

Art is a social form, a thing made by me that is meant for you. Artists sit or stand alone in a room for many hours a day and don't see or talk to anyone. This is how most of my time is spent. But there are always others in the artist's head, worlds of others. The need to make is not solitary: *I've made something, and it's for you, and it's now a part of our world.*

Siri Hustvedt (b. 1955) is a novelist and essayist whose work interleaves reflections on literature with art history, philosophy, and neurobiology. From 1996 to 2004 she wrote art reviews for *Modern Painters*, many of which are collected in the book *Mysteries of the Rectangle* (2005). Her novels include *The Blindfold* (1992); *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996); *What I Loved* (2003); *The Sorrows of an American* (2008); *The Summer Without Men* (2011); and *The Blazing World* (2014). Among her books of essays and nonfiction are *Yonder* (1998); *A Plea for Eros* (2005); *The Shaking Woman: Or, A History of My Nerves* (2010); *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012); and *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* (2016).

Siri Hustvedt

There is an essay in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* where you offhandedly say that your mother used to call you "too sensitive for this world"—I'm wondering about that and how it relates to your early aesthetic experiences.

That particular essay, "Becoming Others," is about my mirror-touch synesthesia, a form of synesthesia that wasn't named until 2005, although obviously people have been walking around with it forever. It's a physiological phenomenon: if I see another person slapped on the cheek, I have a sensation in my own cheek. I also have strong physical responses to colors—once while looking at a shade of turquoise in Iceland, I had a revolting crawling sensation all over my body. Everyone responds to color, but my mirror-touch sensations probably exaggerate the response. At the same time, I can't jump out of myself and check what it is like for you. When I was growing up, it never occurred to me that other people didn't feel what they saw.

So you experience visual things as tactile sensations?

Yes, that is the definition of mirror-touch synesthesia. There are many forms of synesthesia. Some people translate musical sounds into colors. Others see letters and numbers in color—*F is green; L is yellow; 3 is blue; 7 is black*. The colors are subjective. Everyone has her or his own. The great physicist Richard Feynman had that form of synesthesia. He once said he wondered what his students saw when they imagined a formula, because for him it was ablaze with color—lovely, no?

It's possible that this sensitivity increased my interest in looking

at paintings. I grew up in a house in Minnesota with a Norwegian mother and a father who was a professor of Scandinavian literature and language. Munch was everywhere—not *real* Munchs, of course, but books and prints. My earliest exposure to a painter was to Munch.

That's a good one.

A very good one. I also drew and painted. When I was maybe fourteen, I made a painting of Jesus on the cross I was particularly proud of. A couple of years later, I saw a Munch painting of the Crucifixion and realized that my painting had been directly stolen from an unconscious memory of it—every figure was in exactly the same place with the same gestures. I understood how unconscious borrowing works; all those Munch images must have settled deep inside me for me to unknowingly make a bad copy.

We had other art books in the house; they were mostly modernist artists—all men, of course. I remember looking closely at a Cézanne book my parents had and loving it—I still love Cézanne. The Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Walker Art Center were nearby, so many of my adolescent art experiences took place in those institutions. Goya's *Self-Portrait with Dr. Arrieta* [1820] at the Institute had a powerful and haunting effect on me. He portrays himself as desperately feeble, almost swooning, seemingly near death, and the physician behind him is so tender—I have lived with that image for many years. When I was perhaps fifteen or sixteen, I saw a Mondrian show at the Walker. The curator had done the viewer the great favor of including early Mondrians, so when I walked through the show I witnessed his development—from trees and horizons to abstraction. It was a profound experience for me; I felt as if I was *seeing* the artist's thoughts.

When I was seventeen, I spent a year in Bergen, Norway, and attended gymnasium there. After Christmas, while I was still on vacation, I used money I had saved to take a ship to Newcastle, and from there I took a train to London. I stayed in a youth hostel and went to museums. It was a great adventure because I knew no one in the city. At the Tate, I saw Turners for the first time in real life. I remember them vividly. Looking at those Turners, I was drowning and on fire

and completely alive.

How did your relationship with language relate to these vivid visual experiences?

I decided to become a writer when I was thirteen. I think there was something about the withdrawal and retreat into text I liked. Even now, I notice that although my husband can watch two or three movies in a row if he is engaged in the films, I find it difficult to take in more than one. The experience is *too big*. The abstractness of language and the immediacy of visual images should not be confused. They are different, both in terms of ontogeny and phylogeny. I was deeply irritated by the art-world fashion in the seventies and eighties for looting textual theory, mostly French, to discuss visual art—that was a grave mistake. There may well be a relation between my immersion in written language and my hypersensitivity to images, color, and the real world.

How did you decide to become a writer?

Reading. My reading obsession began early, but around twelve, thirteen, I felt as if a switch had been flipped in my mind. Everything printed was suddenly accessible to me. I remember thinking, *Oh, wow, I can read little print!* For all children, that time of life is a moment of burgeoning brain development and greater emotional and intellectual maturity. I couldn't have read philosophy, of course, but I could read long English novels, which are mostly what I read.

Is that when you first got hooked on Charles Dickens, on whom you wrote your dissertation at Columbia?

Yes, I read *David Copperfield* [1849–1850] the summer after I turned thirteen. My father was studying the Icelandic sagas, and the family spent an entire summer in Reykjavík. The city library had lots of English books. My mother recommended titles, and I read them. I read dozens of novels. I read all the time. I never stopped—in part because I had insomnia; it never got dark, and my diurnal rhythms were screwed up. So I stayed up and read long books in three or four days: Jane Austen, Mark Twain, the Brontës, Dumas, Dickens. That summer I decided to become a writer.

Were you drawing and painting before that?

Before then, when people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I always said, *I want to be an artist*. There are several artists in my novels. I think they reflect my old longing to make visual art.

Your book of essays on painting, *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, is so great. I have relationships with many of the artists and artworks you write about, so I was able to read about your experiences with them and hold them against my own. It made me realize how important it is to me to verify art writing against my own experiences.

When you read a description of an artwork, even a highly detailed one, you invent an image, which is inevitably different from another person's image. This was once vividly illustrated for me when a group of German artists made art based on works by my character Bill Wechsler in *What I Loved*. Their images had nothing to do with what I had imagined while writing the novel. It is important to recognize that in a narrative, artworks are part of the artist's character. They say what the artist cannot say. This is my relationship to a novel while I am writing it—the book knows more than I do. When an artist is working well, the artwork knows more than she or he does. It defies other forms of articulation.

Recently a gallery asked me to write about an artist. I replied, *It's not that I find this work bad—it's good and lively and worthwhile—but it is not mysterious to me*. In other words, I am only interested in writing about art that escapes me, art that I don't fully understand, that keeps me looking. Therefore Goya. He is an artist I can never quite get my hooks into, an artist who continually eludes me. This is true for literature as well—the books I return to are the books I need *again*. When I read them, I don't fully understand what is happening to me or how it's been done.

I think it's very clarifying when you write that "a work of art is always part person"—explaining that our relationship with an artwork is never "I-to-object," but rather an artwork is a "part-object/part-you."

Exactly. It's not a mystical idea. It is simply that an encounter with a work of art is an encounter with the traces of a human consciousness and unconsciousness. I've written several times that we don't treat works of art as we treat chairs, even beautiful chairs. An artwork is there

only to be taken in; it is a "part-you." It is the "quasi-you" in a dialogical relation.

When you recognize the "part-you" of an object, you're connecting it with the life of the person who made it. Something I think you do with a lot of nuance is describe that connection in a way that is fleeting and not reductive.

I would like to stress that it's not biographical. It is rather that the relation between a spectator and a work of art has an intersubjective quality. *Intersubjectivity* happens between one subject and another, and it is this in-between, relational quality I want to stress, and that, of course, changes over time. As you were saying, when you know a painting, care about it, and have an established history with it, and then you read what I have to say about it, you remember what you felt and thought in the presence of the painting. It is unlikely that your feelings or thoughts are identical to mine, but they may press you to see what you hadn't seen before. The error is to treat art objects as if there is some higher, objective view of them. Let's face it: even sophisticated art critics often pretend they have an authorial, third-person view, from which they can make objective declarations about what *the thing is*. I adamantly *refuse* to do that. To be clear, I think I have as much authority as many others. I am not devaluing my own thoughts. It is rather that I believe that kind of art writing is founded on a false philosophical premise. That is something quite different.

When did you first begin writing about art?

In 1995. Karen Wright, then editor of *Modern Painters*, had read my first novel, *The Blindfold*, in which my narrator describes her experience with Giorgione's *The Tempest* [ca. 1505]—a painting that has obsessed me since I was nineteen, when I saw a reproduction of it in an art history class. Karen thought to herself, *Here's a novelist who can write about art*. She began to call me with writing suggestions. I was working on a book and put her off. I kept saying I was too busy. Then she called about the big Vermeer show in Washington, DC, and I thought, *Siri, you would be mad not to do it*. It was a great assignment because Karen told me to pick just one picture to write about. I walked into the press

showing with my little badge, wandered through the show of twenty-something Vermeers. I was in a state of stupefied wonder, but I finally parked myself in front of *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* [ca. 1662–1665] and remained there for a couple of hours, looking and thinking and dreaming. It's a great painting filled with sacred, quiet, secret joy. Then, I saw an egg shape in the windowsill. None of the other paintings with windows had eggs. I checked. I also recognized the woman's hand gesture. I felt certain I had seen something like it in Siena. And then the word came to me: "Annunciation." Arthur Wheelock, one of the curators, was wandering around, so I asked him, *Has anyone ever thought of this as an Annunciation painting?* I explained my reasoning about the woman's hands. He turned rather white. I think he did see exactly what I meant, but he said, *I have always thought of this as a Eucharistic painting,* and walked off.

I went home, wrote the piece, which is a narrative account of how I came to my thoughts about the painting. Excitedly, I FedExed the essay to Wheelock. He never answered me. But a few weeks later, he did an interview about the show and said, *Someone recently pointed out to me that it's an Annunciation painting.* There are three points to be made here: one, my argument convinced him; two, he should have answered me; three, he knew there was a name attached to that "someone," and he should have mentioned it. Art museums do not like intruders. I discovered a foggy face in the left-hand corner of Goya's *Third of May 1808* [1814] and wrote about it as a hidden self-portrait, sent other people to see it—they saw it—but I was met with striking hostility from some art historians and museum curators. Territorialism exists in many disciplines, but to be honest, I generally find the sciences more welcoming than the arts and humanities. It may be because scientists have become the masters of culture and can be benevolent, while people in the arts and humanities struggle with feelings of inferiority and feel threatened.

So your sense is that you're treated with suspicion or condescension because you are not "properly credentialed" to make certain art historical claims? Like, *Who is this person with their own thoughts on Vermeer?*

Wheelock knew I was right, which is why he changed his mind. I know that essay made the rounds, and I heard through the grapevine that it changed peoples' thinking about the painting, but I'm not sure anyone has ever given me credit in print.

This is going to sound a bit strange, but when I was reading your essays in *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, I thought, *She is trying to make an actual contribution to the way we understand paintings.* That's not a feeling I have when I read most criticism.

Yes. In my collection *Living, Thinking, Looking*, the essay "Embodied Visions: What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art?" [2010] is a philosophical statement about what happens between viewer and artwork. But, in fact, for me, nothing is ever finished. Every essay is on its way to another. I never want to close off discussion, which is not the same as saying I have no thoughts or beliefs—I certainly do. What I mean is that there is always room for change, for another perspective, a new piece of understanding that will alter what I have said before. I am convinced I am on the right track, that art experience is an intersubjective relation between an "I" and a "quasi-you." This is true for all works of art. There is always an other hiding within it. Therefore, philosophical reflections, as well as psychological and neuroscientific research into self-other relations and the nature of human perception itself, are not extraneous to understanding what it means to look at art but essential to it.

One of the reasons I am so attracted to your writing on art is how attentive you are to its emotional qualities, which, as you note in several places, have been mostly been denigrated in discourse.

In art writing, the denigration of emotion is common, and the denigration of emotion is also denigration of the body. This is certainly not an original thought—feminist scholars have written at length about the identification of the body and emotion with women and the intellect and the spirit with men, and that great divide, the mind/body problem, has haunted the West since Plato and is still alive and well in our culture. Art by women has often been dismissed as too emotional and corporeal. There is a move now in both the sciences and

the humanities to recover the body as crucial to thought. The “mind” is not a neo-Cartesian, ethereal substance hovering over the low, debased, material body but essential to so-called mental experience. A friend of mine, the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, has researched people with damage to their prefrontal cortices who lost feelings of empathy and guilt. This results in an inability to make sound decisions and plan for the future. Feeling is vital to reasoning and judgment.

Narrative doesn't work in visual art in the same way it does in literature. For instance, take Giorgione's *The Tempest*, which has a famously strange relationship to narrative. How do you understand narrative in painting, especially when it's then translated into writing?

A painting is there all at once, but one's attention cannot be on the entire painting all at once, so looking becomes a sequential act of focusing on various parts of the painting, and there is usually a verbal description that follows the attentive eye. This is different from other arts such as music or the novel that unfold in a sequential, linear way. In a painting, narrative movement is created from the relational elements within that static image. For example, Giorgione's *The Tempest* has a diabolical triangular motion, created by the spectator in relation to the two figures in the canvas: the woman in the painting is looking up and out at the viewer, the man to the far left of the picture is looking at the woman, and the viewer is trapped in a kind of erotic gazing mechanism. The man looking at the woman serves as the spectator's double. Like the viewer outside the painting, he is drawn to the woman on the other side of a river. He's dressed. She is partly naked, nursing a baby—God, that's an amazing painting! It generates a spinning narrative trap that goes nowhere, just round and round. It's a locked image. Some narrative paintings are open—you can leave them. It all has to do with how the narrative field is defined.

I don't know if this is paradoxical or not: when we look at a work of art we are communing with another consciousness—that of the maker, separated by time and space—but I also don't think people make art in the first person as *themselves*. How do we square those two things?

On this question, Kierkegaard is the unparalleled genius. The

last essay in my most recent book is on Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writing. I ask: *Who are the pseudonyms?* He speaks of them in various ways, but they are not he. They do not articulate his views. In this way, Kierkegaard is a philosopher-novelist or a novelist-philosopher. When a novelist writes, she becomes another person, and that ability is not limited to artists. I have asked myself an interesting question: *How is the ordinary, imaginative plurality of self related to the pathology of multiple personality disorder?* It is now called dissociative identity disorder, because “multiple personality disorder” was too creepy, was overdiagnosed, and for a time took on epidemic proportions. There is considerable empirical evidence, however, that there are people who harbor several personalities with different physiological attributes—one has asthma, another doesn't, for example. This should challenge our view of human beings as singular. In my essay “The Delusions of Certainty” [2016], I wonder if a novelist who is writing in the voice of a character for several years develops physiological signs related to that character. We have no idea. You have to ask the question before you can research it. No scientist has asked the question. You're right, though. I think plurality is a normal feature of reflective human consciousness.

I don't know if within literary circles this is a really dopey reference, but someone who is a major influence on me is Mikhail Bakhtin, who seems to prefigure a lot of what you're talking about, regarding the dialogic imagination and polyphony in novels.

That's a terrific reference! Bakhtin is a thinker who has had an enormous effect on me. One of my favorite quotes from him is, “The word in language is half someone else's.” For Bakhtin, words are alive and charged with the meanings of others. You give a word an idiosyncratic meaning; the other person adopts it and then returns it to you with his own inflection. I believe this is the way to understand language. Bakhtin also had the great intelligence to pay attention to how words are shot through with power relations and how authoritarianism creates the stilted and dead discourses we see all around us—the ossified rhetoric of power.

Your writing crosses several disciplinary boundaries; I imagine

you as an air traffic controller for ideas. How do you see where you sit intellectually within these different discourses?

It's true: I am a fly in the ointment, a constant irritant. We had a scientist friend of mine here for dinner last night. The two of us were arguing about neurobiology, how to frame certain questions. In neuroscience, I went from zero—literally knowing next to nothing—to lecturing on the subject for people in various fields who respect my work. He said to me, *After being your friend for all these years, I've understood that what you do is decide you're going to master something, and you do. Then you become critical. And then you go on to the next question.*

It's vital not to be afraid to ask fundamental questions that may sound stupid. In 2016, a scholarly book on my work by people in various disciplines came out from De Gruyter. One scholar in the collection notes that I am prone to saying the obvious: *What am I looking at? How can paint have this effect on me?* What she fails to understand, I think, is that when I make an obvious statement, such as *A painting doesn't move*, I am insisting on the fundamentals required to build a larger philosophical structure. Let's say there are five hundred questions in a problem. A lot of discourse begins at question two hundred fifty-seven, which means it's sitting on two hundred fifty-six other questions that have supposedly been answered, but if you go down the ladder, you see almost immediately that they haven't been solved. Question two hundred fifty-seven is founded on a rickety piece of equipment.

Recently, I gave a grand rounds lecture in neurology at Mass General in Boston. While I was there, I also visited a group of research scientists doing work on dementia and Alzheimer's—highly specific, significant work. I told them, *The reason it is important for you to read literature and philosophy and psychology even though you spend your days shaving brain tissue or studying shadows on fMRIs is not because I think everyone should become a cultured polymath. It is because I think knowledge from other disciplines will help you solve problems in your own work.* I call this “reading against myself.” I have laboriously worked my way through texts I find turgid and unpleasant—symbolic logic and various arguments in Anglo-American analytical philosophy, for example—not because I “like” them or

because I agree with them, but because I know that my reading of this material has given me a mental flexibility I would never have had otherwise. So many people are locked into one train of thought; not just in the sciences, in the humanities, too. Inevitably, locked-in people run into a problem that is insoluble from that single point of view, but if they call in a couple of mates from other disciplines, those outside visitors may take a look at the dead end and say, *That's not so hard!*

That is why we need each other.

We need each other, yes, and that's why all artistic and intellectual life is a form of collaboration. Nothing comes from nothing. That is the other thing to hammer home: no one invents him- or herself.

What do you think art is?

Long before there was art as we think of it, people were making things. I gave a series of lectures in November at the University of Tübingen and was taken to a museum with objects that had been found at an anthropological dig near the city. The beautifully illuminated museum cases were filled with tiny carved animals—forty thousand years old. It's hard to explain how moving those little horses and bears and bison were—and a hedgehog, my favorite. The animals were immediately identifiable. Why were these people making those animals forty thousand years ago? Think of it—writing is only about fifty-five hundred years old. We don't know why, but those people represented their world in sculpture. They had music, too; they made flutes.

When we talk about art today, we often think of the art world with fancy people and good wine and elegant clothes and vast sums of money, but the urge to make something is where art begins, and it always takes place among others. Art is a social form, a thing made by me that is meant for you. Artists sit or stand alone in a room for many hours a day and don't see or talk to anyone. This is how most of my time is spent. But there are always others in the artist's head, worlds of others. The need to make is not solitary. *I've made something, and it's for you, and it's now a part of our world.* And the meaning of the thing that has been made is created by our collective social reality.

How do you understand the strangeness of how people end up

doing what they are doing, or being who they are? Like you, a girl from Minnesota, who is living the life you are. Or anyone really. How do you think about the mysteriousness of that?

That is a way of asking, *What is the self?* Although it's inelegant and inadequate, the word to keep in mind is "socio-psycho-biological." Each part of that hyphenated adjective blurs into the next because everything is ultimately physiological.

We are mammals limited by our evolutionary heritage and the organic realities of our species, but we are also dynamic creatures that change in relation to what happens to us. A story is not just a verbal narrative; it is part of the body. Culture becomes you materially, in the way you walk and talk and gesture and inhabit yourself. Much of this is unconscious, but it is inculturated and physical.

"Socio-psycho-biological"—is there space for the spiritual in there?

I'm not only a synesthete. I'm a migraineur. I've had Alice in Wonderland syndrome, visual hallucinations, and euphoria before migraines—none of which I regret, by the way. I regret the pain, but auras have enhanced my life. I think of transcendence as experiences that take me out of myself. I believe there are forms of collective experience, including art, that transcend the loneliness of being, that lift you out of your singular organism. That is the magic of what Kierkegaard calls reflection. Kierkegaard was so reflective it pained him. He wanted more immediacy. He wanted to live more in the moment. What he called "the unhappy consciousness" is the person who is continually running back and forth in time—recollecting the past and anticipating the future—but never living in the now. Kierkegaard wanted to be a Christian, in the deepest, darkest sense, so much so that his ideas don't resemble most other forms of Christianity. But the traveling Kierkegaard worried about—that racing back and forth in time—is what the imagination does. The imagination has tremendous mobility, and for me it is a form of spiritual consciousness.

Were you raised going to church?

Yes, Lutheran. My parents were not pious. In fact, I never really knew what they believed. I agonized as a child over the terrible

Abraham/Isaac story. It kept me awake and miserable for weeks. *Why would God ask Abraham to murder his child?* A Sunday school teacher told me that the story meant that we had to love God more than our parents. I knew I didn't. Finally, I told my mother about it. She looked at me and said, *Nonsense*. I was so relieved I skipped down the stairs to my room. Lutheranism has a frightening transparency—there is nowhere to hide. You have a direct, not mediated, relation to God—a heavy burden. I was happy to be rid of it. When I became a graduate student at Columbia, I knew nothing about poststructuralism and felt ignorant in relation to my hipper fellow students, but I had read a lot of philosophy, and I knew my Bible, which is a great help if you are studying literature. By that time, I would have described myself as a secular person, but I had had a religious education. At St. Olaf College, where I was an undergraduate, every student was required to take three religion courses. I read Martin Buber for the first time in one of those classes, who remains one of my great beloveds. So let's just say: it was not a waste of time.