during the directorships of Rick Brettell and Bonnie Pitman, and what we call the "global gallery," the "to the world" part. The funds of the McDermotts and Greens especially went to a wide variety of pieces. We have a Greek vase that came from the Greens, and the Braque that came from the McDermotts, but we also have pieces from Veracruz culture, Olmec, indigenous African art, indigenous Indonesian art, so we have this global component. So that gallery is dedicated to this array of global pieces that go all the way from ancient Greece and ancient Egypt into the contemporary world.

AR: The kind of trajectory *from Texas to the world* reminded me that, if I'm not mistaken, Margaret McDermott was the only one of these individuals who was raised in Dallas—all of the founders and directors came here as a place they could make their mark, which they did. It's a kind of testimony that this is a place where new people can come in and have a big impact.

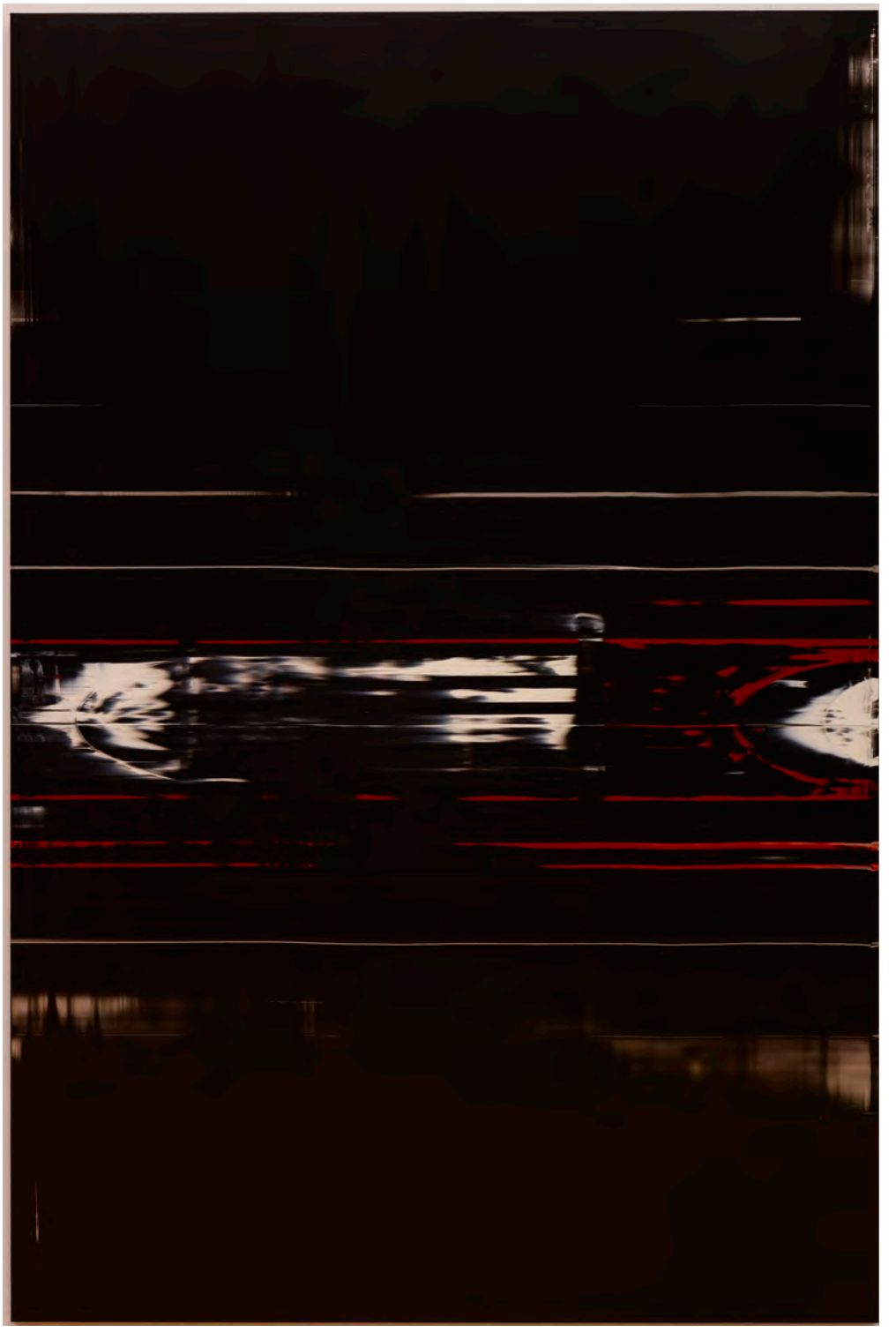
MT: Yes, and the other reason along those lines is that *From Texas to the World* was representative of UT Dallas. We have roots in this idea that UT Dallas was a technological center and initiator for North Texas, but now we have one of the most diverse and global student bodies of any university in Texas, if not the most, and so in a way, I felt that theme mirrored who we are.

From Texas to the World: Common Ground at UT Dallas and the Dallas Museum of Art is on view at the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum at UT Dallas, beginning in fall 2024.

TOP: Roger Winter, *El Paso*, 1983, oil on canvas
Dallas Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. S. Roger Horchow, 1990.184

BOTTOM: Billy Hassell, *Blue Jay Diving*, 1986, oil on canvas
Dallas Museum of Art, anonymous gift, 1992.315


OASIS Restaurant
BAR



John Pomara, *Deadline No. 5*, 2001, oil enamel on aluminum
Dallas Museum of Art, Texas Artists Fund, 2001.311

Door, 19th–20th century, wood, metal, and fiber. Côte d'Ivoire, Baule peoples
Dallas Museum of Art, The Gustave and Franyo Schindler Collection of African Sculpture, Gift of the McDermott Foundation in honor of Eugene McDermott, 1974.SC.25

Panel (Kirekat), ca. 1930, Wood, pigment. Indonesia, Siberut Island, Mentawai peoples
Dallas Museum of Art, The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc., 2017.38.1.McD

Seated female figures (pair), 1200–400 BCE, ceramic, slip, and paint. Mexican, Puebla, Las Bocas, Olmec
Dallas Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene McD ermott, the McDermott Foundation, and Mr. and Mrs. Algur H. Meadows and the Meadows Foundation, Incorporated, 1973.70.1–2

Advancing Creativity, Innovation and Cultural Enrichment

Jonathan Palant

The construction of Athenaeum Phase 2, our new performance hall and music building, is stirring up a wave of excitement and anticipation among students, faculty, and the entire community. This state-of-the-art facility, designed by the renowned architecture firm Morphosis, is set to elevate our University's music program and become a cultural landmark for North Texas.

At the heart of Phase 2 lies a dedication to excellence in both technology and acoustics. Every detail, from the choice of materials to the layout of the performance hall, has been meticulously crafted to ensure unparalleled sound quality and performance experiences. This thoughtful design promises to create an environment where musical excellence can truly flourish.

Located directly behind Phase 1, which houses the Crow Museum of Asian Art, Phase 2 will not only support our music students but also serve as a cultural hub for the entire North Texas region. With its impressive facilities and world-class amenities, the building is poised to attract top talent and audiences, enhancing our region's reputation as a center for arts and culture.

The significance of the Athenaeum goes beyond its physical structure. It embodies a broader shift at the University of Texas at Dallas from STEM to STEAM, where the arts are given equal emphasis alongside science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. This reflects our commitment to holistic education and cultural enrichment.

Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, Phase 2, performance hall interior rendering.
Photo: Morphosis.

The centerpiece of Athenaeum Phase 2 is its 680-seat performance hall, equipped with a stage large enough for prestigious ensembles like the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. The building will also house faculty offices, two large classrooms, two rehearsal halls, a piano lab, a harp studio, practice rooms, and storage space for all our instruments. This facility will provide our students with everything they need to excel in their musical pursuits and will foster the vibrant artistic community we all cherish.

Every day, UT Dallas students and their instructors strive to make great music. Whether through individual practice, ensemble rehearsals, or studying music's rich history, form, and theory, their hard work is evident in every performance. But success in music also requires a space with superior acoustics, a well-designed stage, and backstage areas that meet all pre- and post-performance needs.

Beyond its role as a music building, Phase 2 symbolizes a broader vision for the University of Texas at Dallas. By investing in the arts and creating a dedicated arts campus within our university, UT Dallas and its leadership are affirming their commitment to advancing creativity, innovation, and cultural enrichment for all of us.

Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, Phase 2, exterior rendering. Photo: Morphosis.

—Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, Phase 2, lobby rendering. Photo: Morphosis.

THE ARTS IN THE UNIVERSITY

Why we Need the Athenaeum

Julia Friedman

People are social animals. We thrive in communities; we need shared interests, convivial debates, and meaningful interactions. In their absence, we decline mentally, emotionally, even physically. Last April, the office of the U.S. Surgeon General published an eighty-page report titled *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*.[1] It detailed a worrying trend of Americans becoming more socially disconnected and lonely. While acknowledging that this trend is not entirely new, the report emphasized the exponential growth of loneliness and isolation, just as technology continues to provide new ways of easy virtual ommunication. The report also claimed that effectively everyone (96 to 99 percent of adults under 65) engages online at some level, while revealing that one in three adults are online "almost constantly"—twice the proportion just eight years earlier, in 2015. This growth of digital engagement is in directly inverse proportion to the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of Americans. Life online offers only a simulacrum of interpersonal engagement, without the benefits of genuine human connection. The sad, and inevitable, conclusion is that online contacts simply do not, and cannot, provide what people need. Even setting aside the egregious behaviors enabled by online anonymity, virtual social media interactions, bolstered by targeted algorithms, lead the participants away from nurturing open-minded discussions, and towards the acrimony of echo-chamber auto-confirmation and biased environments.

Reading through this report is a strain. For a start, it is counterintuitive to find bureaucratic terminology used in an effort to foster our shared humanity. Phrases like "collective efficacy," "social cohesion," "social isolation," "social negativity" and "social participation" appear artificial next to the simple, colloquial "belonging," which is identified as "a fundamental human need—the feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences." Despite such lapses into newspeak, however, this thorough and well-meaning report is perfectly timed, even urgent, given the damage that evidently stems from the lack of human connectivity. The health problems recounted here, all documented and statistically proven, range from

1 "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community," 2023. www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

cardiovascular disease, through hypertension, diabetes, reduced cognitive function, depression, and anxiety, all the way to self-harm and suicidality. These subsequently translate into wider, societal problems. The report concludes with a blueprint for a national strategy to advance social connection, proposing improvements in social infrastructure, including the "physical assets of the community (such as libraries and parks), programs (such as volunteer organizations and member associations), and local policies (such as public transportation and housing)." In other words, the solution to the crisis of loneliness and isolation is physical, not virtual, and involves the reintegration of people into real-life communities.

The Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum will fulfill this mandate for community-building, on a scale significantly more ambitious than a comparable, mid-size town infrastructure project suggested in the U.S. Surgeon General's report. The 12-acre campus art district, now under construction, will contain two dedicated museums with nearly 120,000 square feet of combined space, a 53,000 square-foot performance hall, and a three-story parking structure to accommodate over 1,000 vehicles. The Athenaeum's design and construction are being executed by Morphosis—an iconic design and architecture firm founded in 1972 by Thom Mayne, who still serves as its design director. Morphosis made its name with projects ranging from large urban developments to civic and institutional buildings, and bespoke residential architecture. The firm's longevity and reputation undoubtedly derive from its flexibility and adaptability. Named after the Greek term for "to form or be in formation," Morphosis "is a dynamic and evolving practice that responds to the shifting and advancing social, cultural, political and technological conditions of modern life."[2] This very flexibility and adaptability are vital to the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum's conception of a bold, large-scale project that provides a formidable, sympathetic response to the kinds of social shifts which have led to loneliness and isolation on a scale that now requires a triage from the U.S. Public Health Service.

This new Athenaeum taking shape on the southeast corner of the University of Texas at Dallas campus, is modeled after historical *athenaea*—the loci of knowledge and the exchange of ideas, where ancient Greeks could partake in learning, and communicate with their peers. The classical *athenaea* were founded on the free circulation of thought. The concept of the athenaeum was revived during the Enlightenment, albeit in the less inclusive form of salons and clubs, accessible only to select and educated participants. Even in these narrower circles, however, the guiding principle was the pursuit of knowledge, truth and beauty. As the Morphosis "Athenaeum Masterplan" explains, these 18th-century salons were places "where some of the most significant ideas of the era were first presented, challenged, and developed." Critically, the UT Dallas Athenaeum, as conceived by Morphosis, will not concentrate only on "libraries, galleries, and collections" as in the past, but will now "focus on activity as well as artifacts."[3] Hence such plans as outdoor space for events at the Crow Museum of Asian Art, music practice rooms, and choral and orchestra rehearsal rooms at the Performance Hall. The Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum is designed to hold collections of precious objects, but also to accommodate "happenings, events, and

2 www.morphosis.com/about

3 "The Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenæum Masterplan," www.morphosis.com/planning/289

Life online offers only a simulacrum of interpersonal engagement, without the benefits of genuine human connection.

interactions through the day and night." It will "support a great variety of ways in which knowledge and ideas are created and shared, from formal lectures, exhibitions, and research engagements through casual student meet ups or individual study and contemplation." In other words, it will be as much a forum for intellectual exchange as a repository for cultural artifacts.

This connection between the personal and the public, in the context of shared culture, makes the model of the *athenea* especially important in a contemporary culture plagued by ideological balkanization. As the first public athenaeum in North America, the UT Dallas Athenaeum hopes to provide an example of how to salvage free discourse by taking it out of formal and fixed educational settings, and relocating it an an open arena accessible to the local community. It will help to maintain a breadth of view that is in palpable danger of becoming extinct, to be replaced by narrow and utilitarian epistemological models.

In a recent lecture "A Revolution in Thought?" delivered to Darwin College, University of Cambridge, the psychiatrist, philosopher, and literary scholar Iain McGilchrist argued for the urgency of preserving this disappearing breadth of view.[4] The reason, according to McGilchrist, was to counteract what he termed the ongoing "meta-crisis":

> *Not just the odd crisis here and there, but the despoliation of the natural world, the decline of species on a colossal scale, the destabilization of the climate, the destruction of the way of life of indigenous people, the fragmentation and polarization of once civilized society with escalating, not diminishing, resentments on all sides, an escalating, not diminishing gap between rich and poor, a surge in mental illness, not the promised increase in happiness, a proliferation of laws, but a rise in crime; the abandonment of civil discourse….*

McGilchrist, who spent nearly two decades studying the human brain, became widely known following the publication of his first book on the subject in 2009. Using clinical research on the function of the hemispheres, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* explores how our understanding of hemispheric modalities (the difference between the functions of the right and the left hemispheres) can be translated into an understanding of human history and culture.

McGilchrist expanded his theories in his next book, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World* (Perspectiva Press, 2021), a two-volume, 1500 page *magnum opus* where he delves into the functions and malfunctions of the brain. The first volume addresses such matters as attention, intelligence, creativity, and truth. The second consides the repercussions of the brain's left hemisphere's modality becoming increasingly dominant for the condition of

4 "A Revolution in Thought? – Dr. Iain McGilchrist," Darwin College Lectures Series, Cambridge University, Feb. 13, 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuQ4Hi7YdgU

our society. McGilchrist's argument, laid out with great depth and precision, is that the fundamental difference between the right and the left hemispheres consists in the variances of what he calls their "attention." This in turn, creates two divergent phenomenological worlds. McGilchrist summarizes these two modalities in the Cambridge lecture:

> *In the case of the left hemisphere, the world is simplified in service of manipulation. It is made of isolated static things that are already known, familiar, predetermined and fixed. They're fragments that are importantly devoid of context, disembodied and meaningless, abstract, generic, quantifiable, fungible, mechanical, ultimately bloodless, and lifeless. This is indeed not so much a world, as a representation of a world, which means a world that's actually no longer present, but reconstructed after that fact. And it is literally two-dimensional, schematic, and theoretical…. Here, the future is a fantasy that remains under our control. The left hemisphere is unreasonably optimistic and fails to see the dangers that loom.*

He contrasts this detail-focused, manipulative, "narrow-beam attention" left-hemisphere modality, to the modality of the right hemisphere which, as he puts it, "is on the lookout for everything else that's going on while we're manipulating for mates, or predators." The right hemisphere's kind of attention is "broad, sustained, coherent, vigilant and uncommitted as to what it may find." It is "in the service of understanding of the contextual whole":

> *In the case of the right hemisphere, by contrast, there is world of the flowing processes, not isolated things. One where nothing is simply fixed entirely, certain, exhaustively known, or fully predictable, but always changing and ultimately interconnected with everything else. Where context is everything. Where what exists are wholes of which what we call the parts…. Where what really matters is implicit, a world if uniqueness where quality is more important than quantity. A world that is essentially animate. Here the future is a product of realism, not denial. This is a world that is fully present, rich, and complex, a world of experience which calls for understanding….*

McGilchrist suggests that a breadth of perspective is growing rare because our society, and our culture, are focused on the explicit, at the expense of the implicit. We are, that is to say, increasingly favoring the left-hemisphere modality. As a result, the larger context, which is synonymous with a broad view, is neglected in favor of categorization and control. Citing the British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, McGilchrist apportions some of the blame to the human propensity for self-reflexive language and discourse: "a culture in its finest flower [is] before it begins to analyze itself." In our postmodern condition, he says, where everything and anything can be deconstructed, "the explicit stands forward, and the implicit retires." To make the implicit explicit is to alter it, and ultimately to destroy it. A mutation of the implicit into the explicit leaves in its wake a simplistic notion of human nature as mechanistic: "in the entirely predictable parallels we have become enslaved by the machine that should be our servant." McGilchrist points out that, despite evidence to the contrary provided by modern physics, which debunks the mechanistic model of the universe, many people "still imagine that the machine is the best model for understanding everything we come across: we ourselves, our brains, our minds, our society…." McGilchrist rightly sees this ultra-materialism as delusory because human beings, unlike linear and sequential machines, are complex systems.

Their default status is not stasis, as it is with machines that can be switched on and off. The default status of human beings is flow, evolution, interaction with their environment, all of which has the potential of altering people and their nature.

Quoting the mathematician and biophysicist Robert Rosen's book *Life Itself: a Comprehensive Inquiry into the Nature, Origin, and Fabrication of Life*, McGilchrist points out that all naturally occurring systems differ from machines, insofar as they "are never merely complicated, but complex, and therefore never fully predictable, …whether we choose to see them as alive or not." Prompted by the hubristic belief in the supremacy of technology, or perhaps by the lack of awareness characteristic of the left-hemispheric modality which "is unreasonably optimistic and fails to see the dangers that loom," we human beings have become overreliant on the very machines that deprive us of the idea of "the implicit," which is indespensible for our well-being. This has narrowed the breadth of our viewpoint, whose expansion can emerge only out of free and rational debate.

McGilchrist's theories about the increasing prominence of the left-hemispheric modality help us understand why and how the replacement of human with virtual interaction has resulted in the deplorable epidemic of loneliness and isolation. The logical solution to the meta-crisis would be to re-embrace contextual awareness and the spirit of interconnection that the right hemispheric modality stands for. Both the Surgeon General's report and McGilchrist in his Cambridge lecture talk about the need to promote a society of trust, identified in the Report as "an individual's expectation of positive intent and benevolence from the actions of other people and groups." This requires the open-mindness that arises only from convivial disputes. And that is exactly what the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum cultural center aspires to provide. *A*

How to Make Great Art More Accessible

David Carrier

A few years ago, I was walking in Berlin with a German colleague near to the Museum Island. On one side, he remarked, you find the site of Hegel's office. And on the other side, the Bode Museum, the Pergamon Museum, and the other great Berlin art museums. That makes it sound like the academics and the museums were closely connected. In fact, however, he went on to note, Hegel didn't play any practical role in the founding of the great Prussian public art museums. But that proximity is very suggestive, for it's a reminder that academic art history and the art museum grew up together in 1820s Prussia. Indeed, there was a natural alliance, for the museum curators need their colleagues in art history to make attributions, explain the values of artworks, and develop a history of these artifacts. The art museum curator is concerned with artifacts, and the academic art historian with the attributions, the history, and the interpretation of those artifacts. If we accept this broad division of activities, then it seems obvious that the births of the art museum and art history occurred at the same time and place because they needed each other. This, at least, is a useful generalization.

If you read Hegel's two volumes on aesthetics, given as lectures in Berlin in the 1820s and then published posthumously from student notes, you find the bare bones of modern art historical surveys. The best part, I think, is the few pages devoted to Dutch art.[1] The art of Holland is distinctive, he argues, because the Dutch are Protestant merchants, and so have a different visual culture from the Italian Renaissance Catholics or the pagan Greeks, a culture that expresses their worldview. From this vivid description you can sense that Hegel

1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I: 599.

visited Holland. He develops the sketch of a sociological account which, without naming any artists, might without embarrassment be set alongside the much fuller accounts of his numerous French, German and American successors. When Svetlana Alpers offers a modern revisionist history that characterizes Dutch art, it's unsurprising that she refers to Hegel's discussion.[2] The very basic idea that diverse visual cultures have different aesthetics is developed and defended by him. And thanks to that way of thinking, our curators are prepared to gather art from every human culture.

But of course, that story about academics and curators comes from the distant past. And nowadays, relating those two distinctly different tasks is more complicated in part because everything has become more complicated, but also because everyone is so busy. In the 1950s, Arthur Danto was both a successful practicing artist and a teacher of philosophy at Columbia University. Once, so he told me in the 1980s, he chose to be an academic philosopher because he thought that post would leave plenty of time to make his art. How distant that world seems now, when being an academic is so time intensive. It's all to the good to argue that curators and academic art historians should work together. Still, the very real practical question is how to bring this about. It's true, of course, that a curator's practical concern with objects differs from the scholars' interests. But how can the proposal that they collaborate be justified in constructive terms?

Academic art history and the art museum grew up together in 1820s Prussia.

Thanks to my long-standing authorial collaboration with Joachim Pissarro, I got to meet and talk with Richard Brettell. And so I published an interview with him.[3] Brettell, of course, as everyone knows, was a model of a scholar who engaged the art museum. And some of the things we talked about which were not included in the published account gave me some suggestions of ideas that I develop in this present discussion.

How might academic research enter into the life of a museum? And, to look at the other side of this puzzle, how might the practical concerns of a museum generate academic research? Being a

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2 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 249.

3 "Richard Brettell with David Carrier: 'I don't think that what I do or what one ought to do has rules." *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2020, brooklynrail.org/2020/05/art/RICHARD-BRETTELL-with-David.

curator is a full-time job, as is doing research and teaching as an art historian. And so it's not obvious how, in practice, someone can combine these two activities. Here, going beyond these plausible generalities, I offer a constructive suggestion about how in Dallas you might proceed. This proposal builds upon my long research about the historic center of Naples, forthcoming in the book *In Caravaggio's Shadow: Naples as a Work of Art.*[4] I myself am neither curator nor art historian, but a retired philosopher. My hobby horse, then, is a visionary plan relating to that book.

Recently I have made a number of trips to Naples. I have reviewed exhibitions at the Museo di Capodimonte. And I have a special interest in the city because it has extensive displays in the historic center of old master sacred art, which have ironically benefited from the city's scholarly neglect by comparison with its more intensively studied peers. Although in the seventeenth century Naples was the largest city in Italy, it has been relatively marginalized by scholars compared with Florence, Rome, and Venice. A look at library listings reveals that art in Naples attracts much less attention than works in those cities. Because modernists viewed the major pre-modern artistic developments as having taken place outside of Naples, this meant that the most important older artworks elsewhere moved from churches into public art museums. But, thanks to that very neglect, a great deal of Neapolitan art remains in its original sites, in the churches of the historic center.

Studying the sacred art in Naples' historic center poses a particular practical problem that has preoccupied me for some time. There are a large number of interesting churches. I've visited forty, but there are many more. Anthony Blunt did a large academic book on the architecture of these churches.[5] Each of them has a great deal of art. And in these densely hung churches, sorting out what you see is not easy. There are numerous guidebooks. The most complete one that I have found, is *Napoli sacra. Guida alle chiese della città*, published in 15 paperback volumes.[6] It has maps, photographs of the buildings and some artworks in them, and written descriptions. And of course, there are numerous other guides in Italian and also in English, as well as the art-historical literature on the various painters, sculptors, and architects. In general, however, no single reference identifies all of the art on display.

When you visit an unfamiliar art museum, usually you can get a floorplan and purchase a guidebook. And then with the aid of the wall labels, you make your way through the collection.
The churches in the historic center of Naples are more challenging,

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4 (London: Thames & Hudson, 2025).

5 Anthony Blunt, *Neapolitan Baroque & Rococo Architecture* (London: Zwirmer, 1975).

6 (Naples: il mattino, 2010).

for they are densely hung, with art on the walls and ceiling, and a rich decorative arrangement on the floor. Over the years, as I struggled to learn about Neapolitan art, I would bring two or three guidebooks, sit in a pew, and try to identify what I was seeing. The lighting is rarely ideal, and many of these works are at some distance. And so, identifying what you see is not easy. Looking in these churches gave me new sympathy for the pioneering connoisseurs, Bernard Berenson and the others, who had to make attributions under these conditions. Their focus generally was on Renaissance art, which means that the Neapolitan baroque is still terra incognita. Apart from Caravaggio, who visited only briefly, and Artemisia Gentileschi, whose apotheosis is recent, most of these artists are too little known. Some major figures have not as yet been researched or had retrospectives. And so, determining what you are looking at in the churches of Naples is not easy.

Here, then, we come to my constructive proposal about how art history and the art museum can work together. This proposal builds upon the ongoing working relationship between Capodimonte, the great Neapolitan public art museum, and the University of Dallas. The figure associated with the University of Texas at Dallas whose thinking about this issue has influenced mine is Brettell. And here I should mention a second person, Roger Malina. For a very long time I've been involved, first as a contributor, then on the editorial board of his journal *Leonardo*. And I believe that its bold, systematic scrutiny of the relationships between the visual arts and scientific research can play an important role in relating the art museum to art history research.

What's needed in Naples right now is some efficient practical way to organize experience of the art displays. There is, as I noted, a considerable body of information about what's to be seen in the churches. The question is, how to make that material usable.

William Gibson's science fiction novel *Neuromancer* (1984) imagined what became known as Google Glass, an apparatus that would project computer screen information onto what's being seen. Then, for political reasons, when this apparatus was developed around 2013, it proved to be extremely controversial, because people feared it invaded privacy. And so, it as yet isn't in use. What, however, interests me is the way that such an optical device could be used in Naples. I say that while agreeing that its general use might be pernicious.

Imagine that you could walk into one of the Neapolitan churches and see, just by looking through your Google Glass, the attributions and subjects of the artworks. Surely this information would enrich your experience, for it's more engaging to know what you are looking at. And, possibly, it would suggest improved ways of interpreting the art in these churches. I believe that such a device would be popular with visitors, for it would make the art treasures of Naples more accessible. On my most recent visit to the city, in fall 2021, Pio Monte del Misericordia had installed a rudimentary optical device used to unpack the arrangement of the acts in Caravaggio's *Seven Acts of Mercy* (1607). The device I imagine is a natural extension of that apparatus. Here, then, is a concrete way that the concerns of art historians and the art museum could be conjoined, for their mutual benefit. At this time, when Naples is attracting more visitors and additional art historical research, this apparatus would prove popular.

In my academic career, I was fortunate enough twice to do research at an academic center attached to a major art museum. At the Getty and at the Clark, any time that I sought visual inspiration, I could wander across to look at the collection, testing my experience against what I saw. You learn a lot about art when it is accessible nearby. And so, looking at the very ambitious Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenæum Masterplan, I envy its future scholars.[7]

7 My prior accounts of Naples include "The Best Painting in Naples," *Athenaeum Review* 3 (winter 2020), athenaeumreview.org/essay/the-best-painting-in-naples.

A Place in the Sun

Brian Allen

Our rambling, robust system of college and university museums is nearly unique. Yes, there are university museums in the United Kingdom, but they have fewer than ten, while we in America have at least two hundred. No other country has a network of museums dedicated to students and faculty. The first in America—the Yale University Art Gallery—opened in 1832 via John Trumbull's gift of a hundred of his Revolutionary War paintings in return for an annuity and graves for him and his wife in the gallery crypt.

There the Trumbulls still repose. Above them is an intellectual and aesthetic hive. Not every college and university has an art museum, but many do. All focus on students and academics rather than art appreciators and delectation, though many are to be found there and much is to be had. Still, the milieu's scholarly and esoteric.

I'm an art critic and write often about these museums, usually called academic art museums. Often they do good exhibitions, though existing as they do on campuses, much of their work reflects curricular concerns and is too narrow to mine for a frothy, engaging story such as art critics like to write. That said, I've worked at four academic art museums over twenty-five years and was a student at two schools with historically important art museums. At Yale, I often passed by the Trumbull tomb, near the art history department bathrooms as it was.

I'll write about some of the trends I've seen in the field of academic art museums over the last twenty years or so. Engagement with the general public, and interdisciplinary learning, are now prominent. These changes are so big I'll call them revolutionary. I'll also write about how these museums are doing in the face of the politicization, antisemitism, and relaxation of standards that makes so many colleges and universities husks of their once-great selves.

The healthiest, even most ennobling, change in these museums since, say, the year 2000, is public engagement. It's safe to say that academic art museums historically had little, if any, interest in the public. By "public," I mean not only the locals, but the big, wide world accessed and enlightened through traveling exhibitions. These are two publics, I know, but museum insularity and, yes, contempt for the hoi polloi each played a part in ignoring both.

It's the worst pair of tin ears in academia. Colleges and universities are tax-exempt. They often occupy prime real estate in the cities and towns they call home. Their art museums are often the only academic resource they offer to the public. Still, many academic art museums charge admission, and scandalously so. The Fogg, the popular collective name for Harvard's three art museums, until recently charged a hefty $20 per head, a fee the very rich museum levied to discourage the indigenous people of Cambridge from coming. Harvard seems to mass produce ill will, I know, so it astonished me when the Fogg went free last year. A donor underwrote free admission in what is the positive thing Harvard served the public last year.

My experience of Yale's art gallery, a very long one since I grew up near New Haven and went to Yale, showed me a different mood. If the public wanted to come, that was fine. If the public didn't come, that was fine, too, and no one cried in their sherry. Among college and university art museums, I think this was, historically, the default sentiment.

Tradition, location, and a special curator, director, or founder made for degrees of interest in the public. RISD's art museum, Yale's art gallery and its Center for British Art, the Hood at Dartmouth, and Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery belong to schools, but are also the civic art museums serving big and sometimes sprawling population centers. These museums have always had good programs for local public school children, with the Hood especially engaged and imaginative.

The British Art Center at Yale, which opened in 1977, was conceived by Paul Mellon, its founder and core funder, as a civic museum that happened to belong to a university. The museum's always had a lively, accessible special exhibition program—one of my favorite shows there was on the art of British tea biscuit tins—and a lecture and film program that, from the beginning, packed its auditorium. Mellon, of course, steeped in a civic museum culture. His father established the National Gallery in Washington.

The Hood is a star among academic art museums for many reasons. It has a stellar collection and, for years, did very good, self-organized traveling exhibitions that put it on the circuit with civic, big city museums many times its size. So, at least in the 1980s and 1990s, was the Williams College Museum of Art.

Williams's collection is not nearly as good, but Tom Krens was director there in the 1980s, training for the part of supreme showman that he finally got as director of the Guggenheim. Timothy Rub, who later directed the big civic museums in Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Philadelphia, made the Hood an exhibition powerhouse while he was there. He had a natural talent for bridging the gap between art history and the public's understanding of art. This served the Hood well, along with the institutions that he subsequently led.

The Addison Gallery at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, where I was the director, also punched far above its weight in serving the local public with the same passion as the Hood. In part, this came from a brilliant education curator who developed collaborations with the public schools in Lawrence, the struggling old mill city adjacent to leafy Andover. I don't think Adam Weinberg, my predecessor, was deeply motivated by noblesse oblige, and neither was I. We simply both respected our education curator's passion and let her run with it.

I think Weinberg, his predecessor Jock Reynolds, and I shared a basic philosophy. The Addison had three audiences. The first and primary audience, in an academic art museum, has to be the students, faculty, and, riding on their coattails, the alumni. Second, I think the three of us felt, to differing degrees, that the Addison was the civic art museum for the Merrimack Valley, too. And, third, we were deeply engaged in a national audience. The Addison's exhibitions over our collective twenty-five or so years traveled to well over a hundred museums. The Addison's survey exhibition of art from historically black colleges went to a dozen venues. Traveling exhibitions during my ten years were seen by over a million visitors.

The Addison, though, is a great anomaly, in part because the museum is financially independent of the school. Andover Central gives it very little money, and that means *very* little. The school, in my day, paid the phone bill and plowed the snow. Everything else was on the Addison's dime. If something broke in the building, the school would send someone to fix it but bill us. The Addison has its own endowment that covers about 60 percent of the bills. I was fortunate in that Phillips Academy was concerned primarily with two things, vis-a-vis the Addison, at least in my day: My budget had to be balanced, and the Addison was a bad-headlines-free zone. Aside from those, I did what I wanted.

Few academic art museums were, or are, so privileged. Both the Hood, the Williams College museum, and nearly all other academic art museums are far more financially integrated in their parent institutions. This put considerable pressure on the two museums to drop what were once first-class traveling exhibitions with scholarly catalogues. They were expensive, to be sure, but administrators and the faculty—including the studio art and art history faculties—didn't see the point.

"Not seeing the point" is a faculty, administrative, and trustee pandemic, the prime victim of which is not the diseased but the college or university museum, regardless of how enthusiastic and imaginative the staff. This is a nearly universal condition, though it has evolved in two different ways. A growing fringe of schools don't "see the point" so aggressively that they're using their art museums as an ATM.

Valparaiso University and La Salle University both recently sold art, Valparaiso to build new and fancy dormitories and La Salle to balance its budget. Years ago, Fisk University tried to sell treasures from its Stieglitz Collection, arguing that it was broke. Crystal Bridges Museum bought part-ownership in Fisk's art, keeping it in the public's trust. The Valparaiso and La Salle sales both bombed at auction, and both generated so much alumni and art world scorn that such stunts are now toxic.

Engraved in the sensibilities of trustees and presidents is the epic flop that was Brandeis University's stab at closing its Rose Art Museum and selling the art in 2009 and 2010. During COVID, a cabal of museums, led by greedy trustees, tried to change the museum industry's stout ethical rule prohibiting the sale of art for operating expenses. I've seen this movement grow with the Association of Art Museum Directors over the years. COVID lockdowns debilitated museum finances to the point that advocates of art-for-cash vault raids, long a minority, saw their moment.

They nearly won, too, but didn't. When push came to shove, the museum community declined to allow their art to be plundered. Now, museum collections seem to be safe for the foreseeable future.

The biggest boosters of the cash grabs weren't academic art museums, most of whom worry about those among their masters with marginal interest in art. These masters would include school trustees more enamored of new stadiums and science buildings than Renoir and Tintoretto. Rather, MoMA, surrounded by millionaires and billionaires, and the Met, with a $4 billion endowment, were among the key instigators in turning art into ATMs. In a key vote, the academic art museum directors uniformly voted "no" when it came to allowing collection raids. They saved the day from the greedy Manhattan institutions.

Still, earlier this year the University of New Hampshire closed its art museum to slice $1 million off the school's $14 million deficit. The collection, which is tiny, won't go on the block, and the husk of the museum will have an ad hoc, itinerant presence on campus.

These are, I'm happy to write, outliers, for many reasons. Academic art museums might not do splashy traveling exhibitions with catalogues, but most do very good collaborative programming with the local schools in their home cities and towns. The Yale art gallery's and the BAC's work with New Haven's public schools is impressive. The art museums at Colby College, Wake Forest University, the Hood, and Indiana University have very good K-12 programs, too.

Engagement with the locals goes beyond the public schools. Harvard's Fogg went free last year, and so did Smith College's very nice art museum. Endowing free admission is a winning fundraising product, of course, especially in communities where the academic art museum doubles as the civic museum, but colleges and universities

seem to be embracing a new spirit of good citizenship. They're seeing their museums as a means for the locals to feel emotionally and intellectually invested even though they might not be alums.

The Mother of All Tin Ears has to be Oberlin College, whose students, encouraged by the school's top administrators, mounted a riot aimed at Gibson's Bakery, a small, revered mom-and-pop shop on the town's Main Street that has served students and locals since 1885. Gibson's, its reputation and business trashed by Oberlin College, sued the school for libel and got a $32 million check.

Colleges and universities, packed with credentialed people as they are, sometimes learn slowly, but parting with $32 million from the endowment focused the academic mind industry-wide. Playing nice with the locals is more important than ever, and schools see their museums as a tool more keenly than ever. I'm surprised and happy to discover that many academic art museums now have visitor services departments.

Interdisciplinary teaching and learning are now so embedded in academic art museums that it's easy to overlook how new this is. A campus art museum historically served the art history department and, possibly, the studio art department, and that was the extent of its intellectual real estate. Now, college and university art museums have insinuated themselves into the teaching of history, literature, the sciences, especially ecology, and all aspects of the arts. Most museums now have a staffer dedicated to linking the curriculum campus-wide to their collections. Classes of all stripes meet at museums now. Curators design teaching exhibitions focused on classes beyond art history.

I saw this up close and personal at the Addison, where we designed exhibitions in tandem with teachers from the history and English departments, whose courses were planned years out. Art with environmental themes was in abundance, too. My first exhibition as director displayed Alexis Rockman's 24-foot-wide painting *Manifest Destiny* from 2003, which depicts the ruins of Brooklyn—under water—at some future point. I'm not a believer in climate apocalypse at all. Still, this bold and very good painting promoted debate in many classes and was the latest salvo of a long history of apocalypse painting. This exhibition was, at the time, unusual in its scope but now shows exploring all kinds of subjects are the norm.

Last year, I visited the Allen Memorial Art Gallery at the notably less rich Oberlin College and the Walker Art Gallery at Bowdoin College. Both had exhibitions that seemed too boutique and bespoke to me, but addressed advanced-level classes. At the Allen, shows on anatomy art and the photographer Dawoud Bey aimed at students far beyond art history majors. "Counting in Art and Math with Sol LeWitt," now on view, appeals to the pocket protector class. At Bowdoin's museum, a retrospective of the career of Mina Loy, mounted last year, was more about Surrealist poetry than art.

The academic art museum as a class by itself seems to have found a place in the sun.

These are specialist shows that a civic museum wouldn't do (and really shouldn't, since their audiences tend to have more general interests). Academic art museums happily do such shows, and do them well. This is the great strength college and university art museums bring to America's cultural table. Vis-a-vis the tumultuous political controversies that regularly threaten colleges and universities, campus art museums seem to rise above the ugly fray.

Possibly I'm hardened or dulled or immune. Academic art museums have been dealing with identity art and identity themes for years, since "who am I" is a question of special salience to young people. They've had lots of practice and, by and large, deal with these rich, complex topics in a less ham-fisted, opportunistic manner than civic museums that slap a show of bad art by a trendy artist on the walls and think they've done God's bidding.

In the rush to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion, I've seen only isolated moves to diminish permanent collections of European art or American art before, say, 1900. I was aghast to learn that the Hood has no curator of European art, but see little change in staffing and gallery space dedicated to what some on campus would call oppressor art. Exhibitions? As an experiment, I looked at the exhibition docket at the Five Colleges network of art museums in the Pioneer Valley in western Massachusetts. In it are the museums at Smith, Mount Holyoke, Amherst, Hampshire College, and the University of Massachusetts. I added the nearby Williams College museum, which I consider one of my local museums, and the Fogg.

It's a mixed bag. The very good museum at Mount Holyoke wants to "raise the voice of marginalized communities and unseat the Eurocentric and colonialist perspectives that have dominated museums for centuries." There are far too many exhibitions at these museums on what's called "indigeneity," which embraces both Native Americans and people who have moved to this country. The Mead at Amherst is doing an exhibition on Latin American artists examining the "visitor economy regime" in the Caribbean. I'm pre-bored. An upcoming exhibition on Ukrainian contemporary art sounds promising. Smith's doing a Persian art exhibition that sounds worthwhile.

From the Williams College museum's utterly opaque, convoluted website, I learned that it's doing a large show for the 160th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Fogg did an exceptional American watercolors show last year in which almost all

the artists were dead white men or dead white women. Thinking about all of these shows, I see a disposition toward topics itemized in the "In This House We Believe" lawn signs ubiquitous in Georgetown, Chappaqua, and Santa Monica. There's plenty of variety, though, and that's good.

Museums are a lagging indicator in much of what we call life, since planning for exhibitions takes a long time, but not as long in academic museums as in big civic museums. Even in the slow-paced milieu of higher education, academic art museum staffs tend to be nimble. I'm sure some exhibitions on art from Gaza will be on some dockets but I think the dearth of good material might be a barrier.

Over the last few years, many academic art museums have been renovated and expanded, often after big, even heroic capital campaigns. While some museums were in bad shape infrastructure-wise and needed upgrades, these expansions, as a rule, went beyond the call of preventing a building's collapse.

College and university presidents and trustees saw—and continue to see—their art museums as compelling assets to be stewarded and augmented. I've written about their value as local amenities but students, faculty, and alumni want quality museums, too.

Yale's and Harvard's museums, after huge construction projects, now look and feel like big-city civic spaces. Princeton's getting a new, vastly expanded art museum opening next year. The Hood expansion is wonderful and public-oriented. The museum wasn't visible from Hanover's main drag, but now it is.

Colby's museum has a lovely new building. Williams is building an entirely new museum, too. Williams doesn't need a new museum building, but it has more money than it knows how to spend. Still, I think the new museum will be stunning.

Each of these projects foregrounds student access to art in storage and good classroom space, and most of them involved distinguished architecture. These museums are campus showpieces. This is gratifying to see. The academic art museum as a class by itself seems to have found a place in the sun. *A*

The Writing on the Wall

A. Kendra Greene

It matters how you build things. I know this because the life I've made owes no small debt to university architecture. I was studying photography in a building where the classrooms were on the tenth floor, digital labs on eleven, and the darkrooms up on twelve. There was a bank of six elevators in the lobby, and they could take so long to come that I invented a game I called Psychic Elevator, wherein I tried to predict which doors would open next. I was getting pretty good at it when I realized there was another set of doors opposite the elevators. And through their plate glass panes, I glimpsed a museum.

The door was heavy, the interior the usual crisp blank white of contemporary art galleries, but the exhibitions were smart and small. And it didn't cost anything to go in, so I could afford to keep meeting it in glimpses and spare moments and between other things. The curation was so nimble. The work made me think.

And the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like an interesting place to be. I'd noticed by then the student workers. I didn't know exactly what they did in the prep room behind the suspended metal welcome desk, but I saw flashes of white gloves and portfolio boxes going in and out.

I submitted three times before my application landed in the right hands and someone called me back, an application I still remember was one page, but three different colored sheets to take the carbon copy. The last entry on the form left two and a half lines to record special skills. I wasn't entirely sure I had any, but the form anticipated that and held some possibilities in parentheses. I borrowed one, claiming for the very first time, in triplicate, next to some computer programs and how fast I could type: writing.

Coulson says readers have tried to talk to her about the illustrations in the book—but there are none.

My new boss noticed, bothered to hold on to what had just become a fact, and introduced me to museum text. There are a handful of ways that writing goes on the wall, but the most sensuous I know is a certain size of vinyl letter. The text comes on big sheets, as if pulled from the typewriter of a giant, on a smooth and sturdy kind of wax paper. There is much measuring and leveling and double-checking sight lines before the paper is tacked to the wall. And then I'd climb a ladder until I was eye to eye with the titling, holding the flat blade of a bone folder point out.

A bone folder is an old piece of technology; they have worked so well for so long there's now a market for vegan versions. They are so good at setting creases, skimming paper like that, but in this instance are held like a carpenter's pencil. The tip of a bone folder, like all its edges, is dull. The pressure to transfer the letter from the paper to the wall is a kind of tracing, a kind of drawing, sometimes a kind of coloring in.

It is a process that moves letter by letter. Slow as any ritual or procession. I would recognize this pace and attention later, hand-setting lead type for a printing press, the museum letters at least not upside down and backwards. Sometimes a character will seem to hesitate, its ascender on the wall and its bowl still clinging to the page. The letters tremble. You hold your breath, and they jump the little gap of air.

As the letters of a text get smaller, they become more delicate. Their stems are prone to break. Even the fat wedge of a seraph or a blot of punctuation may tear or crack, an effect that looks not unlike the thin veins of marble, if you are close enough to look. You have to steady your hands to be precise, steady your breath so as not to blow some fragile bit apart, anchor yourself to the stationary wall without otherwise leaving a mark.

Christine Coulson spent twenty years at the Metropolitan Museum of Art before she left to write her own books. The first one is a collection of stories based on objects in the Met collection, and the new one is a novel, written in the form of wall texts, called *One Woman Show*. The latter follows the life of its protagonist, from the age of five until after her death, sometimes in a kind of overheard conversation rendered in italics, but almost exclusively through a series of labels. I have long been charmed that the industry calls such labels

"tombstones," because these markers are so often composed of a name, a few dates, and some brief but meaningful context to accompany those facts.

Coulson leverages the conventions of the form: the changing titles re-defining who this woman is, the dates and locations marking shifts in time and setting, the provenance ascribing whom she belongs to that raises a wealth of ideas about class and gender all by itself. But the author keeps the constraint of the word limit under which she was trained to write wall text for the museum. And so the novel unfolds, 75 words or less at a time.

One of the consequences of this formal experiment is that every installment fits on one page. The page is vertical, but still of proportions that would make sense on a wall. And by the author's design, each facing page remains blank. The effect suggests a wall, or an absence, or for some readers: a screen. Coulson says readers have tried to talk to her about the illustrations in the book—but there are none. These readers are so sure they saw something, pictured the story so well in their minds, that they are unconvinced when she corrects them, have to be shown the book as evidence.

I looked forward to this book coming out for months, which is whole orders of magnitude longer than it took to read, the entire thing consumed in one sitting the same night I came home from her appearance at a bookstore. The bookstore reading had proved something of a convention for wall text nerds. During the Q &A, a dramaturge said she sometimes describes her job as writing the wall text for a play. The author and I weren't the only ones in the room who'd written wall texts. The author and most of the room weren't convinced anyone should read them.

It reminded me of my museum days giving print viewings. After the students left, the professor would linger. The professor was usually an artist, sometimes in our collection, and as time went on, quite possibly a friend. Which is to say, these were people who knew me professionally enough to know that part of my job managing the collection was writing about the collection. Sometimes for the new website, sometimes for an exhibition card, occasionally the wall. And these same people would bring up to me, full of pride, that they never read the wall text.

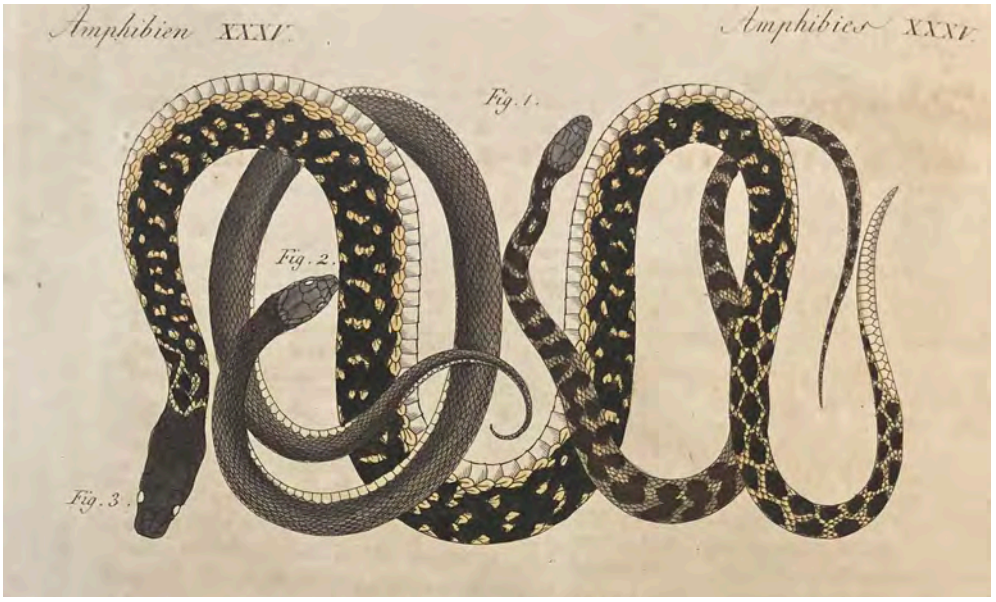
It happened so often I began to trace a spectrum. The no-text purists, the look-at-everything-and-only-then-read adherents. It turns out there are some folks who actually read and *then* look, but they always seemed a little afraid to confess it. I had no idea it was all so personal and nuanced. As I accumulated points of data, I found I began to hope. Maybe somewhere there are people who see it differently. Maybe there are people that know that the art and the objects will still be there, but the text will go away. Maybe there's someone who makes these pilgrimages just for the words. Maybe that should be us.

The best wall text I've ever read was at the Cape Fear Serpentarium in Wilmington, North Carolina. The place itself was a block away from the water. Inside it were two levels, with 50 displays of exotic animals, featuring no shortage of venomous snakes. I'm sorry to say, you can't go there now. It closed permanently in 2018, after tragic circumstances, but I was once in town for a wedding, and right on time for the full tour.

There is no question that I learned plenty without the help of wall text. It was feeding day, and I thought how lucky I was that my timing coincided with an event that only happened once a week. I did not think about what feeding snakes entails. I certainly did not think that the safety apparatus was basically two screen doors on a hinge, a barrier between the assembled onlookers and whatever enclosure was being opened with one upward sweep of its exhibition glass.

I saw with my own eyes the five-gallon bucket of hot water that warms up the dead rats to a more appealing temperature. I watched young men who loved reptiles, thrilled to talk to the young woman employed to feed an alligator named Bubbles. I witnessed the consummate showmanship of the herpetologist trying to entice an Eastern Kingsnake to accept the offering of a warm turkey neck—feeding snakes to snakes raised a delicate ethical issue for the serpentarium, so they made an imitation with the cylindric flesh anointed with two drops of snake blood, which they said they kept in a freezer but did not say how they obtained—and then convinced us that we had seen the rarest thing of all: a snake that wouldn't eat!

And still, no doubt about it, the unsung hero of the whole spectacle was the wall text. I've never seen anything like it. Sometimes it read like an encyclopedia entry about the snake. Sometimes it was like an obituary. Sometimes it was like office gossip, which keeper in which



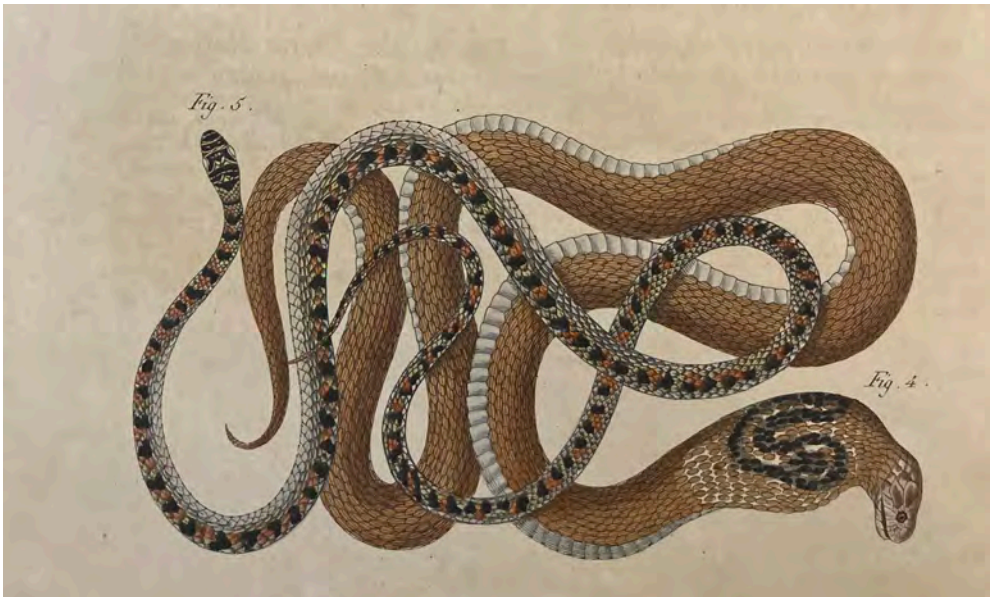
From Friedrich Justin Bertuch and Carl Bertuch, *Bilderbuch für Kinder* (Weimar, 1798-1830). Public domain.

zoo had been bit or maimed or killed. At least once it was a memoir, though it read like a different era of adventure story marketed to boys. The wall text was thrilling. There was no telling what would happen next. It might be about range and habitat and breeding, or it might be about the time the village sent the author out to avenge a child who'd been bit and as he was swinging his machete, he stopped, mid-swing, suddenly confronted with the serpent and unwilling to cut it in half.

It made sense to me, later, that snake collector and Serpentarium founder Larry Dean Ripa had a lot of interests, that he was a painter and a musician, and the kind of writer who kept a correspondence with Beat poet William Burroughs. It's not surprising that when he died suddenly, in the apartment above the Serpentarium, he left behind a massive nonfiction project about it all that his family says will now "lay unfinished."

The building was sold and the snakes were sold and the story kept getting sadder. It's very small in the scheme of things, and perhaps smaller still in the midst of this tragic end, but I don't know whatever happened to the wall text. You can dig through the news stories and the Yelp reviews, but no one talks about that. It may exist only in memory. I wish you could see it.

There are so many ways to live within structures. I know that my life is shaped the way it is in no small part because of one building where I never figured out how to take the stairs. Because a woman in overalls tasked somebody else to prep the walls and had a different job for me. And almost from the very beginning, the question of how language exists in a museum—how we ever live with text—was put right in front of my face. In the architecture of the old Serpentarium, there's a new attraction now. It probably has something to say, writing of its own. But I suspect I'm never going to know. I can't bring myself to look.



LITERARY LIVES

Mutability and Mortality

Robert Crossley

Frederick Turner, *Latter Days*. Franciscan University Press, 160pp., $15 paper.

The equivocal title of Frederick Turner's latest collection of poems calls attention to the rich web of associations that hold this luminous book together. *Latter Days* most pointedly denotes the last stages of a person's life; the poet, not shying away from his circumstances, presents himself in "A Japan Journal, May 2018" as an "ancient primate" and "the old professor," the personae that govern nearly every one of the poems. But "latter days" suggests more broadly the end-times of the planet. Many of the poems are composed in the context of the COVID pandemic, and Turner links his personal end-time to intimations of global catastrophe. Finally, "latter day" carries the sense of someone or something that is a contemporary version of something from the past; Turner often depicts himself as "a live anachronism," a latter-day poet. "I compose in cadences outworn," he writes in "A 'Sonnet' for Leopardi," self-consciously using forms and meters that are out of fashion and that, from the perspective of publishers and MFA programs, seem to belong to earlier eras. The poems of *Latter Days* are suffused with these personal, apocalyptic, and anachronistic senses of aging, existential threat, and traditionalist artistic choices—and often all three senses will be found harnessed together, as in the closing couplet of "Indian Summer": "This is an old man's poem, with plodding rhymes, / An Indian-summer poem, in troubled times."

Before producing his own poetry and fiction, Turner began his career as a scholar of the English Renaissance. The great poets of that period—Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Milton—were preoccupied with the twin themes of mutability and mortality: things (and people) change, and things (and people) die. That Turner writes in that tradition is evident from the opening sonnet, "Spring Harvest," which serves as prelude to the ten thematic sections of *Latter Days*. The sonnet captures, chillingly, the clean, empty, silent cities during the lockdown days of the pandemic in spring 2020. The natural world (in this poem and in many others in the collection) remains gorgeous and untainted but "Death, the harvester" has come for "his ashen tithe," taking away the breath of the virus's respiratory victims. This subject gets its fullest expression in "Posthuman," fourteen rhymed quatrains that evoke the "Ubi sunt" motif found everywhere in medieval and Renaissance literature in many languages besides the original Latin. It is a motif of lamentation for things and people that no longer exist. Turner universalizes the motif: "The cities still are perfect," but the libraries and universities are empty; "mothballed galleries and museums / Have no eye to perceive their gathered stuff." Some parts of the cities remain on automatic pilot, lights still flickering, but the computerized robot-cleaners begin to fail and there is no one to repair programs that cease functioning. One quatrain on the new reign of silence ends with a wicked reminder of the latter-day plague of American massacres:

> Nowhere is heard that curious oboe-hooting
>
> That once was human speech, so close and dear.
>
> When there were human selves, and ears to hear.
>
> (Of course there's also no more sound of shooting.)

The poem neatly juxtaposes some changes that might cause a prospective sigh of relief for this posthuman world ("No sexism, no dogwhistles, no slurs, / No in-law jokes, no microaggressions") with genuine losses ("no art, no science, no poetizing"). With a glance at Donne, Turner ends with poignant images of a newborn landscape empty of human beings:

> No sweet good-morrow with the rising sun,
>
> No pretty spread of legs upon the cover,
>
> No gazing in the strange eyes of your lover,
>
> No wonder at the new world that's begun.

The lovely and loving images that end "Posthuman" are characteristic of the tone Turner sets throughout most of *Latter Days*. "Beauty is the only final consolation," he writes in "The Traveler Packs Up His Tent of Words." It is a trademark line that sums up as succinctly as possible the driving force behind Turner's poetry and his literary and cultural criticism of the past four decades. He has been on a quest to restore the beautiful line, the beautiful image, the ideal of beauty so often banished from contemporary art and criticism. We have been trained as readers of modern verse to refer to "the speaker" of a poem as an entity separate from the poet. Turner abolishes that distinction; the "I" in these poems is Frederick Turner presenting himself unabashedly naked to his audience. Despite growing old and anxious and occasionally grumpy after "three-quarters of a century," the poet of *Latter Days* continues to write in his proudly old-fashioned ways about the predicaments of the present and scenarios for the future—and about his persistent desire for beauty. The humanists of the Renaissance understood that desire. They rejoiced in the human form, carving it into marble, exposing its nude flesh in paint, summoning its splendors in verse on the stage. Two of Turner's most arresting poems luxuriate in anatomical details that are at once clinical and sensuous.

Hamlet's famous encomium, "What a piece of work is a man!" is echoed in the first line of Turner's "Body of a Man": "What is this thing, this noble masterwork?" The answer to that question is a lyrical itemizing of the male form, starting with the head:

> Consider him, his temple, cranium,
>
> The arch of brow, the tendon of the neck,
>
> The long jaw gently furred with its dark bloom.

Moving systematically and exquisitely, the poem explores the beauty and power of the body's structures, until it reaches finally the "central flower" of the genitals. Turner has placed this poem first in Part III which bears the acerbic title, "Toxic Manhood." Just as Hamlet's praise of the Renaissance ideal of humanity collapses into a weary dismissal of "this quintessence of dust," Turner undercuts his exultant panegyric with a concluding complaint against the times: "For who today would celebrate the male, / Or dare to give him any word of praise?" The somewhat hectoring tone at the close of "Body of a Man"—which can also be detected in some of the overtly political poems of Part II, "A House Divided"—is absent from what may be regarded as its companion piece in Part V: "The Poet on His English." Here Turner humorously—but again sensuously—allegorizes the hybrid English language that the working poet savors as a woman:

Her body—ah, it's so mysterious:

Her Latin nerves, with their ten thousand tones,

Her long French muscles, soft, luxurious,

And still those stone-hard fluted Saxon bones.

Readers of Turner's three magnificent epic poems—*The New World* (1985), *Genesis* (1988), and *Apocalypse* (2016)—know that Milton was his Muse, for scenes, images, and words from *Paradise Lost* insinuated themselves into the texture of his verse. *Latter Days* has its own echoes of and homages to other writers—Keats, Hopkins, Blake, Tolkien, Eliot, and especially Donne—as Turner engages the literary tradition that is his artistic home. There is even a touch of a lost paradise in "The Old Distillery on St. Kitts," one of the travel poems of Part I. Reflecting cheerlessly on holidaying at the site where soul-crushed slaves worked the sugar fields, the poet damns the colonizers of the Caribbean: "Out of this paradise came living hell." But the figure that haunts *Latter Days* is named "Mad King Lir" and "The Old Crook." Shakespeare's Lear isn't a muse for Turner so much as a cautionary nemesis, a squatter in the imagination's home, a kind of anti-Turner representing everything the poet is resisting as he faces old age. The Lear who utters curses and roars into the wind is the polar opposite of the Turner who aspires to a quietly unsentimental acceptance of, even love for, his place in the universe. It is Cordelia who adumbrates Turner's ethical and existential stance in her unflattering statement of how much she loves her father. Her words constitute the title of one of the poems in Part VI, "According to My Bond, No More, No Less," words that are also Turner's testament to the quality of his attachment to life and the measure of his detachment from death.

Readers will find a rich array of subjects, of moods, of viewpoints in the eighty-three poems of *Latter Days*, and all of them are the products of a master-craftsman of image and metaphor, of sound and sense, and of a mind that roams at ease across disciplines and cultures. I am not too vain to admit scurrying to Wikipedia for a cheat sheet on the meanings of Dyeu-pater, cytokine, kerykeion, and Ningizzida. With his encyclopedic knowledge, Turner can make music out of the most esoteric and technical terms. To get a sense of the variety of his poetic invention a reader can go to Part VII, "Observations," for geological contemplations on the "record of the universe" in "Stone"; for the delicate epiphany of the haiku "October Sky" ("This darkening blue / curtain suddenly reveals / it's woven with stars"); and for the stunning shifts in tone in "The Abomination," a poem prompted by the indescribably malodorous smell brought into the house by Turner's dog after rubbing herself in something foul.

"This poem will start out funnily enough," Turner warns. "But then it will go gently into hell." Well, not quite gently. It culminates with Swiftian ferocity in an image of the (unnamed) demonic Donald Trump: "The Twitter feed of the great Lord of the Flies."

The poems I found myself returning to most often are in the mischievously titled Part VIII: "You Know Who You Are." These are praise poems dedicated to various people in Turner's life. A few have names attached to them. "Portrait of a Man" opens with "My friend Fred Feirstein," his dying, longtime collaborator in the Expansive Poetry movement. We can deduce that "Maya" is the poet's toddler-granddaughter, that "The Odd Command" is a tribute to his wife, and that "Thirty-Seven Years since You Died," addressed to "Vic," is a set of questions posed to his father, the anthropologist Victor Turner. We can look up Katherine Owens and find out that she was a pioneer in Texas avant-garde theater. Others who are named will mean nothing to most readers (Barnaby Fitzgerald, Daisy, ninety-five-year-old Jo). It doesn't matter; *they* know who they are. The wonder is that, Pygmalion-like, they come to life as Turner conjures them in chiseled lines. Perhaps my favorite in this set of personal homages is "Ode to the Arts and Humanities Staff" which sings the praises of the otherwise unseen and unsung heroes, the clerical and support staffs that keep universities and academic departments running. One of the accomplishments of good poets is that they see, acutely and beautifully, what others overlook, as in these charming couplets:

> I've seen you with an anxious student, kind,
>
> And making sure the paperwork gets signed;
>
> Seen you with absentminded faculty
>
> Patient beyond all human courtesy;
>
> I've seen you hold inside a thoughtful smile
>
> At some transparent folly, guilt, or guile;
>
> I've seen your generosity and cheer
>
> And honest clarity, year after year.
>
> Your virtues are not lost in the routine:
>
> My gentle friends, your gifts to us are seen.

The poems in this volume arrive in many metrical schemes and forms: sestina, Spenserian stanzas, haiku, blank verse, the "common measure" of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines, aubade, elegy, ode. The result is a banquet of language, of shapes and sounds. And Turner even executes a nifty reverse acrostic in one of the five "valentines" to his wife in Part IX, spelling out her name backwards at the ends of the six lines: MEI LIN. But the forms Turner loves most—and that are perfectly suited to the complex of themes and emotions that matter to him—are the sonnet and the rhymed quatrains of the ballad. The sonnet's formality and architectural elegance allow Turner to discover, or create, order out of the chaos of public and private turmoil. And the lilting cadences of the balladic quatrains lighten what might otherwise be a relentless catalogue of endings.

English is often said to be a language poor in rhyme, but Turner's facility with language and his ear for melody belie that truism. A simile in "Mesophysics" amounts to Turner's poetic creed: "the echo of the rhyme / Makes out of words the music of the soul." His rhymes flow naturally and unobtrusively through the stanzas, drawing attention to themselves only when he is being deliberately witty and playful in fashioning unexpected combinations: "close/comatose," "hiatus/prostrate us," "candelabra/abracadabra," "aneurism/anachronism," "talker/New Yorker," and, my favorite, "Constantinople/archetypal." Turner delights in sound, and he does a virtuoso turn with a fourteen-line monorhyme to conclude the collection. All of this is to say that there is a high-spiritedness and an artistic inventiveness in *Latter Days* that ensure that Turner's reflections on mutability and mortality are never lugubrious or protesting. There is no "rage, rage against the dying of the light," but rather a stoic acceptance of the nature of things. "All life is farewells, vanishings," he writes in "Il Faut Laisser . . .," one of the bravely valedictory poems in the concluding Part X. The title of the monorhymed final sonnet, with its sidelong nod to Donne, looks to put his own inevitable exit into the perspective he has been building throughout this volume: "When the Time Comes, He Forbids Mourning." A

The Two Lives of a Poet

Jan Schreiber

Gjekë Marinaj, *Teach Me How to Whisper: Horses and other Poems*, translated by the author and Frederick Turner. Syracuse University Press, 223pp., $40 paper.

Albania, on the edge of the Adriatic sea between Montenegro and Greece, is dim in the minds of most Americans. Many remember the country as a rigidly controlled Soviet outpost, holding tight to Stalinist repressions even as *perestroika* was advancing in Russia. Most know nothing about its present government (a parliamentary constitutional republic), its language, or its literature. Poet Gjekë Marinaj was born there in 1965. Persecuted after publishing a slyly rebellious poem ("Horses") in 1990, he fled to Yugoslavia, then received asylum in the United States in 1991. He found his way to Texas, where he enrolled at the University of Texas at Dallas. There he pursued literary studies, ultimately receiving a PhD in 2012.

He has continued to write poems, which are now collected in *Teach Me How to Whisper*. It is not clear if all the poems in this volume were originally composed in Albanian. Some, such as "The Em Dash of Emily Dickinson," look and sound as if they might have been written in English. If they were, what was the role of the translator?

We all know that translators of poetry face an all but impossible task. They need to recreate not just the meaning of a poem in another language but a simulacrum of its sound as well. How does one make a poem in a new language that combines the sense and the sound of the original in a rationally and emotionally convincing form? The problem is made even harder when the original language is as remote from English as Albanian, a distant Indo-European cousin twice removed, with few cognate words and few cultural touchstones in common.

If anyone can rise to the challenge, it is likely to be Frederick Turner, a poet able to handle meter and rhyme with dexterity, and one who has proven his skill as a translator. Working with Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, a fluent German speaker, he produced an elegant translation of Goethe's *Faust, Part I*, a translation that adheres not only to the original rhyme scheme but to the often-shifting meter throughout that kaleidoscopic dramatic poem. In the present instance, however, Turner's collaborator is not just someone fluent in Albanian, it is the poet himself, a one-time colleague at the university where Turner himself taught until his retirement in 2020.

For a translator, having the author as a collaborator, especially one who has some facility in English, may be a mixed blessing. Even if he lacks a native speaker's command of English, the author may at times prefer his own expression. The delicate negotiations that ensue can only be imagined, but they may result in odd constructions like "In many lands I am held as if a god" ("The Blue Nile"). To judge from the English we have here (and Turner is scrupulous in reproducing meter and rhyme—or their absence—as he finds them in the original language), Marinaj is a free-verse writer most of the time, who nevertheless frequently uses end-rhyme.

The book contains multitudes. It starts with verse recollections of Marinaj's home and parents, then moves on to poems about his native country, including celebrations of Skënderbeu (Gjergj Kastrioti), a hero who fought for Albania against the Ottoman empire, and a poignant recollection of Marinaj's own exile while awaiting permission to enter the United States. There are passionate and delicate love poems that bring the landscape to life: "with blown pine needles the wind / writes love's calligraphy upon the snow." And there are poems of protest (here called "Admonitions"), including "Horses" whose last line ("And compared to humans, horses we remain!") roused a once quiescent Albanian citizenry to rebellion.

The collection moves onward into matters such as Greek mythology, a celebration of heroic women (including the poet's mother), metaphysical speculations, and tributes to poets as seers and spiritual guides. The book's last sections celebrate notable places (Mount Fuji, the Nile, the Eiffel Tower, and India), and finish with a mini-epic called "The Lost Layers of Vyasa's Skin." This is a first-person narrative in which the poet changes his form and moves, fishlike, into a watery world where he is able, after much struggle, to lay hands (fins?) on sheets of mica that comprise the lost Upanishads of the Hindu Vedas. He delivers these to two seahorses in a crystal cave deep in the Bay of Bengal while observing that "For fish and poets not poverty nor terror, nor yet death / can shut their eyes and mouths."

As this epic, and indeed much of the book, suggests, Marinaj is at pains to convince readers that the poet is a creature of singular nobility and insight. Of course, the best way to demonstrate that is to

write very good poems. So readers will be eager to see how the poems stack up. And this is where the pesky problems of translation loom. The largely absent meter and the shaky command of idiom I alluded to earlier make it hard to read and really *hear* some of these poems as their author no doubt intended. What are we to make of sentences like these, all taken from a single poem ("Looking into Your Kind Eyes")?

> The breezy evening has engendered this
> Translucent window
> Into the labyrinths of your soul.
>
> . . . . .
>
> The butterflies of pity
> Drift silently
> Into a redefinition of the modern mother.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Let your pen flow its hope upon
> The naked sheets
> To vivify compassion's aquarelles . . .

It is certainly possible to see and appreciate Marinaj's wide-ranging concerns with his family, his homeland, his sense of history, and his position in the worldwide realm of poetry. But we often see through a glass darkly. Nevertheless, a few of the poems in this book spring off the page to affect us viscerally. One is a little poem called "Truth":

> Truth
> Is an asymptote.
>
> We are the curve of the search.
>
> However hard we try to close on it
> Never can we touch it.

The poem works without meter and without rhyme. It states a simple proposition with a mathematical metaphor, and it is easy to understand. It suggests that behind even the imperfectly realized verbal

structures in this book (for no poet, even in his native language, strikes gold every time) there is a real sensibility searching for, and sometimes finding, the right words.

A poet exiled from his homeland and from his native language, forced to recreate himself in a new environment and a distant tongue, is a figure of both nobility and pathos. His reputation and achievement may follow him into his new life, and he may be welcomed into the fellowship of poets in his new land, as Brodsky was, and as Marinaj now is, but he is unlikely in his second language to achieve the grace and distinction that were his birthright in the first. What he can hope to do is evoke for a new audience something of the tradition and the imaginative environment from which he emerged. This is an invaluable service, for we are all parochial, however cosmopolitan we imagine ourselves to be. We need wider horizons. Read this book, then, for the expansion of knowledge and the shift in perspective that come with exposure to a different culture and a new tapestry of experience. There are always new truths to encounter. *We are the curve of the search.* A

Translating the Chinese Diaspora

Mai Wang

Yan Ge, *Elsewhere*. Scribner, 304pp., $27 cloth.

The title of Yan Ge's latest short story collection, *Elsewhere*, evokes the contradictions inherent to the immigrant experience: if one is elsewhere, one cannot be home, even if the elsewhere one has chosen is a place that one may have idealized in the past. For many of the characters in Yan's stories, particularly those who find themselves alone in a foreign land, the feeling of always wishing to be elsewhere (no matter where they might happen to live) captures a state of longing that appears to be the most permanent fixture of their interrupted lives.

It's a familiar sentiment for many individuals who identify with the far-flung members of the Chinese diaspora, a group produced by successive waves of immigration following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the surge in international student enrollment in U.S. and U.K. universities starting in the 1990s, and—more recently—the viral stories of Chinese immigrants crossing the southern border from Mexico to the U.S. in search of lives free from CCP intervention after mass Covid lockdowns. Yet as the foundational premise of Yan's book, the wish to find oneself elsewhere forms the basis of a seemingly infinite number of plot permutations.

A graduate of the University of East Anglia's MFA program, Yan Ge writes stories that skirt the formulaic requirements of workshop fiction while still exhibiting some of the features of high cultural pluralism defined by Mark McGurl in his 2009 book *The Program Era*, namely, a merging of multicultural subject matter with the intense devotion to literary craft that renders an author's prose worthy of recognition by their professors, publishers, bespectacled readers, and award panel judges further down the line. In her case, Yan remains committed to representing Chinese cultural particularities to a global audience that skews white and Western, but she is primarily focused on the emotional turmoil that accompanies immigrants like her on their journeys to the West.

Following in the footsteps of other Chinese diasporic writers such as Ha Jin and Yiyun Li, Yan first started writing in English in 2016—but unlike many of her contemporaries who first found fame in the Anglo-American literary world, Yan had already established herself as the author of five novels in China. Her maturity as a storyteller is evident from the virtuosic range of the stories, which span centuries and cross continents, yet are united in their treatment of their Chinese diasporic subjects as perpetual wanderers who find themselves in a brave new world and must confront the people in it.

Neither a story cycle nor a straightforward collection, *Elsewhere* contains several loosely linked stories that share either a central character or a diasporic location. Taken as a whole, Yan's book is perhaps best understood as a meditation on the centrality of literature and language in mediating each of our encounters with the world in all its strangeness. Many of the stories share a commitment to exploring the necessity of translation in a globalized age—not necessarily as a tool to facilitate cosmopolitanism, but rather for individuals to navigate their disorienting new environments.

This theme is especially apparent in stories that feature Chinese immigrants who have recently arrived in the West. In "Stockholm," for example, the narrator is a writer and new mother who flies to Sweden to participate in a literary panel attended by "twenty people in the audience, mostly senior citizens" (a description that surely resonates with those of us who have presented at academic conferences). After the event, an audience member asks the narrator to identify her favorite Chinese word—to act as a translator of her own culture—and she in turn confronts the temptation of infidelity while pumping the breast milk her body insists on producing nonstop after giving birth. Characterized by a confessional tone, this story exhibits documentary impulses that feel auto-fictional, even if its plot is invented.

Other stories reimagine ancient Chinese history. In "Hai," Zixia, a disciple of Confucius, converses about the brutal death of his mentor Zilu, who was betrayed by an unknown party, and comes to

realize that the House of Confucius has become corrupted by greed and inequality before he himself is framed for the murder. Though these stories appear to have little in common, they share an overlapping concern with exploring how narratives—both in spoken form and as texts proliferating between cultures—can radically alter our experience of reality, especially in times of personal duress.

Yan's book is perhaps best understood as a meditation on the centrality of literature and language in mediating each of our encounters with the world in all its strangeness.

Hardship, betrayal, and alienation are far from the only modes of existence detailed in the collection. The opening story, "The Little House," obliquely explores the psychic aftermath of the 2008 Szechuan earthquake by imagining a new communitarian ethos that emerges soon after the natural disaster. The story's first-person narrator, a poet who goes by Pigeon, takes shelter with fellow artists who have pitched a giant red tent in a square, where they indulge in sumptuous meals and casual sex in defiance of the death surrounding them. Both before and after she joins the collective, Pigeon is a reader of Camus's *The Plague*, and when she meets a man nicknamed Six Times, they exchange their views on fiction:

> Six Times wandered over and sat down beside me. "What are you reading?"
>
> I showed him the cover.
>
> "Camus," he said. "Interesting. Do you like him?"
>
> "He's all right," I said.
>
> You should read Marquez," he said. "*Love in the Time of Cholera* is a better choice."

Although Pigeon's praise for Camus is equivocal at best, Yan indirectly suggests that reading Camus functions as a coping strategy for Pigeon, allowing her to reach a state of calm that is unavailable to

her by any other means, including the hasty seduction Six Times enacts after he gives her the reading suggestion. What is left in the wake of the disaster, Yan suggests, is a series of choices about which distractions one might pursue to forget about the inevitable random tragedies waiting for us all. Weighed against other options, literature at least provides a more durable form of consolation.

Another lead story in the collection, "Shooting an Elephant," features a young Chinese woman, Shanshan, who finds herself struggling with the grief of a miscarriage after moving to Dublin with her workaholic husband, Declan. Declan is also a George Orwell fan so enamored with the writer's work that he arranged their honeymoon to Myanmar, where Orwell spent five years as a policeman during the waning days of the British Empire. Memories of the disastrous honeymoon briefly subside in Ireland. When she first arrives, Shanshan finds that "her anonymity soothed her," but she is also perturbed by the feeling that "anyone could turn to her at any moment and start a conversation about practically anything." Her lurking concern about her inability to maintain her own privacy—and by extension to secure herself against unwelcome intrusions—ultimately extends to her marriage. As she copes with the unresolved trauma of her miscarriage, Shanshan starts to read Orwell's 1934 novel *Burmese Days*, the same book her husband read aloud just before she suffered the miscarriage during their honeymoon, but Declan stops her:

> He hauled the book out from underneath
> her arm. "Why are you reading this?"
>
> She knew what he meant but she had no answer.
> Instead she said: "I thought he was your favorite writer."
> The Burmese woman looked down at Shanshan from
> the cover, a sarcastic expression on her face.
>
> "It doesn't matter." Declan shoved the book back on the top
> shelf of the bookcase. "You should focus on getting better."

For Shanshan, literature functions as a way—perhaps the only way—of feeling intimate with others—both Orwell and his readers (in this case, the husband who has grown estranged). At the end of the story, the couple reconciles after Shanshan crafts her own identity in Ireland by finding work as a translator, while she reads Orwell in her spare time as a way of becoming reacquainted with her husband. She makes her way through all of Orwell's books, but skips over the essay "Shooting an Elephant." We learn that Orwell's graphic description of the elephant's death was the text that Declan read to Shanshan when she was recovering in the hospital: "In a low and slightly hoarse voice, he had read to her how Orwell had pulled the trigger of the rifle, aiming the first bullet a few inches in front of the elephant's earhole." The visceral nature of Orwell's description,

delivered by a husband who has yet to come to terms with his own loss, coupled with Shanshan's acute knowledge that she—like the elephant—has suffered an involuntary form of violence, primes her to return to Orwell. Through her encounter with the English writer, Shanshan reaches a new understanding of how the miscarriage has impacted her, transforming it from an undeserved corporeal punishment to a shared experience of suffering.

The usefulness of language as a tool for dissolving the barriers between the self and the other is made most apparent in one of the most memorable stories in the collection, "How I Fell in Love With the Well-Documented Life of Alex Whelan," in which the narrator Claire—another Chinese female immigrant in Ireland—becomes infatuated with the posthumous social media persona of Alex, a young man she meets briefly at a movie screening before friending him on Facebook, only to discover that he commits suicide a few hours after accepting her friend request. Digging through his old Facebook posts, Claire discovers one dated from November 8, 2016 in which Alex unexpectedly catalogues "things we take for granted: A pint of Guinness. Packed and prewashed spinach. Eight bananas from Costa Rica for one fifty…Short stories of Kafka…Globalization. Rationalism. Freedom. Life." As she wavers between categorizing his words as banal

or profound, Claire realizes that it is only because Alex is dead that "every word and paragraph, every line of code, and every algorithm looked solemn and prophetic." Was Alex taking on the role of a Facebook prophet by forecasting the end of his own life, alongside the demise of globalization under Trump? Did he really regard Kafka's short stories as functionally equivalent to a bunch of imported bananas? As Claire searches for the answers to these impossible questions, she comes to realize that text may supplant physical intimacy in delivering unfettered access to another person's thoughts and emotions.

Yan suggests that the power of language lies in its abilities to bring us closer to overcoming our biggest source of pain: our isolation as individuals trapped in our own separate bodies. For diasporic subjects, this isolation is only intensified by the experience of being perceived as a foreigner, which leads to a longing to be elsewhere, if only in another person's head. Language, then, is the medium of communication best equipped to deliver a modicum of relief from the inherent loneliness of life in the internet age. It's only fitting that this relief may arrive in the form of a Facebook post we read only to forget as we scroll down and redirect our monetized attention to the next block of words from a person we may not even know in real life. ▲

The Quiet Ticking of Minutes

Isabelle Stuart

Harriet Baker, *Rural Hours: The Country Lives of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Rosamond Lehmann*. Allen Lane, 384pp., £25 cloth.

As its name suggests, *RURAL HOURS* tells the story of three writers who were only ever intermittent ruralists. Sylvia Townsend Warner, Virginia Woolf, and Rosamond Lehmann all wrote their major works in London, and biographers usually capture what these snatches of country life signified with a vague gesture: a bolthole, an escape, a peaceful foil to the real life that happened in town. But the best biographies can offer an antidote to vagueness, and Harriet Baker's achievement lies in the unusually vivid attention with which she sketches out what those rural hours meant to these three women.

The writers came to the countryside at very different phases in their lives. Woolf's country house was meant firstly as a place of healing, where her mental illness could slowly subside and her sense of self emerge from the tangible details of rural life that she meticulously notates in her diaries from Asheham, her rural Sussex rental house. For Townsend Warner, riding high on the sudden success that greeted her 1926 novel *Lolly Willowes*, a tiny, isolated cottage provided the opportunity to carve out a new life which could accommodate a new lover, the androgynous poet Valentine Ackland, as well as her budding communist principles. Lehmann, on the other hand, was on the run: fleeing wartime London as well as a painful divorce and trying to establish a rhythm with her young family and a new, married lover, Cecil Day Lewis. Baker's overarching suggestion that these rural spells were a creative forge is sometimes less interesting than all the other things she shows these interludes offered them: space for unconventionality away from prying eyes, time for slow recuperation, and a stage for hard-won self-reliance.

Rural Hours spans the two world wars, picking up on a moment of transition for each of these writers, when they were caught between city and countryside. Such a fitful structure is striking: it extends the arbitrariness that governs any group biography—taking up a handful of lives at the expense of others— to the chronological structure of the work, selecting episodes to represent a life as well as lives to represent a period. But Baker puts this selectivity to good use, picking over the ordinary country days, the days where, as Woolf puts it, "nothing strange or exalted" happened. Rather than compressing monumental developments into a few minutes of reading time, *Rural Hours* attempts to recreate the experience of living that life, encouraging the reader to inhabit the quiet ticking of minutes passing by as these women write shopping lists, forage for mushrooms, or supervise repairs.

Luckily for those who think this sounds like heavy going, the three women at the biography's center are highly charismatic country subjects. They bring the distinctive humor and acute social observations that characterize their novels to bear on their often-eccentric country lives. The freshness with which they saw the world around them catches in the mind: from the image of Townsend Warner in her glass snail of a bathroom, floating serenely among the frothy green of the sycamores that fill her garden, to the filigree drama of a piece of fish "grilled with a slip of banana lied along it like a medieval wife on a tomb."

As a biographer, Baker is unusually wary of drawing facts from fiction, focusing on archival materials more than on the published fiction. For the most part this restraint is admirable: an academic by training, she reads instead for the changing habits and routines that subtly shaped the form of the women's prose. In this way, Lehmann's shift to short stories emerges from wartime interruptions in her cottage; the flashcards Woolf kept for her husband seep into her compressed diaristic observations; and Townsend Warner's penchant for lists and small material details carries into the attention to objects that pervades her novels. Such observations do reflect back onto the texture of their fiction, but it occasionally feels as though we're losing the wood for the trees, the novels for the record cards. These are novelists whose work bristles with characters shaped by the countryside, and some of their most striking sentences capture moments of profound communion with rural landscapes. Think of Lolly Willowes, the title character of Warner's first novel, yearning for the witchy Chiltern Hills, where "like embers the wet beech-leaves smouldered in the woods," and where she lays her cheek against tree trunks to listen for the rising sap of spring; of the nostalgic seaside landscapes in Woolf's *The Waves* and *To The Lighthouse*, which loom vividly as their inhabitants drift in and out of focus; of the strangely seductive river that wends its way through the lives of the children in

Lehmann's *The Dusty Answer*, "scattered over with fierce, fire-opal flakes" or "moon-coloured, with a dying flush in it." Even the most vividly written shopping list couldn't compete, and Baker's relative lack of attention to these novelistic passages can't help but feel like a loss.

Baker's own prose is earnestly luxuriant, every phrase finely finished. When in 1930 Townsend Warner buys a ramshackle, leftover Dorset cottage, intending for it to be an occasional retreat, we are told: "But her heart snagged on the cottage, and the woman she had invited to lodge there, and from that point onwards, she went back to London infrequently, and then hardly at all." Like Townsend Warner's original intentions, the sentence peters out to a leisurely halt, containing the slow movement of the years within it. Alongside such attentive details, the biography's structure can occasionally feel unwieldy. The book is adapted from a PhD thesis, the traces of which are still visible in its three hefty central chapters, long enough to make one wish for a brisker thematic trot across these lives. Similarly, these three women's country lives are not equally compelling. Lehman's ordinary lovesickness in particular pales in comparison to the other two, especially the gloriously eccentric Townsend Warner; it would be difficult not to be charmed by her projected country cookbook, which was to include chapters on "Other Herbs than Parsley" and "Unusual Breakfasts." But *Rural Hours*' distinction is that it sets out to do something fresher and perhaps more usable than objective, narrative biography. It seeks to recreate these writers' "happy undistinguished days, ripe & sweet & sound; the daily bread," as Woolf describes her time in the country. In that, it succeeds enchantingly. *A*

American Outlaws

Benjamin Shull

Steven Hyden, *There Was Nothing You Could Do: Bruce Springsteen's "Born In The U.S.A." and the End of the Heartland*. Hachette Books, 272pp., $32 cloth.

Brian Fairbanks, *Willie, Waylon, and the Boys: How Nashville Outsiders Changed Country Music Forever*. Hachette Books, 464pp., $32.50 cloth.

Bruce Springsteen's 1984 album *Born in the U.S.A.* is a towering monument of rock history. The album offers an unrelenting progression of seminal songs, from the rousing title track to "Cover Me," "I'm Goin' Down," "Dancing in the Dark" and beyond. Many Springsteen fans count other albums as their personal favorite—I prefer *Darkness on the Edge of Town*—but *Born in the U.S.A.* features such a formidable track list, Steven Hyden notes in his book *There Was Nothing You Could Do*, that it functions as a "de facto 'greatest hits' album."

Born in the U.S.A., Hyden writes, is "undoubtedly" Springsteen's "most iconic record from a pop-culture perspective. It's the album that defines his persona in the broadest sense—the way Bruce sounds, looks, and acts in the popular imagination derives mostly from the *Born in the U.S.A.* era." Hyden is well-positioned to make such a claim. He's an erudite rock critic who has recently written books about Pearl Jam and Radiohead, and is especially skilled at placing a musical act's work in historical and cultural context. In his book about Radiohead, he presented the English band's foreboding 2000 album *Kid A* as a herald of the tribulations of the early 21st century: 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial meltdown, and the tech ascendancy.

In *There Was Nothing You Could Do*, Hyden considers the place of *Born in the U.S.A.* in American culture—especially the conundrum of the title track, a stinging indictment of Vietnam-era

America that many have superficially heard as a full-throated patriotic anthem—and Springsteen's broader body of work. The author first heard the album on cassette at the age of six. From the opening piano chord of the title track, he recalls hearing a man start to sing. "Actually, he is not singing—he is shouting. I try to make out what he's saying. He's been kicked around, I think? He says he's like a dog that's been beat too much, which disturbs me. He hollers that he was born in the U.S.A., but he doesn't sound happy about it." After one full listen, he writes, he was "officially a Bruce Springsteen fan" and would soon have every song memorized.

Hyden ranges widely, flaunting his musical knowledge. Some of his most insightful commentaries consider Springsteen in relation to other legendary artists, including Elvis Presley. The author sees a predecessor to the *Born in the U.S.A.* phenomenon in a pair of live Elvis recordings from the early 1970s: *As Recorded at Madison Square Garden* and *Aloha from Hawaii via Satellite*.

Elvis, Hyden notes, was then touring "with a conventional rock combo," along with vocal groups, string and horn sections. "It was the most overwhelming musical presentation by an American rock star," the author writes, "until Bruce's own *Born in the US.A.* tour." Hyden alights on "An American Trilogy," a medley that Elvis performed during both concerts. Elvis turned the trilogy, which consists of three traditional songs, into a performance "as broad, thunderous, and all-encompassing as America itself," a "vehicle in which he could forge a spiritual heartland…in the context of hammy, melodramatic arena rock." Springsteen, Hyden argues, would attempt to do much the same in the 1980s.

Hyden also points to Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, another blockbuster of the 1980s, released two years before *Born in the U.S.A.* For "Dancing in the Dark," the penultimate track of Springsteen's album, producer Jon Landau told Max Weinberg of the E Street Band "to play the drums like the rhythm track" for Jackson's "Beat It," the third single from *Thriller*. Weinberg, Hyden writes, interpreted this directive to mean "no frills," a "simple bass drum," "constant hi-hat" and to make it sound like a "dance record." There was a business parallel between the two albums: *Thriller* had seven top 10 singles released over a 13-month period, a schedule that was consciously designed to turn the album into a "multiyear phenomena." *Born in the U.S.A.* repeated this strategy—like *Thriller*, it had seven top 10 singles, but the release cycle extended some months longer.

There Was Nothing You Could Do offers a brisk survey of the singles themselves. Hyden labels "Cover Me," originally written for Donna Summer, as the one with "the most guitar solos," while "I'm On Fire" is Springsteen's "most overtly sexual song." In "I'm Goin' Down," Springsteen "profiles a couple on the verge of a breakup," though his delivery "comes across as a playful flirtation." The album's

lead single, “Dancing in the Dark,” is “an infectious synth-pop tune about self-hatred.”

Hyden discerns in “Born in the U.S.A.” a compromise necessary for a massively popular arena-rock act intending to speak to as large an audience as possible.

The author holds a special place in his heart for the concluding track, “My Hometown,” a somber song whose lyrics provide the title to the book. The song addresses 1960s racial strife in Springsteen’s hometown of Freehold, N.J., and father-son relationships. Though comparatively subdued, after the high-octane sequence that precedes it, the song is essential to the album, Hyden argues, providing a thematic capstone first signaled at the start of the record. Hyden reports that, when he returns to his own hometown, he drives past his childhood home while listening to it.

Then there’s the title track. “Born in the U.S.A.,” Hyden writes, is “the most misinterpreted Bruce Springsteen song of all time.” Despite its chorus, the verses tell a damning story of Americans sent to die in a foreign land and left to fend for themselves in their own. Many listeners over the years have heard an entirely different song than the one Springsteen wrote.

Hyden discerns in the song a compromise necessary for a massively popular arena-rock act intending to speak to as large an audience as possible. The song, he suggests, is “designed to be heard in a multitude of ways, and only one of those interpretations aligns with Bruce’s original intent.” Speaking to such a wide fanbase, he continues, means connecting with “people who like you for the wrong reasons,” and that the key to the song and the album’s lasting impact is Springsteen’s “ability to appear progressive and conservative at the same time,” and his willingness to leaven “cultural commentary with party-friendly music.”

Some readers will be more convinced by this line of reasoning than others, as they will by Hyden’s various musical judgments. But the author proves a great enthusiast of Springsteen’s music and American rock in general. Though *Born in the U.S.A.* is the book’s centerpiece, Hyden surveys the arc of Springsteen’s career, exploring the making of earlier albums like *Born to Run*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and *Nebraska* (his discussion of the pared-down

predecessor to *Born in the U.S.A.* is especially well-tuned) and later ones like *Tunnel of Love* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*.

The book's narrative takes in the album's cover photo of Springsteen's backside shot by Annie Leibovitz and Andrea Klein; the music video for "Dancing in the Dark" directed by Brian De Palma and featuring a young Courteney Cox dancing on stage; Springsteen's relationships with the members of the E Street Band; and his various reinventions up to the present day. Devotees of the Boss will feast on the book, though music fans of various persuasions should find much of value in Hyden's account, a passionate and sharply observed work of cultural criticism.

Brian Fairbanks's *Willie, Waylon, and the Boys* begins the day the music died. On February 3,1959, a chartered plane carrying Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson crashed not long after taking off from Mason City, Iowa, en route to a gig in Moorhead, Minnesota. One of its passengers was supposed to be Holly's bass player, Waylon Jennings, who gave up his seat to a flu-stricken Richardson and then joked to Holly that he hoped the plane crashed. When the plane did so, killing all aboard including the pilot, Jennings was distraught.

"I was just a kid, barely twenty-one," Jennings later said. "I was about halfway superstitious, like all Southern people, scared of the devil and scared of God equally. I was afraid somebody was going to find out I said that, and blame me." Jennings, who would eventually reinvent himself as a country star, is a principal character of Fairbanks's book, which describes how Jennings and peers like Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Johnny Cash and others created outlaw country, defying the strictures imposed by Nashville's country-music establishment.

Fairbanks, an investigative journalist and author, traces the careers of his cast of characters as they struggle to establish themselves as musicians. Nelson and Kristofferson had early breakthroughs as songwriters. Nelson's "Crazy" was turned into a hit by Patsy Cline. Kristofferson, who worked for a spell as a janitor at a Nashville studio, penned a number of tunes, including "Me and Bobby McGee" and "Help Me Make It Through the Night," that appeared on his debut album but became hits for other artists. Nelson returned to his native Texas after a decade in Nashville, and beginning in the early 1970s released a string of legendary Outlaw records including *Shotgun Willie, Phases and Stages,* and *Red Headed Stranger*.

The book's pages on Johnny Cash are naturally entertaining. Fairbanks evokes the making of Cash's 1968 live album

At Folsom Prison, performed for an incarcerated audience at a California penitentiary. The author writes:

> With his back to the audience, Cash was met by silence. When he whirled, took the mic, and intoned: "Hello, I'm Johnny Cash," the audience roared. Each of the nineteen songs he played seemed carefully chosen for the prison audience. From the literal gallows humor of "25 Minutes to Go," with Cash's ragged voice starting to "go" in tandem with the character's life, to the devastating "Long Black Veil," Cash focused mainly on prison songs, and the inmates mostly cheered in all the right places.

The pioneers of outlaw country, Fairbanks notes, collaborated frequently. The 1976 album *Wanted! The Outlaws* was a compilation of new and old songs featuring Nelson, Jennings, Jessi Colter (who was married to Jennings), and Tompall Glaser. Nelson and Jennings shared a fruitful musical partnership. Jennings's song *Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)* has guest vocals from Nelson, and the two created the 1978 duet album *Waylon & Willie*, scoring a hit with their rendition of "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys."

The Outlaws sure did some hard living. Fairbanks notes that Cash and Jennings at one point shared an apartment in Nashville that functioned as a drug den, replete with hiding places for the stash. Both men had severe pill addictions, while Jennings was partial to cocaine. As late as the early 1980s, one of Jennings's sons recalled, his father would cut a straw, put a half in each nostril, and snort "about every fifteen minutes for three or four days as a time." Nelson always preferred marijuana; Mickey Raphael, who plays harmonica with Nelson's touring Family band, quipped that Nelson felt great after one pot bust because he was six ounces lighter.

A narrative high point of "Willie, Waylon, and the Boys" is the formation of the Highwaymen, a supergroup of Cash, Jennings, Kristofferson, and Nelson. The group released three studio albums from 1985 to 1995. Their debut album was a great commercial and critical success; a personal highlight is its rendition of Cash's "Big River," featuring vocals for each member. "It looked like four shy rednecks trying to be nice to each other," Jennings said of their work together.

In the later sections of his book, Fairbanks surveys an impressive roster of artists who have grown to prominence in the Outlaws' wake, including Jason Isbell, Brandi Carlile, Mickey Guyton, Chris Stapleton, Amanda Shires, Allison Russell, Sturgill Simpson, Kacey Musgraves and many others. Readers who are encountering any of these musicians for the first time will be glad they did so.

Jennings's lifestyle left him in poor health in his final years before his death in 2002. Cash recorded right up until his demise the

following year, not long after the death of his long-time wife June Carter. Kristofferson, who in addition to a country star became a Hollywood actor (he won a Golden Globe for his turn opposite Barbra Streisand in 1976's *A Star Is Born*), retired a few years ago. Nelson is still touring at the age of 91, and appears on Beyoncé's *Cowboy Carter*. All of them, along with the other remarkable characters who populate Fairbanks's lively book, are rollicking fun company as we watch them make music that was born in the U.S.A.

AI and the Futures of Literature

Amit Majmudar

Technology had been talking back to us for years. Answering machines instructed us to leave a message, and phone trees welcomed us down endlessly forking paths to the same frustration. Bodiless assistants with names like "Siri" and "Alexa" always answered to their names with bright and unflappable voices, incapable of despair. They spoke in the first person—"Here's what I found"—a charming fiction. The kingdom of the visual had been the second to fall. Computer-generated imagery has been deceiving our eyes for decades.

So it shouldn't have been so startling to see the technology write back to us. Yet these artificially intelligent answers, so clear and knowledgeable, seemed to signal something new, something deeper. Even in the initial rollout, AI seemed to have leapfrogged three-quarters of human beings at this distinctively human endeavor. Textbook writers and a certain sector of nonfiction seemed doomed. The technology seemed to have shown up almost fully formed, effortlessly lucid on most topics, serene, almost smug in its mastery of journalistic prose. Prompts beginning "Write a poem…" proved that it could turn a rhymed quatrain more reliably than many practicing contemporary poets, too. Within a few months, we were experimenting on text-to-image generators, astonished at how our words could transform, within seconds, into Persian miniatures, or paintings in the style of Goya. It wasn't half bad. In fact, it was quite good. What would old-fashioned artists do? The advent of photography had shot realism in the stomach, but AI seemed likely to shoot art itself in the head. And then came text-to-video generators, conjuring uncannily sophisticated clips from motionless, colorless words. Did all this really happen in a year?

Naturally, as I watched ChatGPT instantly blurt out a "poem about Shiva in the style of Amit Majmudar" in rhymed quatrains, I fell to wondering about the technology's potential. This poem in my style, while not quite good, was certainly better than the stuff I had turned out in my first year at this art. If this was AI poetry's first iteration, what would the fifth churn out? Shakespeare plays?

That question can tease us into a thought experiment. Let's say you wanted to get a new Shakespeare play out of our hypothetical fifth-generation AI. You would have to train it on written material from around roughly 1594 and before, nothing after that Shakespeare couldn't have read. You might allow it to read some of Shakespeare's own earlier plays. A fair amount of research would have to determine which books were available in

translation to him, and which books he was unlikely to have read. A study like Kells's *Shakespeare's Library* might be helpful, but hardly exhaustive. We would have to go into the English grammar school curriculum of the time. Even so, we would never be able to replicate the extraliterary, nontextual inputs that might have led to a given character getting written a certain way—the playwright was known to write roles for specific actors, like the Fool in 1606's *King Lear*, tailored to the talents of one Robert Armin. Snatches of music, recommendations during rehearsal, private conversations, childhood memories, everything anyone said to Shakespeare all converged on a single point, the tip of his quill as it dotted the i in Goneril or inked a full stop. Letting the AI train on Shakespeare's own body of work might help it along in the task. But if an AI, of any degree of complexity, were denied access to those plays, would it ever replicate or approximate that inspired motley of thirty-seven Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies? Would it ever produce the passages that have few or no parallels or predecessors in English, or any other language?

I feel like it's tempting fate to deny any possibility to a new technology. (No one can dig a tunnel faster than John Henry, certainly not your newfangled steam shovel….) Predicting the far future and the near future are equally impossible, now that the near future moves farther away from us faster than ever. Still, though I know things may turn out entirely different than any projection, I find myself speculating on possible futures for literature.

Doomsayers tend to jump to the idea of total replacement, but in some advanced fields, the first incursion of artificial intelligence is as an assistant. My day job is radiology, the subfield of medicine that AI companies targeted earliest and most aggressively. Even twenty years ago, as a trainee, I saw the use of a (mostly useless or distracting) "Computer-Assisted Diagnosis" function with mammography. The computer circled spots in normal tissue, and the radiologist ignored its incompetent suggestions (but documented its use anyway, since "CAD" was an upcharge). Today, the technology has advanced, and AI is working toward both the interpretation of CT and MRI scans and the production of full radiology reports. Some of my colleagues already use a textual AI program that summarizes their rambling, freeform description of study findings into a succinct, numbered "impression" section at the end. The only thing keeping us from being replaced entirely, we radiologists joke darkly these days, is the need for someone to sue in case there's a mistake. Over the next few years, AI may well make individual radiologists many times more productive—before rendering us entirely redundant.

Could something similar happen with poets and writers? The verbally uninteresting, I-could-have-written-that poetry of Rupi Kaur depends less on the words themselves and more on her persona. She rose to fame after posting a viral image of herself wearing sweatpants stained with her menstrual blood. Her social media accounts sprinkle poems among photographs of herself, some professional, some candid, as well as posts in which she expresses laudable political sentiments. Occasional in-person tours don't change the fact that most of her fans were drawn to, and interact with, an online persona.

Kaur's online persona happens to correspond to a real-life person, but there is no reason why readers can't have AI poets in the same way lonely people have AI

As I watched ChatGPT instantly blurt out a "poem about Shiva in the style of Amit Majmudar" that turned out rhymed quatrains, I fell to wondering about the technology's potential.

girlfriends and AI boyfriends. That may be the next step. In the near term, a poet like Kaur, or other similar poets, could amplify their online presence by endlessly posting AI-generated poems in their own, easily matched styles. Much of social media success relies on relentless posting; AI-assisted mediocrities could boost their literary brands. The phase after that would be the generation of detailed poet-personas that "connect" with specific constituencies in poetry's online readership.

This may be one way that our notions of literary creativity change after this shock to the system. After photography, the plastic arts adapted, too. Since the 20th century, a repurposed urinal or colored square have qualified as art. Photographs themselves qualify as art, with camera-clickers like Annie Leibovitz and Diane Arbus gaining more prestige than many a painstaking painter, mixing and applying colors.

In time, an imaginative, detailed prompt might come to seem an art form in itself, appreciated for its suggestive verbal artistry, fed fruitfully into new iterations of text-to-video technology. The playscript was once considered an inferior or secondary form. Shakespeare's posthumous First Folio collected the first set of scripts to be printed on expensive French paper, and bound it in a manner previously seen fit only for Bibles and theological works. A couple of centuries later, the form seemed an unreachable brass ring for poet after overreaching Romantic poet. Novels used to be considered shallow, frivolous, and liable to corrupt a lady's morals. By Joyce's day, they were high art.

The kind of prompt that I envision as a future art form does not simply goad a bot with text into providing more text. Enough proliferation of words: Text-to-image and text-to-video prompts, conjuring the visual with the verbal, track to the use of imagery in literature generally. Writers, for centuries, have used words to evoke images and interactions in the reader's imagination. In the future, they may use the same verbal techniques with AI as the intermediary. A prompt that reads, "A wet black bough, with human faces instead of leaves" is not all that different in technique or aim than Pound's famous Imagist poem.

An AI-assisted filmmaker, liberated from the tyranny of studios, might publish scene-by-scene prompts and dialogue. The remake of a classic might entail feeding that decades-old text—which would surely approach the size and scope of a novel—into the latest AI, then watching a new iteration of the film. Future remakes might take the liberties that Shakespeare's directors take with his plays and settings. Tweaks to the "classic" prompts could renew the film for each generation.

You will notice I sound awfully confident that some kinds of poetry (and formulaic fiction) will be easy for AI to forge or replicate. This is because I have already witnessed poetry adapt to the new environment of social media, at great cost. Instapoetry is infraprose. Bleached of historical and cultural allusiveness, formal

structure, complexity of syntax or diction, and close observation of the natural world and urban environment alike, the bestselling work of Rupi Kaur, Nayirrah Waheed, "Atticus," and others is designed to fit seamlessly into an infinite scroll of distracting images and video clips:

like the rainbow
after the rain
joy will reveal itself
after sorrow

This is absolutely stuff that AI could generate. The doodle that accompanies this genuine Kaur poem would have been more competently executed by AI. This is the kind of chaff that inflates statistics about how young people are reading more poems than ever before. If this is what American poetry's renaissance looks like, I prefer its dark ages; that darkness was the darkness of the deep.

Not that the rest of poetry is impossible to replicate. The dense, nearly nonsensical image sequences and fractured text-snippets of much contemporary academic page poetry seems thoroughly within reach as well. A passage from Lyn Hejinian, like

the dead are used over
the major insects was that
tile the rent become mortgage money
fortress replaced by a more natural forest
tints the tall flowers
leap the embarrassment of a great subject
high in my own eyes hanging over the day
from this aviation is clumsy
or even desirable diction

strikes me as a style, like Kaur's, within reach of AI. The only reason the experimental stuff may remain safe from usurpation is because there is no money in producing it. Accessible poetry for the general (read: lazy) reader and the abstruse, at times meaningless poetry that poets write for other poets: Ironically, the poets working at these two extremes are the most vulnerable. It's the Goldilocks principle of AI poetry: Poetry that is too simple, and poetry that is too inscrutable, are equally easy for AI to generate well. The same principle will likely apply to AI fiction. AI will find it easy to learn Lee Child's literary practices and produce ten pages of a Jack Reacher novel, and even easier, perhaps, to dissolve ten AI-generated paragraphs into Finnegans Wake. But the ability to forge ten sentences of *Beloved* will elude AI for some time to come, if not forever.

What kind of poetry or fiction will a future readership decide is "just right"? And in that Goldilocks analogy, who is Goldilocks?

Notice how the same people who say they have no time to read a book will binge-watch a Netflix series or play a video game for an hour or two after work. Reading and watching do different things to brain waves. By "reading" I mean reading deeply, or attentively—the opposite of self-distraction, scrolling through hot takes and snippets of news. (According to Johann Hari in *Stolen Focus*, even reading a text online is a different activity, at a neurological level, than reading the same thing in print.) Watching television switches the brain into alpha waves, the low-frequency brain activity associated with daydreaming. The brain uses more energy during outright dream sleep. Reading sends the brain into a wholly different state than watching. Neurologists have observed the high-frequency gamma waves of active attention, information gathering and fully-awake experience. I imagine some specialized modes of reading—poetry and

scripture, in my own case—prompt theta waves, too, the kind associated with inward focus and prayer. Anecdotally, when I am deeply tired, I drift off to sleep after watching a show because my mind has been lulled for an hour or so, but I drop off to sleep while reading because my mind resists more work. An hourlong stroll and an hourlong run are different workouts, each stressing the body to different degrees. When we say our attention spans are diminishing, we are observing a drop in intellectual stamina. Most contemporary minds are deconditioned.

Complex, "literary" English may be the equivalent of postclassical Latin, the common language of Europe's scholars and theologians, artificially preserved. AI would generate epics in search of a soul to stir, lyrics in search of a heart to break; most souls would stir, most hearts would break independently of AI's attempts to accomplish those tasks in outmoded language. So the fate of AI-generated literature would match the fate of human-generated literature: Ever-increasing supply, ever-diminishing demand.

The audience, or the absence of one, will do the most to determine the future of literature. To focus on the writing and the writers is to focus on the wrong things. Historically, the receiving end has usually governed the producing end. Is anyone going to be reading at all in an age when a potential novelist can use AI to conjure his or her novel, complete with dialogue, background music, and, hopefully, a larger audience? The taxing medium can be dispensed with. Novelists will be able to attain, directly, their daydream: apotheosis on the daydream-adjacent screen.

Streaming entertainment and video games have already drawn away much of that literate, 19th-century audience which once used novels for entertainment. Dickens and Dumas wrote the equivalent of Netflix shows in their day. Consider how the great exemplars of the form, from The *Count of Monte Cristo* to *War and Peace*, were serialized in magazines. To buy the bound novel was like buying the "box set" in the 20th century, or, in the 21st, binge-watching a whole series.

So what if the vast majority of people abandon reading? From the invention of writing onwards, for centuries, most people have never read because they never learned how to read. The great ages of literature either consisted of small batches of scattered literary people writing for each other (the early humanists) or for performance (Elizabethan drama, or Spain's Siglo del Oro). Neither Homer, Sophocles, or Shakespeare expected that reading would be the primary way in which their words would be experienced. In fact, there is some evidence, scattered in diaries and other descriptions, that the books of 19th century poets and novelists were read aloud to families or small groups. They did this for the same reason the characters in Jane Austen novels play the piano and sing for the guests after dinner: That was how people entertained themselves before the eras of radio, television, and streaming media.

In one future, all the entertainment-seekers flee the audience for fiction. The novel regresses to an antiquated form, beloved of a small number of practitioners, who reconcile themselves to the absence of any substantial readership. This has several precedents in literature. The "closet drama" was a play not intended for the stage, usually because it was in verse. Byron, Keats, and Shelley all wrote them in post-Shakespearean England, after verse had been chased off the stage. The form existed even in antiquity; in Nero's Rome, Seneca produced several elaborate verse tragedies for his friends (plays which went on, by a quirk of history, to become the

main models for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, who had no access to Seneca's Greek models).

In such a future, the novel will be a holdout form. Any anxieties about failing to connect with a mass readership will vanish once novelists realize they cater, like poets, to a niche taste. Harpsichord players do not fantasize about making the Billboard Top 100. They play an obscure instrument for the love of it, and those who listen to them share that love. Defiantly and proudly written with no expectation of mass readership, the novel would resemble, say, strictly iambic, end-stopped, hard-rhymed verse in the 21st century. The writers and readers of such verse, pictured as a Venn diagram, consist of two almost exactly overlapping circles. Novelists would write for other novelists.

AI's most impressive aspect, so far, is the speed at which it churns out drivel and dross.

Many believe "literary fiction" is more than halfway to that state already. Shrink the attention span enough, and that will be the only kind of fiction around. What it will look like is anyone's guess. New styles may pass in and out of fashion, if the tradition remains vigorous and innovative. In a more likely scenario, pre-existing styles will be recycled (ironically, the modus operandi of AI), with novelists endlessly seeking to recapitulate the work of "classical models" like Raymond Carver, or David Foster Wallace, or Alice Munro. The long death of the classical epic poetic tradition was signaled by a proliferation of huge poems patterned on Homer. Virgil's, signal boosted by imperial favor and Latin's reach, happened to succeed and last. Only specialists have heard of Silius Italicus.

Throughout this essay, you will notice that many of my speculations concern whether AI's output will rival the best of human artistry. This may seem an unfair bar, since no one demands of a debut poet, or any poet really, that he or she rival Dante. Yet for AI, that ought to be the standard. The production of forgettable art and mediocre word sequences may be a technological feat, but it is also a redundant and irksome one, since so many humans do that already.

AI's most impressive aspect, so far, is the speed at which it churns out drivel and dross. This makes a kind of sense: Speed is the quest, curse, and birthmark of the modern. In this desultory future, we see AI hit a ceiling. Literary freshness continues to elude it; metaphor's arbitrary-yet-apt connection remains as difficult for algorithms to mimic as it is for poets to master. AI's products fill the environment with even more literary noise, making it exponentially more difficult for good books and writings of any length to get a hearing. Its products become, not human in the richest and most mysterious sense, but just humanish enough to swarm the market. AI masters literary formulas and deploys them relentlessly, hundreds of times a week, for unscrupulous masters who bombard online booksellers with doppelganger volumes that clog recommendation algorithms. Certified human work might become a separate category, with every book vetted by a program like the one at Turnitin.com—until the programs become clever enough to cloak and circumvent these checks with verbal chaff programmed to vanish when the file is opened, or some other strategy

to introduce sufficient variation and deflect suspicion.

How could programmers improve the quality of AI fiction and poetry? Ay, there's the rub. Even if you trained the AI exclusively on "the best that has been thought and known," in Matthew Arnold's phrase, inputting the classics with the expectation of getting some new classic as the output, you aren't likely to solve the problem. This might be downright counterproductive. No successful writer of the past has read all the "Great Books," if only because so many of them did not exist yet—there was no way for an 18th century American writer to read *Beloved*, and even a copy sent back in time would make very little sense. For much of history, past writers could not be accessed because of the lack of translations or manuscript scarcity. Shakespeare probably never read Dante, just as Dante never read Homer, either in Greek or in translation (he may have read a rough summary of the Iliad in Latin, the 1070-line *Ilias Latina*). Lady Murasaki never read the Book of Job; *Gilgamesh* wasn't even discovered until 1849. What would an AI that had been fed the vast library of world literature produce, if prompted to write? Could any one human reader parse allusions to everything from the Vedas to Virginia Woolf? One solution might be to train the AI on the eclectic reading list of a real-life reader, mixing in an assortment of news articles and textbooks. But serendipitous and arbitrarily limited readings are not enough to create an idiosyncratic mind, if only because any writer selects and amplifies his or her influences.

I myself have read a lot of essayists about literature, for example; I model my approach—but not my style—after the late George Steiner. I have no idea why, since I never met or studied with this critic, and we do not share much in the way of background. Montaigne, discussing friendship, sums it up: "Because he was he, and I was I." These are the mysterious goads and divagations of human literary productivity. AI is unlikely to replicate that, and not just because the sort of people who make AI software don't know what goes into becoming a writer. A program cannot (yet) experience first-pass recognition and instant kinship.

Some of my proposed futures have been mixed or downright desultory. But I want to speculate on the happiest future for literary AI: That Silicon Valley figures literature out, too, and AI attains a state of genius, with all that entails. As a writer myself, I love literature itself more than my own place in that collective, multigenerational endeavor. If AI really can do my radiology job better than me, I owe it to future patients to let it take over; the same holds true for my literary work. Future readers deserve the best.

A literary genius AI might well run into the same problem that we human writers face. Even if AI could generate work of evocative complexity and idiosyncratic insight, casting human psychology in expressive literary form, who would read it? Who would be receptive to it? If that portrait of humanity, filtered through a human-designed text generator, required over a thousand pages of dense prose, who would have time, or make time, to read it? The reversion of humanity back to oral and visual communication will limit AI's reach, too. It will be working for the same small group of people.

And those people, drawn to deep and demanding books, may well savor human fallibility and ineptitude. The effortless perfection of AI literary art would work against it, particularly because so much of

what we look for in literature involves portrayals of human suffering. AI's wisdom would be attained without suffering; its detached evocations of pain and despair would be mere hearsay. The fitful arc of a human writer—the early failures, the breakthrough, even late-career sterility—might become the focus of future literary experience: Not the individual poem, but the progress of the poet; not the one "best" novel, but the aesthetic shifts that distinguish the early works from the later ones.... AI's habit of instantaneously blurting paragraphs might turn out to be its Achilles heel: The inability to struggle, and to evolve through struggle, will discredit its eloquence as slickness, its wisdom as pablum. Those who still read at all will shift to value messy, erratic, oddly proportioned works, works authenticated with Cheeto-orange fingerprints and chocolate smudges and a coffee ring, the way we value the cat's pawprints and the monk's doodles in the margins more than the medieval manuscript's theology.

To risk a hard prediction, though, I don't think AI will ever match human literary genius, past, present, or future. This isn't just wishful thinking, or at least I don't think it is—unless this is just strategic reasoning that soothes my territoriality. One key factor, for me, is that language, spoken and written, changes. Linguistic drift is intrinsic to language itself, and, based on everything we know about human language, it seems to be a hard fact. By which I mean that no AI can change that fundamental aspect of language, any more than it can change the fact that heart rate variation is a fundamental aspect of circulation.

The introduction of AI will almost certainly influence what changes take place. Technology has already shaped human dance and music—we have a dance called "the robot" and a musical genre called "electronica." Human writers in the future may well try to imitate AI authors instead of flesh and blood ones, complete with its tells and mistakes, like beatboxers mimicking electronic rhythms and record scratches. Nonetheless, living, speaking human beings, with their slang and portmanteaux, their in-jokes and consonant mutations, will grow the data set with which AI works. Because of what it strives to do and how it strives to do that, AI, like most human authors, will always be one step behind garrulous humanity itself.

The proof of this is how the early AI image generators often wanted you to specify a style. DALL-E would direct you to categories such as Surreal, Abstract, Photorealist, or Steampunk. In the prompt itself, you could add phrases like "...in the style of Goya" or "Persian miniature of...." This hints at the underlying nature of what AI does best: the recombination of visual or verbal elements at will, the manipulation of preexisting forms and styles into new examples, sometimes four at a go. Its virtuosity is infinite, and its execution partakes of Darwinian overproduction. Even an uninspired prompt, run enough times, can goad at least one image worth saving. Yet the surprise and delight wear off after a while because they possess finitude and familiarity. "Persian miniature of Mughal emperors shopping at a Kroger supermarket" amuses the eye with the incongruous application of a well-known style, but the image's details, however numerous, communicate nothing, unlike the intricate, numinous eloquence of a Russian icon or Chola bronze.

The same limitations seem to hold true, only more strikingly, with AI's productions in language, at least so far. These programs have been trained on miles of internet

blather, and they are hampered, ultimately, by their method, which is the recombination of preexisting sources. All words recombine letters, and all literary works recombine words—but the perpetual freshness of an Emily Dickinson poem derives from something that even large-scale recombination, exhausting the possibilities of the juxtaposition of words, cannot discover. This elusive quality is idiosyncrasy, and what idiosyncrasy produces cannot be replicated easily, or at all—sometimes even by its idiosyncratic creator. Joseph Heller never reproduced the magic of *Catch-22*, not even in its sequel—and neither has anyone else. Both T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost wrote their most lasting poems in the first halves of their careers and proliferated forgettable work in their last decades. Idiosyncrasy of mind, the result of nontextual, extraliterary, maybe even genetic factors, cannot be generated from pre-existing text alone. Though it may seem a random occurrence—nothing could predict literary genius arising in Amherst, Massachusetts, in the 1860s, neither its nature nor its dash-happy, hymn-like poetic form—the fact is that it is profoundly nonrandom. Such work exerts disproportionate power on its generation, or in the specific cases of the posthumously recognized Dickinson and Melville, a future generation. That power and fascination hold long after the generation passes away.

AI may change the way human writers create, intensifying some already-evident tendencies in contemporary literature. These will be open signals of idiosyncrasy, usually through the introduction of autobiographical material. Notice how I referred to my own background as a radiologist in an essay ostensibly about AI and literature; notice, too, the self-reflexiveness of this passage, indicating self-consciousness, and hence, indirectly, consciousness itself. You see these tendencies everywhere of late. It is the *fons et origo* of the recent genre of "creative nonfiction." I sprinkled that random Latin phrase in there because it isn't very typical of AI's offerings. All of this is me trying to convince you that you're getting something in this essay that you can't get by typing "What potential effects will AI have on literature?" into ChatGPT. I am trying to plant an idea in your head separate from the ideas of the essay itself, using prose paragraphs that look but hopefully don't read like AI-generated paragraphs. That separate idea is crucial, since it authenticates everything else. It may become the ultimate certification of literature, defiant, desperate, pleading, hopeful: A human being wrote this. A

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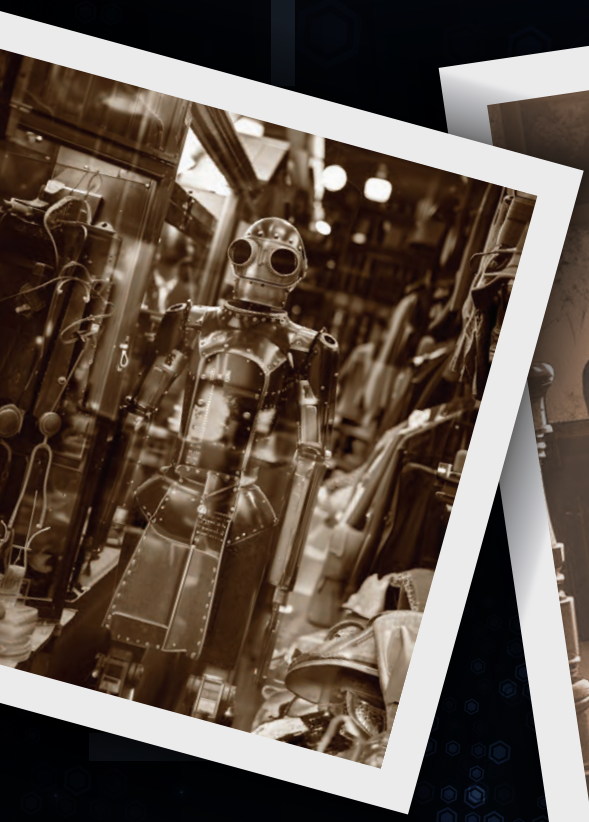

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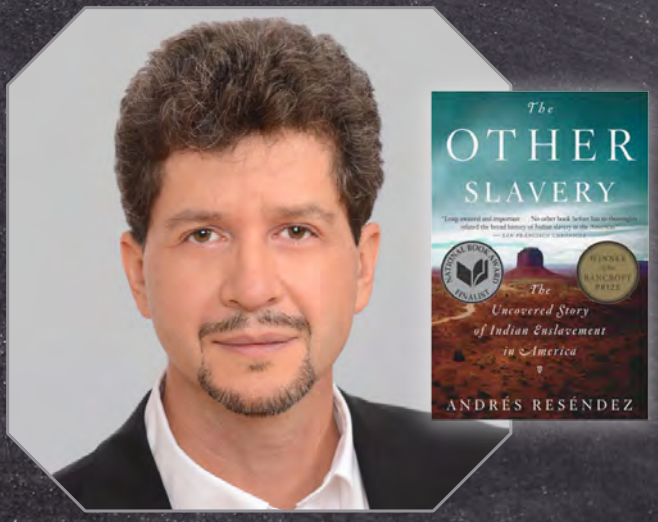

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