

Didi-Huberman and art history's amicable incursions

Chari Larsson

*"I" is harder to write than to read.*¹

Divided into four sections, Georges Didi-Huberman's recent book *Aperçues* consists of nearly 200 fragments organised into four themes: *occasions, blessures, survivances, désires* (occasions, wounds, survivals, desires). The fragments are dated, but not ordered chronologically. As a result, the text refuses to be organised into a neat linear narrative resembling diary form. Instead, it is an unruly collection of intimate thoughts and memories, combined with research notes and reflections. Early in the text, Didi-Huberman observes:

Je ne désire pourtant ni dresser le système des singularités multiples où se dessinerait une physionomie de ma sensibilité, ni écrire un roman du personnage que mes expériences de regard finiraient par dessiner.²

I have no desire either to organise these multiple singularities into a system that would provide an outline of my sensitivity, or to write a novel around the character that my visual experiences would end up drawing.

Didi-Huberman urges the reader not to confuse his writing as a reflection of his authentic, true self. Despite this, the text is incredibly personal, replete with letters, recollections, travel observations and the use of first person singular throughout. This essay will argue that Didi-Huberman's decision to write in fragmentary form is part of an undercurrent in art-historical writing: the turn to the 'I', or an embrace of loosely demarcated autobiographical practices. This, however, is not a simplistic return to the humanist author as a stable and coherent entity. In the wake of the poststructuralist critiques of subjectivity, the reintroduction of the 'I' in autobiographical mode is a mode of disciplinary disruption. At stake here is art history as a narrative structure, the subjective authorial voice, and changing attitudes to the subject-object relationship.

The question of art writing's *literariness* has a habit of resurfacing. In a recent issue of *Art History*, Catherine Grant asked: 'what does it mean to write art history creatively?'³ As Grant observes, the question of how art history should be written is not a new one, but the focus on creative writing has gained momentum in recent years, bolstered by postgraduate art writing programs.⁴ If we were to reach back further to the 1990s, Paul Barolsky lamented

¹ Roland Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, 366.

² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2018, 18.

³ Catherine Grant, "'A narrative of what wishes what it wishes it to be": An Introduction to "Creative Writing and Art History"', *Art History*, 34: 2, March 2011, 231.

⁴ Grant, 'A narrative of what wishes what it wishes it to be', 232.

the state of art-historical writing, observing it was 'clotted with jargon and larded with cliché, impenetrable in its density, analytic and contentious to a fault, and, worst of all, utterly predictable.'⁵ Barolsky mused:

To be sure, writing art history is not the same thing as creating poetry or fiction, but one wonders why art history cannot share some of the qualities of imaginative literature, why such prose should not be beautiful, playful, witty, and inspiring—in short, a pleasure to read.⁶

The tension between objective realism and more subjective modes of expression is a fault line that runs through the history of the discourse. Nineteenth-century writer and critic Walter Pater, for instance, sought to clearly distinguish himself from the art writing of his immediate predecessor, Matthew Arnold. In a crucial passage located in the Preface to his 1873 *The Renaissance Studies in Art and Poetry*, Pater carefully distanced his project from Arnold's dictum: "To see the object as in itself it really is," has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism...'.⁷ In the lines immediately following, Pater described an immanent experience that was grounded specifically in the individual's direct contact with the art object:

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? And if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?⁸

Pater elevated the primacy of the subjective experience above the external art object.⁹

Long identified as one of the *most* subjective of art writers, Pater's earliest commentators detected an autobiographical impulse in his writing. Reviewing Pater's second book *Marius the Epicurean* in 1885, Mrs Humphrey Ward expressed her distaste for autobiographical writing: 'As a nation we are not fond of direct 'confessions'.'¹⁰ Mrs Ward's comments point to the Victorians' general preference for obliquely rendered autobiographical portraits. Mrs Ward continued:

English feeling, at its best and subtlest, has almost always something elusive in it, something which resents a spectator, and only moves at ease when it has succeeded in interposing some light screen or some obvious mask between it and the public.¹¹

Autobiographical writing was deemed appropriate only *if* properly obscured.

⁵ Paul Barolsky, 'Writing Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, 78: 3, 1996, 398.

⁶ Barolsky, 'Writing Art History', 398.

⁷ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, New York: Mentor Books, 1873, xii.

⁸ Pater, *The Renaissance*, xii.

⁹ For an account of the controversy generated in the wake of the publication of *The Renaissance*, see R.M. Seiler, *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, 19-22.

¹⁰ Mrs Humphrey Ward, 'Marius the Epicurean', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 52, June 1885, 134.

¹¹ Ward, 'Marius the Epicurean', 134.

While Pater rarely used first-person singular associated with autobiographical writing, he did deploy the use of first-person plural 'us', 'we' and the possessive 'our'. Consider this passage drawn from his essay on Johann Joachim Winckelmann:

Filled as *our* culture is with the classical spirit, *we* can hardly imagine how deeply the human mind was moved, when, at the Renaissance, in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil. Winckelmann here reproduces for *us* the earlier sentiment of the Renaissance. On a sudden the imagination feels itself free. How facile and direct, it seems to say, is this life of the senses and the understanding, when once *we* have apprehended it! That is the more liberal life *we* have been seeking so long, so near to *us* all the while. How mistaken and roundabout have been *our* efforts to reach it by mystic passion, and monastic reverie; how they have deflowered the flesh; how little they have emancipated *us*!¹²

By using first-person plural, Pater demonstrated that it is possible to create a sense of shared closeness or proximity with his audience. Pater folds the reader into the text, collapsing historical distance between the Renaissance, Winckelmann and the reader's own time.

Returning to Didi-Huberman's recent decision to use first-person singular raises a range of questions: why a return to self and why now? For the generation of poststructuralist authors such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, the unified subject was an uncomfortable and outdated humanist legacy. Spectacularly, in 1968 Barthes killed the author. In what has perhaps become one of the most staid and predictable of all poststructuralist clichés, Barthes argued the text needed to be freed from the strictures of authorship. The author must 'die', Barthes argued, to enable the reader to be 'born'.¹³ The author was no longer the sole determiner of meaning. Over time, notions such as the author's death become fatigued. Fatigue breeds familiarity and distain. Is it possible, then, to rehabilitate a cliché? To return, and try to look again at the author's death with fresh eyes? With time, clichés become rich with possibility, and deserve revisiting.

More recently, the author has been 'killed' again, this time by the object. Critical theory has seen a 'turn to the object' in a range of theories as broad and diverse as 'vibrant materialism', 'speculative realism', 'object-orientated ontology' and other, related approaches.¹⁴ Generally speaking, all share a desire to abolish the traditional subject-object relationship and identify modes of post-humanist thinking. In much of this work, however, little attention is paid to genealogical 'precursors', or earlier preoccupations that have taken up the question of the subject's relationship with the art image.

¹² Pater, *The Renaissance*, 126. My emphasis.

¹³ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

¹⁴ See for instance, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010; Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28: 1, Autumn 2001; C. Cox, J. Jaskey, and S. Malik, *Realism Materialism Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015.

The amicable author

Resisting an absolute bracketing of subjectivity promoted by object-orientated approaches, I would like to move instead in the opposite direction: the reassertion of authorial agency. If the author died in 1968, what is not as well-known is Barthes' 1971 *exhumation* of the author. In the preface to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, he remarks: 'The pleasure of the Text also includes the amicable return of the author.'¹⁵ The author returns after a three-year hiatus, and the author is *amicable*. What does it mean, then, to be an amicable author? Amicability suggests a degree of confidentiality, disclosure, and candidness. It signals a desire to share with the reader a general sense of goodwill and intimacy. To be amicable is to be friendly, to demonstrate a sense of benevolence. As we have already seen in respect to Pater and Didi-Huberman, the use of first person succeeds in creating a sense of closeness and proximity with the reader. In line with Barthes' observations, this intimacy leads to an impression of amicability. Barthes, however, urges caution: 'Of course, the author who returns is not the one identified by our institutions (history and courses in literature, philosophy, church discourse); he is not even the biographical hero. The author who leaves his text and comes into our life has no unity.'¹⁶ The amicable 'I' returns, but is fragmented, fractured and unreliable.

Following Barthes and working against a simplistic resurrection of the humanist subject, I wish to explore the conditions of *amicability* and how these might be conveyed to the reader. If the amicable author returns, how then to best give textual representation in art writing? Generally speaking, art historians have generally been reluctant to pursue alternative literary strategies, and tend to err safely on the side of 'objective' facts. Again, Barthes is helpful here as he leaves us a series of clues through the 1970s. In one of the final essays published in *Tel Quel* before he died, Barthes took up the question of the self again, this time in relation to the *journal intime*, or the diary. Barthes commenced the essay with a degree of uncertainty, with a confession: 'I've never kept a journal —, or, rather, I've never known if I should keep one.'¹⁷ Barthes died several months after the publication of 'Deliberation'. Despite this apparent apprehension, during his final decade Barthes developed four texts that reveal an ongoing experimentation with autobiographical forms of writing: *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) and *Camera Lucida* (1980). To this list we can add the posthumous publications *Incidents* and *Mourning Diary*.¹⁸ During the final years of his life, Barthes introduced a teaching and lecturing style that reinscribed the self into the analysis.¹⁹

If autobiography was the vehicle for the amicable author to return, what does this signal to us about shifting attitudes towards autobiography and its attendant subgenre, the

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1976, 8.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, 8.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, 'Deliberation', in *The Rustle of Language*, 359.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 2010; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, London: Flamingo, 1984; Roland Barthes, *Incidents*, trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.

¹⁹ See Neil Badmington, 'Deliberations: the journals of Roland Barthes', *Textual Practice*, 30: 2, February 2016.

diary? The lure or promise of referentiality and its privileged relationship to the truth of authorial intent suggests that autobiography might represent an authentic portrayal of an author's life and thoughts. Language, however, is a form of representation, and the reader must therefore negotiate the tension between memory and history, authenticity and imagination, fact and fiction and so on. The field of autobiographical studies reflects these conflicts and it is worth returning to the debates of the 1970s and 1980s to map out the tensions. The theorisation of language and the representation of the self led Rudolphe Gasché to declare in 1978 that the interest in autobiography did not 'consist of a desire to return to theoretical positions rendered obsolete and – strictly speaking – untenable in the aftermath of "structuralism"'.²⁰ In line with Barthes' description of the return of the split and contested subject, Gasché underscored the 'insurmountable contradictions' of autobiography, suggesting that perhaps every discourse was necessarily 'autobiographical'.²¹

Akin to the return of the amicable author, the theorisation of autobiography in the late 1970s was not a straightforward embrace of the unified and coherent subject. The debate was taken up and elaborated by scholars such as Paul de Man, who argued it was impossible for language to represent 'reality' and the relationship between fact and fiction rendered undecidable.²² As a counterpoint to de Man's scepticism, James Olney has argued that autobiographical truth *can* be known, even if language is not entirely transparent. For Olney, autobiography signalled 'the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create and that, in the end, determines both the nature and the form of what he creates.'²³ Autobiography continues to occupy an awkward and ambiguous relationship to the referent.

What are the implications for art writing? Similar tensions between attitudes to language, constructions of self and subjectivity have played out in art-historical writing. It is impossible, for instance, to decouple Pater's writing from autobiographical interpretations that have underwritten the long history of his reception. For decades, Pater's opaque reflexivity has taunted scholars' search for the 'real' Walter Pater. In 1906, A.C. Benson observed that 'it is obvious that a certain autobiographical thread is interwoven.'²⁴ Later, Gerald Monsman coined the term 'criticism-as-creative-self-portraiture' to describe Pater's diverse writerly practice.²⁵ In the 1990s, Pater's sexual identity became important for queer historical recoveries.²⁶ Pater's work and life have generally been understood to operate reciprocally. This may also help us understand why Pater's writing has been of little interest to art historians.

²⁰ Rudolphe Gasché, 'Autobiography and the Problem of the Subject', *MLN*, 93: 4, May 1978, 573.

²¹ Gasché, 'Autobiography and the Problem of the Subject', 574.

²² Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *MLN*, 94: 5, December 1979.

²³ James Olney, 'Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction', in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, 3. Also see Olney's *Metaphors of Self: the meaning of autobiography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.

²⁴ A.C. Benson, *Walter Pater*, London: Macmillan, 1906, 4.

²⁵ Gerald Monsman, *Walter Pater's Art of Autobiography*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980, 13.

²⁶ Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.

More recently, autobiography has been deployed by Rosalind Krauss as a tool for disrupting conventions and demarcating her writing practice from mainstream modernism. In *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss included a personal memory in order to distance herself from her former mentor, art critic Clement Greenberg:

He's sitting there just as I remember him, next to the neat little marble-topped table, with its prim lamp in gilt bronze mounted by a simple white shade, and behind him a painting that might be by Kenneth Noland but is hard to identify in the tightly held shot that frames him. His face is much the same, flabby and slack, although time has pinched it sadistically, and reddened it. Whenever I would try to picture that face, my memory would produce two seemingly mismatched fragments: the domed shape of the head, bald, rigid, unforgiving; and the flaccid quality of the mouth and lips, which I remember as always slightly ajar, in the logically impossible gesture of both relaxing and grinning.²⁷

The anecdote is repeated five times in the text. Through this strategy of repetition and recurrence, Krauss has effectively evacuated any claims to sincerity as the mythical 'origin' retreats further and further from view. As opposed to amicability, we might say Krauss is deliberately abstruse. She later reflected on this use of subjective voice as a literary strategy:

In considering this exchange of the objective voice for the subjective one, I, of course, contemplated the genre of confessional writing. But that seemed too obvious, too easy. Instead I decided on ventriloquism. I would write as though through the first-person account of many other characters, actual historical characters, whose narratives I would, by the mere fact of bringing them into the orbit of my own subjectively developed voice, suspended somewhere between history and fiction.²⁸

Again, the tension between subjective and objective art writing emerges here. Following Krauss, we might conclude that autobiographical art writing is treated suspiciously because it is not deemed scholarly enough. Fast forward to Krauss' 2011 book *Under Blue Cup*. The title refers to the treatment she underwent to recover her short-term memory in the wake of suffering an aneurysm. Krauss commences the text with a description of the event: 'Late in 1999, my brain erupted. It is called an aneurysm, but all the same it is an exploded artery launching a cataract of blood into the brain, disconnecting synapses and washing neurons away.'²⁹ The text differs in tone and sincerity to Krauss' earlier treatment of autobiographical memory in *The Optical Unconscious* that keeps the reader at arm's length. The anecdote is sincere, even *amicable* as the reader is left to contemplate the therapy undertaken by Krauss in the wake of a catastrophic neural event.

Despite its autobiographical departure point, Krauss' *Under Blue Cup* ultimately adhered to realist conventions. As such, realist narratives work to conceal the author's agency as the author retreats, privileging the 'objective' voice of art history's pseudo-

²⁷ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993, 243. See also pages 48, 66, 90, 309.

²⁸ Krauss Rosalind, 'We Lost It at the Movies', *The Art Bulletin*, 76: 4, December 1994, 578.

²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011, 11.

scientific origins. In his essay 'The Discourse of History', Barthes identified historians' preference to self-evacuate from discourse. This creates a 'systematic absence of any sign referring to the sender of the historical message: history seems to *tell itself*.'³⁰ The discipline of art history produces the *appearance* of objectivity, by retreating behind the referent. This results in something that Barthes described as a 'referential illusion, since here the historian claims to let the referent speak for itself.'³¹ The evacuation of authorial agency results in the referent, or history, appearing as autonomous, neutral and rational.

The melancholic art historian

If the referent no longer serves as a viable proxy for the historian, how has a shift to a subjective mode of art writing been deployed? If the author is amicable, albeit split and decentred, how can art writing best reflect this? One strategy deployed by Michael Ann Holly is through the strategic use of *tone*. In her recent book, *The Melancholy Art*, Holly seeks to distance herself from the objectivity that has characterised art-historical writing, arguing: 'I take it as axiomatic that all written histories are narratives of desire, full of both latent and manifest needs that exceed the professional mandate to find out what happened and when.'³² As opposed to adhering to the illusion of referentiality, the art historian's *melancholia* and the inadequacy of language is in her sights. One of the central questions Holly asks is 'why' write art history? What is it that drives and compels the art historian, when the encounter with the art object is something that evades language? Can the gap between the art object and the words we use to describe it ever be closed?

In the opening pages, Holly introduces the reader to her gambit: 'I'll confess: what has been troubling me is the loss of wonder in the writing of art history'.³³ To *confess* should signal a different type of writing style. To confess is an intimate gesture, akin to sharing a secret. To confess conjures the amicability that Barthes evokes when he resurrects his author in the opening pages of *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. Holly goes on to outline her thesis: 'No matter how tangled and well-researched the web of words of those who write about art weave around a past work, something about it will always and forever resist capture.'³⁴ We might say that Holly takes up Pater's question posed in the opening pages of the *Renaissance*: 'What effect does it really produce on me?'³⁵ Holly's response is mournful: if Pater was focused on the power exerted by the image, Holly concentrates on its historical absence.

As opposed to retreating behind the referent, perpetuating a positivist fantasy of objectivity, the author is very much present here. Instead of bracketing the relationship between subjectivity and art writing, Holly places it at the centre of her enquiry, observing art history is 'an art in its own right, very similar in many unconscious respects to the making of art, whether it be literary, musical, or visual. Whereas artists embody, however, art historians tend to deny.'³⁶ It is this denial of subjectivity that Holly is seeking to

³⁰ Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', 131.

³¹ Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', 132.

³² Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013, 6.

³³ Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, xii.

³⁴ Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, xiv.

³⁵ Pater, *The Renaissance*, xii.

³⁶ Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, 18.

overcome. Holly attempts to capture in *tone* what words alone cannot capture or tame. If language is an impediment to the *magic* of the art object, how to best capture this tension?

The relationship Holly establishes with the reader is familiar. The autobiographical impulse driving her research was to make sense of the enduring sense of sorrow she experienced in the wake of the sudden death of her son. By electing to share, Holly reveals a part of her private life that is seldom disclosed to the reader. By writing these words, it somehow feels like an uncomfortable breach of confidentiality. Elsewhere, I naively thought that I could try to rescue Holly from her sadness: against Freud conjure Nietzsche. Against loss and grief, evoke affirmation and joy.³⁷ Now, I am not so sure. The point of melancholia is that it is conflictual and unresolved. As Freud made clear in his 1919 essay, melancholy is a pathological deviation from mourning. The mourner successfully resolves the grieving process, which has a finite beginning and end. The melancholic, however, languishes in an elongated process that never reaches successful resolution. With time, the mourner's ego eventually becomes free. The melancholic's ego identifies with, and eventually incorporates, the lost object. Freud writes, 'In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.'³⁸

The tone of melancholy permeates the text as Holly ruminates on the relationship between objects and the nature of time. Art historians, she argues, are driven by the compulsion to write about the past because the past cannot easily be relinquished. Melancholy might therefore be formulated as a core impulse of art-historical writing. The art historian's obsession might best be understood as a form of melancholic languishing, with the ego unable to detach from the image. Freud makes a crucial distinction between mourning and melancholia that has important implications for the melancholic art historian. In mourning, the ego eventually gives up its lost object. When given a choice, the object is declared dead, and the ego is free to continue to live. Importantly, a hierarchy is created, and for Freud the ego enjoys 'the satisfaction of knowing itself as the better of the two, as superior to the object.'³⁹ Against this, is the melancholic's *ambivalence*: conflict is created via the tension between love and a narcissistic identification with the lost object. If the love for the lost object cannot be successfully relinquished, this then shifts to self-torment and hatred. Freud describes this hatred in the following terms: 'hate comes into the operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering.'⁴⁰

The melancholic ego is ambivalent, or characterised by these deeply contradictory impulses. If we were to explore the full implications of this conflictual opposition as a rent or split mode of subjectivity, Holly's thesis points to evidence of a change in the traditional subject-object relationship. Unlike the mourner's ego, which can re-establish its hierarchical relationship and assume dominance over the object, the melancholic relationship with the lost object is one of conflict and abuse. The amicable author, in Holly's hands, takes the reader into her confidence. On closer inspection, however, the subject's melancholic ego is

³⁷ See my Chari Larsson, 'Against a Melancholic Art History: The Afterlife of Images', in *The Persistence of Melancholia in Arts and Culture*, edited by Andrea Bubenik, New York: Routledge, 2019.

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol XIV*, trans. James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press, 1956-1974, 246.

³⁹ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', 257.

⁴⁰ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', 251.

trapped in an ambivalent, or conflictual, love, hate relationship with the lost object. It is the oscillation between love and hatred that prevents the ego from re-establishing its hierarchical relationship to the lost object.

Experiments in art writing: the diary

Another literary strategy where the autobiographical 'I' is permitted to return is through the journal, or diary form. The opening pages of T.J. Clark's *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* begin with a confession to the reader. Clark reveals that he arrived in Los Angeles in 'low spirits... Nothing special was in my mind. I was just looking.'⁴¹ Like Holly, Clark seeks to initiate a relationship with the reader that relies on the cues of intimacy. In 2000, Clark was commencing a six-month fellowship at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. Nicolas Poussin's *Landscape with a Calm* (1650-1651) belonged to the Getty's permanent collection. The second painting, Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (1648) was on loan from the National Gallery in London. Separated for centuries, the two paintings temporarily shared the same gallery space during Clark's residency. Clark chronicled what he observed in a series of diary entries between January 2000 and 14 November 2003.

The Sight of Death is a record of looking, and how these observations change through time. At first glance, Clark appears to have presented an impossibly formalist reading of Poussin's paintings. Day after day, he records in detail the changing variables of light, motion through the gallery space, time of day and the effect this has on his experience of looking. The diary entries offer a rare insight into the act and process of writing about art. The nature of the diary allows Clark a freedom and flexibility that traditional art writing does not afford. Diaries are personal and unsystematic. Clark writes, 'Writing came easily, for the most part—more easily than I ever remember. The process was a pleasure.'⁴² The process is dynamic and unpredictable as Clark revisits the paintings on a near daily basis. Like Holly, Clark reflects on the inadequacy of language to capture the aesthetic experience: 'Writing can't help but get wrong.'⁴³

Clark's decision to write in diary form raises a series of questions. If this is 'an experiment in art writing', as his subtitle declares, *who* cares? Unlike the 'we' and 'us' deployed by Pater, the use of 'I' through the text precludes any sense that these observations can be shared by the reader: Clark's observations belong to Clark. Like autobiographies, diaries enjoy a privileged relationship with the truth, perhaps even more so. The diary is therefore an ideal literary genre for problematising the autobiographical self, as it enjoys unstable boundaries spanning both fiction and documentary, spontaneous and reworked, the authentic and constructed author. The diary itself has long suffered neglect, a point Barthes observed: 'the (autobiographical) "journal" is, nowadays, discredited.'⁴⁴ Writing in diary format affords Clark a degree of informality that is denied to traditional academic writing. Clark is sharing the most detailed record of his thoughts that would usually be

⁴¹ T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, 1.

⁴² Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 9.

⁴³ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 67.

⁴⁴ Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 95.

edited out. At best, diaries are unpredictable and at worst can read as banal indulgences. If we return to Barthes' article 'Deliberation', he muses about the process of editing a diary in preparation for publication: 'I get tired of these verbless sentences... or sentences whose verb is carelessly condensed... Is it *worth the trouble?*'⁴⁵

Clark's text is self-reflexive as he records the processes of his thoughts and observations. Consider the following passage:

But astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what incidental alter bewilderingly from day to day, the larger order of the depiction breaks up, recrystallizes, fragments again, persists like an afterimage.⁴⁶

The sentence is accumulative. Clauses are added to clauses. Rather than constructing a logical, predictable sequence, Clark instead gives form to the disorganised, disjointed flow of thoughts as he seeks to render these thoughts legible. The process of writing is performative as it seeks to capture the thought process, not to tame or organise, but to surrender to that very disorder. What emerges is something that is unstable and fluctuating.

It is possible to detect an evacuation of authority over Poussin's paintings, as Clark attempts to capture the stream of observations. As opposed to trying to impose stability and coherency, Clark embraces a lack of mastery and control. It is worth pausing here to retrieve Clark's definition of modernism: 'Perhaps the change can be described as a kind of scepticism, or at least unsureness, as to the nature of representation in art.'⁴⁷ Written in 1985, this famous passage is from *The Painting of Modern Life*, and introduced the reader to an important cornerstone of his argument. Clark identified an *unsureness* of representation that preoccupied a line of French artists stretching from Courbet and Cézanne to Manet. The unsureness first seen in *Painting of Modern Life* returns in *The Sight of Death*, but this time in respect to the art historian's relationship with the art object. The traditional relationship between the art historian and the image is reversed: 'as if words were ever going to constitute a real threat to the paintings they boa-constrict. Paintings are perfectly able to take care of themselves.'⁴⁸ As readers, what we gain visibility to is the lack of authorial clarity and cohesion.

Fragmentary forms: art writing as montage

The illusion of art history's objectivity has long been the subject of Didi-Huberman's revisionist project. From the earliest texts of his career, Didi-Huberman has criticised what he described as the positivism adopted by the history of art. In *Confronting Images*, he declared his position: 'This book would simply like to interrogate the *tone of certainty* that

⁴⁵ Barthes, 'Deliberation', 359-60.

⁴⁶ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 5.

⁴⁷ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, revised ed; London: Thames and Hudson, 1999, 10.

⁴⁸ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 132.

prevails so often in the beautiful discipline of the history of art.⁴⁹ The 'tone of certainty' is a lineage he traces from Kant through to Erwin Panofsky via Ernst Cassirer. Kant reduced, Didi-Huberman argues, the sensible images of experience to the universal concept of understanding, or the 'transcendental schema'. In turn, it is this reduction that informs Panofsky's iconological approach: the image is subordinated to Panofsky's three tiers of iconographical reading or interpretation.⁵⁰ Against the authority of the art historian and the certainty of knowledge, Didi-Huberman advances the *uncertainty* of not-knowledge. This is not to repress or repeal, but as an epistemological conceit worthy of its own consideration. As such, his argument suggests a slippage in the subject-object relationship. As opposed to the authority of the art historian, Didi-Huberman is instead embracing modes of not knowing.

This line of thought runs through Didi-Huberman's forty-year career, and he has long experimented with different forms of art writing and modes of authorial intimacy. Take, for example, his 2010 photo essay *Écorces* (Bark). The text is autobiographical, and is a record of his stroll through the camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau in June 2010. Didi-Huberman records what he observed, found and photographed on the day.⁵¹ Another example is an open letter written to film director László Nemes and published by Éditions de Minuit following a screening of Nemes' 2015 film *Le fils de Saul* (Son of Saul).⁵² In the letter, Didi-Huberman responds to the film in an emotional and direct manner. Like diaries, letters are distinguished by the cues of closeness and confidentiality. Letters are exchanged between friends and are an amicable and intimate form of communication.

In his 2018 book, *Aperçues*, Didi-Huberman again departs from what we would recognise as 'objective' academic writing. The text is composed entirely of fragments. Unlike Clark's diary, the fragments are not organised chronologically. Instead, the fragments jostle and collide. Didi-Huberman's attack on the subject-object relationship occurs through the atomisation of the art historian's gaze. He is undermining a long history where the art historian has been in control of the art object. To understand what I mean by this claim, *aperçues* is derived from the verb *apercevoir*, and translates *to catch sight*, or *to catch a glimpse of*. The noun 'aperçu' is usually masculine. Didi-Huberman, however, feminises it by adding an 'e'. Instead, an 'aperçue' —in the feminine: 'Une « aperçue » sera plus belle et plus étrange'⁵³ (a 'glimpse' will be stranger and more beautiful'). The gesture is Brechtian, the making strange of the everyday. By emphasising the slippage from the gaze to the glimpse, Didi-Huberman underscores the glimpse's ephemerality, and suggests an evacuation of authority over the image. The *aperçue* is not the colonising gaze of the 'full' humanist subject. Instead, it is unstable, fragile and transient, at odds with the ocularcentrism traditionally privileged by art historians.

⁴⁹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, 2. Didi-Huberman's emphasis.

⁵⁰ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 130-38.

⁵¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Écorces*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2011; *Bark*, trans. Samuel E. Martin, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2017.

⁵² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Sortir du noir*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2015.

⁵³ Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues*, 18.

Didi-Huberman draws close to both Holly and Clark and the argument pertaining to the inadequacy of art writing. Something in the art object is elusive and resists the words that seek to tame under the rubric of empirical knowledge. It is through the fragment that Didi-Huberman is seeking to emulate in language the fragility and instability of the glimpse. *Aperçues* is a series of fragments that act as a montage, close to Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street* or March Bloch's *Traces*.⁵⁴ In one fragment, 'Mon vieux traces', (My old traces) Didi-Huberman describes his delight at his discovery of his old copy of Bloch's *Traces*. He recollects:

Ce livre d'Ernst Bloch a constitué pour moi — c'était en 1980, je crois — une lecture décisive : à l'instar du *Sens unique* de Walter Benjamin, il m'avait littéralement (ou plutôt littérairement) émerveillé, avant tout pour son principe d'écriture par montages de fragments où réflexions et récits, concepts et contes s'enrichissaient perpétuellement les uns les autres.⁵⁵

Ernst Bloch's book constituted for me — it was in 1980, I think — a turning point for me: following on from Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street*, he had literally (or rather literarily) amazed me, above all for his theory of writing which involved assembling fragments where reflections and accounts, concepts and stories were perpetually enriching each other.

Didi-Huberman's fragments become cinematic, a montage of letters, observations and recollections. At its most basic, montage is the connection and juxtaposition between shots. What montage does is make explicit the joins and connections. Didi-Huberman is exploring in language what filmmakers have been exploiting since the earliest decades of the twentieth century. Like montage, literary fragments eschew realism. The fragments can be endlessly reconfigured and reassembled anew.

The fragment as a literary form suits a fragmented or split authorial voice. Between 1976 and 1980, Lucy O'Meara has observed that Barthes' writing became increasingly fragmented in his search for writing renewal.⁵⁶ In a strikingly similar fashion to Barthes, Didi-Huberman embraces the fragment as a strategy for undermining objective and authoritative knowledge. Like Barthes, Didi-Huberman's use of the fragment suggests he is searching for new possible structures and forms for his writing practice. He confirms this, writing, 'Le genre littéraire des « aperçues » serait une forme possible pour écrire ce genre de regards passagers.'⁵⁷ (The literary genre of the 'glimpse' would be a possible form for recording this type of fleeting vision). Didi-Huberman describes his method:

Laisser être l'occasion, l'écrire à l'occasion. Esquisser. Ne pas relire pendant un long temps. Un jour, remonter tout cela comme on remonte les rushes de mille et un films

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, *One-way Street, and Other Writings*, London and New York: Verso, 1997; Ernst Bloch, *Traces*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

⁵⁵ Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues*, 24.

⁵⁶ See Lucy O'Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012, especially 163-99.

⁵⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues*, 18.

brefs et voir se dessiner les motifs inconsciemment formés de regards en regards, les inquiétudes persistantes, les sollicitations à penser.⁵⁸

Let the occasion be, write the occasion. Sketch. Do not re-read for a long time. One day, put together all these as we might put together the rushes of a thousand and one short films and watch as unconsciously formed motifs appear: glimpses, the persistent worries, the pressing invitations to think.

The fragment is experimental, incomplete and subjective. Like diaries, fragments are intimate. Consider Derrida's remarks concerning his decision to write in fragmentary form in the essay he wrote to commemorate Barthes' death:

I do not yet know, and in the end it really does not matter, if I will be able to make it clear why I must leave these thoughts for Roland Barthes fragmentary, or why I value them for their incompleteness even more than for their fragmentation, more for their pronounced incompleteness, for their punctuated yet open interruption, without even the authoritative edge of an aphorism. These little stones, thoughtfully placed, only one each time, on the edge of a name as the promise of return.⁵⁹

The self-reflexivity of Didi-Huberman's fragments is certainly not new. By electing to written in a fragmentary form, Didi-Huberman reminds us that the fragment enjoys a rich history in French literature. It is possible to reach back beyond Barthes to Michel de Montaigne and the birth of the essay as a literary genre.⁶⁰ Montaigne developed a new style of writing and approach to non-fiction in his *Essais* (c.1571-92), drawn from the verb *essayer*, or *to try* or *attempt*. Montaigne identified his own subjectivity as a valid mode of writing against the orthodoxy of traditional scholarship. Montaigne observed:

The world is but a perennial movement... I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this condition, just as it is at the moment I give my attention to it. I do not portray being: I portray passing.⁶¹

In another passage, Montaigne distanced himself from the authorial voice of the scholar, writing, 'Determining and knowing, like giving, appertains to rule and mastery: to inferiority, subjection, and apprenticeship appertains enjoyment and acceptance.'⁶² Lawrence

⁵⁸ Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues*, 18.

⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes', in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001, 34-35.

⁶⁰ The literature on Montaigne's theorisation of self and subjectivity is enormous. See Lawrence D. Kritzman, 'Montaigne and the Crisis of Autobiography', in *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*, ed. Ullrich Langer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Richard L. Regosin, 'Montaigne and his Readers', in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

⁶¹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1958, 610-11.

⁶² Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 785.

Kritzman has argued that Montaigne's rejection of mastery enables the subject to transform the inadequacy of the apprentice implicit in the act of 'essaying' into a form of enjoyment.⁶³ When we bring Montaigne's essaying into dialogue with Didi-Huberman's *aperçues*, a strong parallel can be drawn: Didi-Huberman's mode of looking eschews authorial control over the image. The *aperçue*, or glimpse, does not try to tame the image, or bring it under the control of the subject and maintain a hierarchy. Instead, it embraces the uncertainty.

In one fragment 'Selon Moi, Selon l'Autre' (According to Me, According to the Other), Didi-Huberman takes up the question of the authorial self, in relation to the word *selon* (according to). He writes, 'C'est une manie de philosophes depuis Platon... Cela s'appelle académisme, voire dogmatisme.'⁶⁴ (It is the mania of philosophers since Plato... It is called academism, even dogmatism). By interrogating the word *selon*, he places the authority of the author under pressure, revealing something he argues is 'moins antipathique, peut-être, moins narcissique'⁶⁵ (less disagreeable, perhaps, less narcissistic). Instead, Didi-Huberman investigates its entry in the *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, teasing out a more nuanced complexity by tracing the term's etymological history. This strategy evacuates the authority of the word, and expands its possible meanings and connotations to encompass notions of travail, risqué et modestie (work, risk and modesty).

Montaigne's theorisation and practice of essaying, combined with the question of self and subjectivity, have ensured his insights have held enduring relevance for contemporary essayists. Akin to Pater, every generation looks, and finds, something of themselves in Montaigne. Working in this long literary tradition, Didi-Huberman is a prolific essayist. Individual texts within his corpus cannot be understood in the singular, as he will repeatedly return, in different contexts to ideas and favourite interlocutors such as Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg. The essay is an ideal vehicle for reintroducing the subjective 'I' back into scholarly writing. Underscoring the distinction between the essay and the scholarly article, Paul Barolsky observes, 'As an experiment in speaking briefly, the essay stands in an almost polar relation to the scholarly article. Whereas the article aspires to be definitive, the essay, more flexible, is suggestive.'⁶⁶

Importantly, Didi-Huberman takes up Montaigne's theme of uncertainty in *Aperçues*. The lines between fact and fiction are deliberately blurred as Didi-Huberman seeks to decouple his writing practice from vestiges of latent realism. As readers, we are never entirely sure where the boundaries lie. Didi-Huberman is constantly moving between tenses as the fragments collide. He will juxtapose childhood memories with visual analyses; research notes collide with travel journals. The fragmentary form allows Didi-Huberman to destabilise narrative structure and any sense of temporal continuity. The fragments rub and bump, eluding notions of totality. Writing in this fragmentary, essayistic form allows Didi-Huberman to continue his search for appropriate modes of disciplinary renewal. This expands to the form and structure of language itself.

Art history writing is a literary genre. As Pater argued in the 1870s, the genre is not neutral or objective, but it produces the appearance of objectivity, by obfuscating its

⁶³ Lawrence D. Kritzman, *The Fabulous Imagination: On Montaigne's Essays*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, 56.

⁶⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues*, 262.

⁶⁵ Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues*, 264.

⁶⁶ Barolsky, 'Writing Art History', 399.

condition as a literary and subjective discourse. The erasure of the authorial subject is well understood in the wake of the linguistic turn. What is not as well understood, however, is the author's return. The self preoccupied Barthes throughout the 1970s, and he explored different types of autobiographical writing as a means of reintroducing the subject. For art historians Michael Ann Holly, T.J. Clark and Georges Didi-Huberman, Barthes' conception of amicability is an ideal form for complicating the authority of the subject. Importantly, amicable writing signals a return to the subject, albeit in a fractured and unreliable form. Experimental, or essayistic writing techniques are deployed as the art historian no longer claims authority over the image as the traditional hierarchical relationship begins to break down. What emerges is a lack of resolution or mastery in a distinct shift in the subject-object relationship.

Chari Larsson is a lecturer in art history and theory at Griffith University's Queensland College of Art in Australia. Her forthcoming book *Didi-Huberman and the image* will be published by Manchester University Press in 2020. Her research focuses on theories of images and representation, specifically in the areas of art historiography.

c.larsson@griffith.edu.au



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)