

Beauty on Trust: Aesthetic Testimony, Verbal Description and the Impact of the ›Objectivity Imperative‹

Concern for the limits of what we can learn from one another about beauty has recurred throughout the history of aesthetic theory. Dividing its attention between literary renderings of blindness and widely endorsed regulatory features of art access initiatives, this chapter positions an exploration of what the experiences of people with visual impairment might contribute to long-standing deliberations about the appropriate weighting of the degrees of epistemological credence afforded to aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony within a history of philosophical debate from which their potentially instructive perspectives have been regrettably absent. After tracing aspects of the ›aesthetic testimony debate‹ through literary representations of blindness, the chapter shifts focus in order to contemplate potential applications of insights generated by the debate to a review of the potentially impoverishing impact of selected art access guidelines on the aesthetic experiences of gallery visitors with visual impairment. The ›objectivity imperative‹ that is a feature of established verbal description guidelines is accounted for in terms of an ill-supported and distinctly unhelpful suspicion of interactive or correlational hermeneutics within the domain of art access. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's delineation of the threads of mutual causation and justification that fuse experience, hermeneutics and evaluation within the ›psychological set‹ of art engagement is brought into service alongside an application of concerns that have recurred throughout the history of aesthetic theory as a means of challenging the logic and value of the repeated instructional mantra that describers of works of visual art for gallery visitors should merely ›say what they see‹.

Aesthetic testimony

Were it not for testimony, a lot of what we consider ourselves to know about the world would remain a closed book to us. Although daily news reports from far-flung corners of the earth indicate that testimony is clearly an indispensable source of knowledge, misgivings persist within the aesthetic sphere about testimonial justification. The aesthetic testimony debate is premised on

the question of whether we can come to know the aesthetic value of a particular entity – for example whether it is beautiful, or more or less aesthetically impressive – on the basis of someone’s say-so. Language and the inherent limitations of its capacity to do justice to beauty is another recurring concern within these debates, culminating, perhaps, in James Elkins’ seminal account of pictures and the words that fail them.¹ Theorists who have contemplated the question of whether it is acceptable to form a belief about the excellence of a movie, a painting, a literary representation or the beauty of a sunset or a human countenance simply on the basis of someone else’s say-so have tended to arrive at less than entirely optimistic verdicts. These aesthetic testimony pessimists can be said to fall broadly into two camps. *Unavailability* pessimists claim that testimony fails to make meaningful, reliable or appropriate forms of knowledge available to its recipient, who is therefore poorly positioned to arrive at aesthetic judgment or knowledge when testimony constitutes the sole source of insight at his/her disposal. *Unusability* pessimists concede that aesthetic testimony can, in certain circumstances, transmit knowledge; but that certain exacting and non-negotiable conditions of justified belief preclude the full assimilation of the aesthetic insights that have been verbally volunteered to us by another. The snag for pessimists of this ilk lies not in the unavailability of knowledge, but rather in the hermeneutic transgression entailed in availing of the learning opportunity presented by such knowledge.

Although the frequently asked question about whether testimony can generate knowledge or merely transmit it would appear to have an especially pertinent bearing on considerations of the shareability of aesthetic understanding amongst individuals with differing sensory configuration, such isolated and indirect instances as the published epistolary correspondence between Brian Magee and Martin Milligan,² Diderot’s brief discussion of the theme in his *Letter on the Blind for the Use of those who can See* (1749),³ and William Paulson’s fleeting engagement with the issue in his study of blindness and the enlightenment.⁴ Issues relating to the availability, usability and value of aesthetic testimony have largely evaded interrogation within the specific context of the aesthetic experiences of individuals with visual impairment. My

1 Cf. James Elkins: *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them*, New York 1998.

2 Cf. Bryan Magee/Martin Milligan: *Sight Unseen*, London 1998, 1st pub. as *On Blindness*, Oxford 1995.

3 Cf. Margaret Jourdain (ed. & transl.): *Diderot’s Early Philosophical Works*, Chicago and London 1916, pp. 68–141.

4 Cf. William R. Paulson: *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France*, Princeton, NJ 1987.

endeavours within the fields of literary disability studies and museum and gallery access have generated concern for the aesthetic cost to individuals with visual impairment of the (seemingly unwitting) regulatory incorporation of the more pessimistic doctrines yielded by these fastidious philosophical ruminations by institutions which undertake art access initiatives. The first section of this chapter draws on literary representations as a means of illustrating these concerns.

Well of the Saints and the unreliability of aesthetic testimony

Martin and Mary Doull, two blind beggars living in a rural society in the west of Ireland, are the central protagonists of J.M. Synge's *The Well of the Saints* (1905).⁵ They have been led by the lies of the townsfolk to believe that they are both exceptionally attractive. When a saint cures them of their blindness with water from a holy well, the disgust each feels for the other's appearance belies the assurances they have historically been given that their beauty is unrivalled in the village. The indirectness of the way in which Martin and Mary accumulate the information about the world that they take for »truth« is captured in the auxiliary construction »to hear tell,« which is often used to describe the process. Martin becomes aware of strange happenings in the village, such as the killing of an old man for his gold by »hearing tell« of them.⁶ Likewise, Mary is told that »it's a great sight to see a man hanging by his neck«,⁷ and is asked by Timmy if she has »heard tell« of the »grave of the four beautiful saints«. ⁸ In terms of communicable information, »hearing tell« of a phenomenon is regularly deemed to be an acceptable means of coming to know or understand it. It is regularly deemed otherwise, however, when reference is made to aesthetic properties of the phenomenon. In order to learn about visual beauty – and the pair have an insatiable appetite for knowledge relating to their own – they must subject themselves to the mediatory function of the verbal descriptions. Mary, for example, has »heard tell« that the »splendour« of her appearance is accountable for in terms of the wet south wind to which she has been exposed for so many years.⁹ In Act

5 Cf. John Millington Synge: *The Well of the Saints*, ed. Nicholas Grene, Gerrards Cross 1982.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

I, when Martin questions the beauty of Mary because of her cracked voice, Mary reminds him that he's heard Timmy the Smith, Mat Simon, »and a power besides« speaking appreciatively of the beauty of her face.¹⁰ Martin's means of comparing the beauty of Molly, a local woman, to that of his wife is equally based on what he can garner from village gossip. Misgivings about the adequacy of hearsay as a source of aesthetic awareness underpin Martin's declaration: »I've heard him say a power of times it's nothing at all she is when you see her at the side of you, and yet I never heard any man's breath getting uneasy the time he'd be looking on yourself«. ¹¹ Martin also remarks that although the girls of the village lack the courage to approach him, »they do be saying" that he is »a handsome man«. ¹² Mary reminds Martin that he is married »with a woman he's heard called the wonder of the western world«. ¹³ Martin concedes that he's »heard tell her yellow hair, and her white skin, and her big eyes are a wonder surely«. ¹⁴ Toward the end of Act I, when Martin is trying to identify his wife after the restoration of his sight, the role previously played by mediation in his reception of her beauty is illustrated by his decision that he is married to Bride rather than Mary, on the grounds that she is »more the like of what they said«. ¹⁵ Beauty, the play appears to suggest, is not something to have on second-hand authority, especially not the eminently equivocal authority of individuals whose shared conception of fun is deliberate misinformation.

Aaron Meskin is one of several theorists to have argued that unlike non-aesthetic reports, we learn very rarely from the beauty reports of others.¹⁶ His argument is grounded in a deeply held conviction about the innate unreliability of aesthetic testimony. Such testimony can fail the trustworthiness test in one of two ways: incompetence or insincerity. The majority of Meskin's thesis is dedicated to addressing the first of these two scenarios – if someone lacks authority on a subject matter, then his or her testimony should be received with scepticism – and most people do not have recourse

10 Ibid., p. 71–73.

11 Ibid., p. 75.

12 Ibid., p. 87.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 95.

16 Cf. Aaron Meskin: *Aesthetic Testimony: What Can We Learn from Others about Beauty and Art?*, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (2004), pp. 65–91; Aaron Meskin: *Solving the Puzzle of Aesthetic Testimony*, in: McIver Lopes, Dominic/Kieran, Matthew (eds.): *Knowing Art: Essays in Aesthetics and Epistemology*, Dordrecht 2006, pp. 109–124.

to the necessary expertise to make warranted aesthetic judgments. Meskin's treatment of dismissals of aesthetic testimony on the grounds of insincerity is not as expansive, but his reflections on this issue are expanded upon by Brian Laertz.¹⁷

It does happen that people are less than entirely genuine when relaying aesthetic testimony. We may feel compelled to tell a potential partner that an artwork or a movie towards which we feel ambivalent was utterly compelling, for example, because we happen to know that such a verdict aligns with their opinion and so may enhance the prospect of the emergence of a sympathetic connection. As a manifestation of the phenomenon known to reluctantly coerced clothes-shopping companions as the highly perilous ›does my ass look big in this?‹ quandary, our familiarity with the capacity of aesthetic judgments to generate personal upset amongst sensitive or particularly vain acquaintances can prompt us to approve of a radical makeover although we inwardly believe it to signal a marked disimprovement, or make us feel inclined to tell an ill friend that (s)he is looking well, even though their appearance has triggered an intensification of our concern for their well-being. Parents will be familiar with those scribbled wall hangings and with a reluctance to let a child know that their creative output is cherished on no other basis than sentiment. Young people might feign aesthetic appreciation, prompted by peer pressure to avow wildly affirmative evaluations of music that actually leaves them unmoved, while certain adults will employ a similar strategy in the belief that demonstrating appreciation for certain artworks will generate an impression of sophistication and discernment. However, although disingenuously volunteered aesthetic testimony and the various motivations that might prompt insincerity in this regard are not entirely unheard of, it is hard to countenance that it is such a persistent or significant occurrence as to have a meaningful bearing on the epistemic value of such testimony. Within a museum or gallery context, I would suggest, while concern about the competence or credentials of the member of the access team tasked with the challenge of describing paintings for visitors who cannot see them may represent a genuine concern, it is difficult to imagine how concerns about the honesty of a museum or gallery docent might account for the resistance to aesthetic testimony that continues to prevail within that domain. It seems noteworthy, in this and other regards, that existing critical engagement in Syngé's play tends to dismiss Martin and Mary as ›dreamers‹ for investing

17 Cf. Brian Laertz: A Modest Defence of Aesthetic Testimony, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64:4 (2008), pp. 355–363.

faith in anything other than the ›reality‹ that unfolds when their vision is restored by a wandering saint.

On Baile's Strand and the (old) acquaintance principle

Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*¹⁸ might be said to represent an ableist reverse engineering of the literary tradition of ›romantic agony‹ documented by Mario Praz, Frank Kermode and others.¹⁹ In his study of the »cult of isolated joy, « and the cost of the »Image,« for example, Kermode details the »sense of irreconcilable difference and precarious communication« and the ultimately unbearable torment of alienation imposed on the single beholder of the »romantic image«. ²⁰ The emergence of this torment in the warrior Cuchulain is evidenced when his appeal to Conchubar, the High King of Ireland about the impact of the legendary beauty of Aoife is informed by a keen sense of the value of such an appeal when addressed to someone who has not witnessed this beauty at first hand:

A fierce woman of the camp!
But I am getting angry about nothing.
You have never seen her. Ah! Conchubar, had you seen her,
With that high, laughing, turbulent head of hers
Thrown backward, and the bowstring at her ear,
Or sitting at the fire with those grave eyes
Full of good counsel as it were with wine,
Or when love ran through all the lineaments
Of her wild body – although she had no child,
None other had all beauty, queen or lover,
Or was so fitted to give birth to kings.²¹

What is most notable about Yeats's rendering of this phenomenon is that the only thing that threatens to save the fearless and otherwise invincible warrior Cuchulain from being undone by the »romantic isolation« traditionally the lot of the solitary witness of a site of visual beauty is that the play's Blind Man has encountered it too. The opportunity to spare himself a form of mania-in-

18 Cf. William Butler Yeats: The Variorum Edition of the Plays of William Butler Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach, London 1966, reprinted 1989, pp. 457–527.

19 Cf. Mario Praz: *The Romantic Agony*, New York 1993; Frank Kermode: *Romantic Image*, London 2001.

20 Kermode: *Romantic Image*, p. 9.

21 Yeats: *The Variorum Edition*, p. 487.

ducing agony born of »the very costly matter of beatific imaging« and »the sacrifice of a thousand possible sympathies«²² presents itself to Cuchulain only when he happens upon the unlikely solace of the company of Blind Man's who bore witness to Aoife's beauty before losing his vision. The representation of blindness primarily in terms of visual memory, as Yeats was also to do with Hanrahan in *The Tower*, is likely to be deemed problematic in many ways by literary disability studies scholars. Epitomising the concept of narrative prosthesis, Blind Man, an otherwise irreducibly peripheral figure, assumes an authority as a consequence of being able to alleviate the quarantined torment of the play's central protagonist – although the influence he commands is entirely uninformed by or indebted in any way to his contemporary sensory configuration. Blind Man assumes the substantial significance he comes to wield purely on the strength of what he has previously seen. The element of the aesthetic testimony debate to which the play seems to me to most directly relate is what has become known as the »acquaintance principle«. The ableism underpinning Yeats's rendering of blindness manifests in the apparent assumption that in instances of individuals who are adventitiously blind, the only acquaintance that is of any interest or value is old acquaintance.

Richard Wollheim explains the rationale underpinning his scepticism about the value and credence of aesthetic testimony in relation to the aforementioned Acquaintance Principle, which »insists that judgments of aesthetic value, unlike judgments of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another«.²³ Positioning the issue inadvertently within a context that is more specifically aligned with our current focus, Alan Tormey contends: »[i]n art, unlike the law, we do not admit judgments in the absence of direct or immediate experience of the object of the judgment. We require critical judgments to be rooted in eye-witness encounters, and the epistemically indirect avenues of evidence, inference and authority that are permissible elsewhere are anathema here«.²⁴ Bertrand Russell's treatment, in 1910, of the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description arguably remains the definitive one, although it has been very usefully complemented by Richard Fumerton.²⁵ Language and description

22 Kermode: *Romantic Image*, pp. 4–5.

23 Richard Wollheim: *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd ed, Cambridge 1980, p. 233.

24 Alan Tormey: *Critical Judgments*, in: *Theoria* 39 (1973), pp. 35–49, here: p. 39.

25 Cf. Bertrand Russell: *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*, in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11 (1910–11), pp. 108–128; Richard Fumerton: *Knowl-*

assume a central importance within this element of the aesthetic testimony debate, as second-hand, verbal accounts of somebody else's direct experience with a site of beauty represent, for advocates of the acquaintance principle, a poor and misguided basis for aesthetic judgment.

Brian Laertz lists remembered acquaintance alongside photographic evidence of beauty and aesthetic engagement in recorded musical performance within a suite of aesthetic experiences which seem to cast into jeopardy the validity of the acquaintance principle's insistence that only direct forms of experiential engagement can warrant aesthetic judgments.²⁶ He concedes, however, that subscribers to the principle might, by means of a considered application of the ›transparency thesis‹ argue that engagement with the effectively diaphanous media of photography, audio recording and memory might constitute so slight a remove from immediate contact as to represent a negligible compromise of the rationale underpinning the acquaintance principle. From a purely philosophical perspective, acceptance of aesthetic knowledge via memory, as such acceptance pertains within the relationship between Cuchulain and Blind Man, represents a distinctive challenge to acquaintance principle advocates. Whether one deems remembering that something has an aesthetic quality to constitute direct experience of it, depends on whether the conditions of directness are deemed to be met by the fact that one was once acquainted with an entity. »Sometimes,« Laertz suggests, »our memories are so dim all we recollect is our assessment of a work but none of the details that compelled us to make it. We often decide to revisit a work, simply because we remember that it was good.«²⁷ Reflecting on this challenge within the context of the aesthetic experiences of individuals with acquired visual impairment generates even more intricate convolutions. Were an individual to resume, after losing their vision, engagement with an artwork to which they attributed significant aesthetic value as a fully sighted person in the past, there is no guarantee that the favourable verdict arrived at in the past would survive the transition to less ocularcentric forms of beholding. Were Blind Man to encounter Aoife in ›real time‹, the fate of her legendary beauty would be in the balance.

The assumption that the aesthetic sensibility of an individual with acquired visual impairment is inevitably or necessarily residual brings to mind Ray-

edge by Acquaintance vs. Description, in: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2008). plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-acquaintdescrip/ (22.10.2023).

26 Cf. Laertz: A Modest Defence, p. 357.

27 Ibid.

mond Williams' treatment of the often-definitive influence wielded by historical lineaments over the transition from past to future cultures, and of the debilitating impact of tradition and long-won convention on the emergence of alternative or oppositional forms of cultural expression.²⁸ The hegemony afforded to residual convention can, according to Williams, »exert its pressure as a static and exclusionary prototype against which all real cultural progress is measured«, resulting in the advocacy of perspectives supportive of traditionally dominant practices and the exclusion of the marginally emergent.²⁹ Subordination happens, according to Williams, because the emergence of diverse perspectives is rarely accompanied by a corresponding emergence of accommodating infrastructures. Applying these sweeping epochal observations to Yeats's rendering of blindness yields insights into Yeats's apparent disregard for the capacities of individuals with acquired impairment to forge new standards of ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic value as they renegotiate their experiential contracts with the lived realities of their surroundings.

Questions relating to the perceived availability and usefulness of elements of an outlived sensorium also afford opportunities to reengage with central tenets of the aesthetic testimony debate. One of the instances identified by Jon Robson as representing grounds for aesthetic testimony optimism, for example, is when the beauty of an entity stands the test of time.³⁰ We can assure an acquaintance that Yeats was an exquisite poet, though a shockingly poor dramatist, because that consensus has persisted amongst learned scholars for a considerable period of time. If our approach to aesthetic value is more inclined towards conceptions of it being the product of the relationship between an entity and an individual sensibility, however, rather than being conceived of in terms of the cultivation of good taste by ushering aesthetic preference into contrived alignment with that commonly espoused by proven experts, the truth value of any endorsement by Blind Man of Cuchulain's affirmations of Aoife's beauty when that beauty has become, for the former, a remembered feature of an outlived sensorium, seems highly contestable.

David Bolt has commented on the tendency of blind characters to be represented as tolerating a »residual existence whose only pleasure is in the past«.³¹

28 Cf. Raymond Williams: *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford 1977.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

30 Cf. Jon Robson: *Aesthetic Testimony and the Test of Time*, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96:3 (2018), pp. 729–748.

31 David Bolt: *Cultural Disability Studies in Education: Interdisciplinary Navigations of the Normative Divide*, London 2018, p. 8.

Claire Penketh argues that ascription of an irreducibly retrospective aesthetic sensibility to those with acquired impairment is inevitably premised on the invalidation of an epistemology embedded in the lived contemporary realities of life with an impairment.³² I have elsewhere identified at the core of a history of »visually-biased meta-narratives« of blindness a recurring assumption that, in the case of characters with acquired visual impairment, »the beautiful thing has always already been and gone«.³³ Disability studies scholars tend to be less interested than pure philosophers in the question of whether the epistemic value of reports of remembered beauty can be rationalised, being generally more inclined to concern themselves with the potentially debilitating impact of such rationalisations. My involvement in the domain of museum and gallery access provision, however, has prompted a certain tempering of my wariness of the perils inherent in indulging a residual aesthetic in a way that I am sure will frustrate or disappoint many of my colleagues in the field of critical disability studies. My work in that field generally brings me into regular contact with individuals with acquired visual impairment. Many of these individuals are artists. They are self-selecting gallery visitors, and retain an interest in, and usually a passion for, visual art. For these individuals, the suggestion that indulging a residual interest is not in keeping with the principles underpinning contemporary work in socially-oriented academic approaches to disability identity tends not to readily register itself as a pressing concern, as visual memory becomes one of several modalities exercised within their comprehensive and fervent engagement with exhibited artworks.

Molly Sweeney and the asymmetry thesis

Within philosophical treatments of the issue, the imbalance between willingness to believe, assimilate or epistemologically operationalise the yield of aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony is often referred to in terms of an asymmetry thesis, which holds that aesthetic testimony is epistemically inferior to its non-aesthetic counterpart. This asymmetry is evidenced in the opening monologue of Friel's *Molly Sweeney*, where we gain an insight into the type

32 Cf. Claire Penketh: Special Educational Needs and Art and Design Education: Plural Perspectives on Exclusion, in: *Journal of Education Policy* 31:4 (2016), pp. 432–442.

33 David Feeney: *Toward an Aesthetics of Blindness: An Interdisciplinary Response to Synge, Yeats and Friel*, New York 2007, p. 279, p. 125.

of tuition to which her father subjects Molly as a young girl.³⁴ It may be instructive, for our current purposes, to consider the patterns of distinction and attempted fusion that pertain between aesthetic and non-aesthetic elements of her father's pedagogical endeavours. Mr Sweeney tells Molly, for example, »at the bottom of the pedestal there is a circle of petunias. There are about twenty of them all huddled together in one bed. They are – what? – seven inches tall. Some of them are blue-and-white, and some of them are pink, and a few have big, red, cheeky faces«. ³⁵ In the immediate aftermath of this tuition, the following test ensues:

- ›Now Molly. Tell me what you saw.<
- ›Petunias.<
- ›How many petunias did you see?<
- ›Twenty.<
- ›Colour?<
- ›Blue-and-white and pink and red.<
- ›Good. And what shape is their bed?<
- ›It's a circle.<
- ›Splendid. Passed with flying colours. You are a clever lady.<³⁶

Her father's methodology entails rewarding Molly with high praise for the memorizing and repetition of his descriptions of the visual features of the garden. Molly's capacity to produce what her father hails as ›excellent testimony< is where her education begins and ends.³⁷ It is also one element of Friel's exposition of the blindness that he appears, for all of his exquisite word-smithery, to identify at the heart of language. Molly finds herself bound to the corrective and compensatory designs of another who instinctively attributes aesthetic frustrations to her condition and thereby creates them. As part of a misguided indoctrination into the formal domain of aesthetic appreciation, Mr Sweeney resolves to make his blind daughter a witness to all of the beauty he describes. Although Molly is encouraged to touch and smell the flowers, when their beauty is in question, all that she derives through these sensory channels is subordinated to or translated into the terms of her teacher's visual perspective. As Molly's education progresses, it becomes evident that the imparting of information about the features of the family garden is also intended as a component of her aesthetic education, which seems premised on an active

34 Cf. Brian Friel: *Molly Sweeney*, Oldcastle 1994.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

discouragement of the pupil's capacity to exercise or express preferences or forms of discernment that are aligned with her experience. »I know you can't see them«, Mr. Sweeney informs Molly about the nemophila, »but they have beautiful blue eyes. Just like you«. ³⁸ When considered within the wider context of the play in its entirety, the scene juxtaposes conceptions of the purpose of aesthetic education as the cultivation of good or proper taste, with approaches underpinned by the recognition volunteered by Ralph Alexander Smith and other aesthetic theorists, that aesthetic value, like any other, is the product of the interface between an entity or phenomenon and a particular sensibility. ³⁹ The lesson underscores the soundness of Santayana's argument:

It is absurd to say that what is invisible to a given being *ought* to seem beautiful to him. Evidently this obligation of recognizing the same qualities is conditioned by the possession of the same faculties. But no two men have exactly the same faculties, nor can things have for any two exactly the same values. ⁴⁰

The shortcomings of testimony as a means of transmitting aesthetic value are further exposed later in the play, when Molly reflects on her own genuine aesthetic experience. In keeping with the play's recurring illustration of the limitations of verbal mediations of direct sensory experience, Molly is reconciled to the ineffability of the experience to which she endeavours to do descriptive justice:

And how could I have told those other doctors how much pleasure my world offered me? From my work, from the radio, from walking, from music, from cycling. But especially from swimming. Oh, I can't tell you the joy I got from swimming. I used to think – and I know this sounds silly – but I really did believe I got more pleasure, more delight, from swimming than sighted people can ever get. Just offering yourself to the experience – every pore open and eager for that world of pure sensation, of sensation alone – sensation that could not have been enhanced by sight – experience that existed only by touch and feel; and moving swiftly and rhythmically through that enfolding world; and the sense of such assurance, such liberation, such concordance with it.... Oh, I can't tell you the joy swimming gave me. I used to think that the other people in the pool with me, the sighted people, that in some way their pleasure was actually diminished because they could see, because seeing in some way qualified the sensation; and that if they only knew how full, how total my pleasure was, I used to tell myself that they must, they really must envy me. ⁴¹

38 Ibid., p. 14.

39 Cf. Ralph A. Smith: *The Sense of Art*, New York and London 1989.

40 George Santayana: *The Sense of Beauty*, New York 2005, 1st pub. 1896, pp. 19–20.

41 Friel: *Molly Sweeney*, p. 24.

A rich history of aesthetic theorists, including Immanuel Kant,⁴² Frank Sibley,⁴³ Mary Mothersill,⁴⁴ and Richard Wollheim,⁴⁵ have been reticent to attribute any epistemological value to aesthetic testimony on the general grounds that nothing can be learned from it. These arguments represent iterations of what is referred to in the literature as the asymmetry thesis – the contention that aesthetic testimony is epistemologically inferior to its non-aesthetic counterpart. Arguably the most robust slight against the epistemological credence of aesthetic testimony is ventured by those, such as Frank Sibley⁴⁶ and Alan Tormey⁴⁷ who hold that there is no such thing as aesthetic knowledge, thereby rendering anomalous the very idea of the generation or transmission of knowledge through aesthetic testimony. Related arguments amount to either a denial of the truth-aptness of aesthetic claims, or to an applied subscription to John Leslie Mackie’s error theory, culminating in the contention that all aesthetic claims are necessarily false.⁴⁸ Others still fall short of denying the existence of ›aesthetic truth‹ but do deny that such truths can be known. In the course of these philosophical debates, the epistemological status of aesthetic testimony has been targeted on the grounds that aesthetic judgments are broadly perceptual, subjectively evaluative, or effective or attitudinal. Those few theorists, such as Brian Laertz,⁴⁹ Rachel McKinnon,⁵⁰ and Jon Robson,⁵¹ whose interrogations of aesthetic testimony demonstrate a semblance of optimism, have suggested either that these misgivings do not represent grounds for a wholesale dismissal of aesthetic testimony as a source of knowledge or belief, or that as these characteristics are also regularly properties of non-aesthetic claims or concerns, their influence does not render aesthetic testimony uniquely problematic. Even these more optimistic theorists, however, tend to identify a unique set of challenges related to arrival at aesthetic understanding via testimonial means, their arguments often resting on resting on the reduction of complex epistemological questions to a series of purely semantic distinctions between the profound epistemological entities

42 Cf. Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford 1998.

43 Cf. Frank Sibley: *Aesthetic/Nonaesthetic*, in: *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), pp. 135–159.

44 Cf. Mary Mothersill: *Beauty Restored*, Oxford 1984.

45 Cf. Richard Wollheim: *Art and Its Objects*, 2nd ed, Cambridge 1980.

46 Cf. Sibley; *Aesthetic/Nonaesthetic*.

47 Cf. Tormey: *Critical Judgments*.

48 Cf. John Leslie Mackie: *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth 1977.

49 Cf. Laertz: *A Modest Defence*.

50 Cf. Rachel McKinnon: *How to be an Optimist about Aesthetic Testimony*, in: *Episteme* 1:2 (2016), pp. 1–20.

51 Cf. Jon Robson: *Aesthetic Testimony: An Optimistic Approach*, Oxford 2022.

of knowledge and belief, while also remaining embedded in quite a severely delimited set of circumstances within which transmissions of aesthetic judgment may secure a degree of epistemic purchase. As a fully-sighted Brian Friel devotee with a background in critical disability studies, I realise that Molly is spot-on when she suggests that it is beyond even her remarkable powers of description to do justice to richness of her aesthetic sensibility through words or to render through that medium the precise nature of her aesthetic experience available to me. As someone who is now very familiar with the play, however, I feel richer and even more knowledgeable, for the fact that she nevertheless endeavoured to communicate it.

The cost of aesthetic testimony scepticism within a gallery access context

The majority of existing audio description guidelines recommend a ›neutral‹ or ›objective‹ approach (ADC 2008; AENOR 2005; Salzhauer Axel, Hooper, et al. 2003; Snyder 2010).⁵² Not only does the vehemence with which this specification is tirelessly commanded belie the thrust of a rich history of philosophical accounts of the nature of aesthetic experience, it remains at perplexing variance with the more elemental dimensionalities of practical viability and the avowed preferences of many gallery visitors with visual impairment. The first two stipulations outlined in the Audio Description Coalition's ›Standards for Audio Description‹ (third edition, 2009), for example, are ›Describe What You See‹ and ›Describe Objectively‹. The former stipulation, qualified by the directive »what you see is what you describe« is presented as »the first rule of description«.⁵³ One should never, access facil-

52 ADC (Audio Description Coalition): Standards for audio description and code of professional conduct for describers (2009) available at: www.perkins.org/wp-content/uploads/earning-media/adc_standards.pdf (25.10.2024; AENOR: Norma Española UNE 153020: Audiodescripción para personas con discapacidad visual. Requisitos para la audiodescripción y elaboración de audioguías (2005). Available at www.en-standard.eu/une-153020-2005-audio-description-for-visually-impaired-people-guidelines-for-audio-description-procedures-and-for-the-preparation-of-audio-guides/?srsltid=AfmBOorbLJmB_8AiGqQInOz48pNYIgzdGQDNaNFmRU4X2tBWlf-yIh (29.12.2024); Elizabeth Axel Salzhauer/Virginia Hooper/Teresa Kardoulis: AEB's guidelines for verbal description, in: Salzhauer, Elizabeth Axel/Levent, Nina Sobol (eds.): *Art Beyond Sight: A Resource Guide to Art, Creativity, and Visual Impairment*. New York 2003, pp. 229–237; Joel Snyder (ed.): *Audio Description Guidelines and Best Practices Version 3.1*. American Council for the Blind Audio Description Project, 2010. adp.acb.org/docs/AD-ACB-ADP%20Guidelines%203.1.doc (27.10.2024).

53 ADC: Standards, p. 1.

itators are cautioned, describe »what you think you see«. We do not see emotion, so we should concern ourselves only with descriptive accounts of the physical manifestation of emotion, rather than incorporating the naming of emotions within our access provision endeavours. To inform a listener that a character seems angry, for example, constitutes a reprehensible transgression. Joel Snyder takes this stipulation to an extreme by prohibiting the relaying of the information that a character is dead, on the grounds that doing so amounts to the casting of aspersions about the cognitive faculties of an individual with visual impairment.⁵⁴ Amidst this expansive array of prescriptive disallowances relating to when describers should not to say what they should not say, Snyder, without betraying the remotest recognition of the irony inherent in doing so, then proceeds to instruct the describer not to employ censorship.⁵⁵

As part of the justification volunteered to support this objectivity decree, we are instructed to concentrate on that which is the most significant and to prioritise what is deemed to be »essential«⁵⁶. The commanded cull of all things subjective and, by extension, superfluous, seems ordained by an objectivity fetish premised on convictions pertaining to a conception of experiential redundancy that seems decidedly unencumbered by any form of informed concern for the nature of aesthetic experience or art engagement. The ideal of descriptive impartiality should be further advanced, according to the ADC guidelines, by refraining from any form of interpretive activity when facilitating engagement with the artwork being described. »The best audio describers«, Snyder informs access practitioners, »objectively recount the visual aspects of an image«. »Subjective or qualitative judgments or comment«, he continues, »get in the way – they constitute an interpretation on the part of the describer and are unnecessary and unwanted«.⁵⁷ The imperious positing of this objectivity fixation remains at distinct odds with what I have personally been led by gallery visitors with visual impairment to believe about their access and aesthetic preferences, and, more significantly, with the findings of research conducted by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) and VocalEyes, which suggest that more subjective descriptions are deemed by sig-

54 Snyder, *Visual Made Verbal*, p. 43.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

56 *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

57 ADC: Standards, p. 9.

nificant sections of the population of gallery visitors with visual impairment to be conducive to a more meaningful and engaging gallery experience.⁵⁸

Soler Gallego (2019) and María Colmenero (2024)⁵⁹ share my concern for the tendency of existing audio description guidelines to »recommend describing only that which is seen«, as a means of avoiding »subjective interpretations of the visual message«. ⁶⁰ As part of her persuasive rejoinder to this prevalent stipulation, Soler Gallego's research evidences the preference for subjective description amongst many gallery visitors with visual impairment. The nature of art and art access, she contends, renders the incorporation of subjectivity within descriptions of selected artworks an inevitability. Rather than lamenting this fact, Soler Gallego's consultation with gallery visitors suggests that such subjectivity is the cornerstone of meaningful aesthetic experience within an art access context. Her empirical review of audio description guidelines in museums in France, Spain, UK and USA yielded the finding that the withholding of subjective elements from descriptions of artworks depletes aesthetic experience. The degree of this depletion was found to be directly correlated with the rigidity with which describers comply with audio description guidelines as they relate to the subjectivity/objectivity interface.

The ideal of objectivity upon which art access guidance tends to be premised seems as philosophically misguided and ill-informed as it is practically untenable. Consultation with an abundant history of insights into the nature of the objectivity-subjectivity interface within the domain of aesthetic experience might have prompted those who feel compelled to regulate the acceptable terms of art access provision to temper the categorical complexion of this directive or to at least soften the absolute terms in which it is so obstinately repeated throughout most available guidance on the issue. It would appear that the prohibition of all reference to emotion, interpretation or appraisal from endeavours to convey what Ralph Smith (1989)⁶¹ has described as a ›sense of art‹ is stipulated on the grounds that the volunteering of such insights serves an editorial, analytical, elucidatory or explanatory function

58 RNIB and VocalEyes: Talking images guide. Museums, galleries and heritage site: Improving access for blind and partially sighted people, 2003, pp. 47–52. www.thetalkingwalls.co.uk/PDF/public_talkingimagesguide.pdf (25.11.2024).

59 María Olalla Luque Colmenero: Subjectivity and Creativity Versus Audio Description Guidelines, in: Marcus-Quinn, Ann/Krejtz, Krzysztof/Duarte, Carlos (eds.): *Transforming Media Accessibility in Europe*, Cham, 2024, pp. 39–52.

60 Soler Gallego: *Defining Subjectivity*, p. 708.

61 Ralph A. Smith: *The Sense of Art: A Study in Aesthetic Education*, New York and London 1989.

that is deemed alternately as being either ultimately unhelpful or all too helpful for the recipient.⁶² The more salient of the misconceptions in which such guidance seems to be embedded arguably relate to the nature of the relationship between sensation and language and the nature of aesthetic agency. The first of these misconceptions might be accounted for in terms of conceptions of the nature of description in a museum or gallery context as a form of intersemiotic and multimodal translation.⁶³ If prescriptive guidelines are deemed necessary for the acceptable facilitation of such translation, those who undertake the formulation of these guidelines need to factor into their consequential reckonings the nature of the relationship between an irreducibly non-verbal source and the verbal output that is at the core of such cross-modal mediation. There is scant evidence in any of the existing guidelines that these intersemiotic and multi-modal features of verbal approaches to art access have been considered.

Although nothing more persuasively versed in these matters than meagerly supported dogmatic stricture is forthcoming in any of the existing guidelines, the implicit assumption would appear to be that avoidance of subjectivity on the part of the generator of the description bestows agency to its recipient, whose own inferential faculties are thereby compelled to intervene in order to decipher the aesthetic significance of the evocative narrative sketch of which they have taken delivery. The grasp of the phenomenon of aesthetic agency (Gorodeisky 2022, McIver Lopes 2018, Dammann & Schellekens 2021)⁶⁴ informing the unequivocal attribution of passivity to the reception of a subjective account of an artwork would appear to be rather slack. The conception of aesthetic agency underpinning Snyder's direction, for example, seems premised on an underestimation of the significance of the exercise of the type of discernment required to distinguish aesthetic from non-aesthetic and intrinsic from secondary qualities of an artwork. His regulatory principles also seem premised on an underestimation of the capacities and appetites of self-selecting gallery visitors for discerning forms of aesthetic engagement with descriptors. Only »adjectives and adverbs that do not offer value judgments«, according to Snyder, should feature in the verbal mediation of a visual

62 ADC: Standards, p. 3.

63 Soler Gallego: *Defining Subjectivity*, p. 727.

64 Keren Gorodeisky: *Aesthetic agency*, in: Ferrero, Luca (ed.): *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Agency*, Abington, Oxon 2022, pp. 456–466; Guy Dammann/Elisabeth Schellekens: *Aesthetic understanding and epistemic agency in art*, in: *Disputatio* 13:62 (2021), pp. 265–282.

artwork.⁶⁵ The subsequent qualification that these selected parts of speech should »not themselves be subject to interpretation«⁶⁶ raises questions about the very existence of terminology that meets these exacting and seemingly spurious criteria. It is entirely conceivable that persuasive arguments might be developed in order to refute the suggestion that failure to incorporate subjective elements within art access facilitation represents a compromising of aesthetic value. For all of the fervor with which this contention is reversed within existing verbal description guidance, however, no compelling rationale for the reversal is anywhere advanced.

Furthermore, unless we are inclined to broadly dismiss what centuries of aesthetic theorists have suggested about the impossibly involved interplay between objectivity and subjectivity and language and sensation within aesthetic experience, the recommended reduction of art engagement to a deductive and propositionally articulated approach to the mediation of elements of the substance or value of artistic expression seems problematic. To insist on objectivity in the mediation of aesthetic value is to ride slipshod over a richly generative history of philosophical debate. Modern contributions to these protracted deliberations by such figures as Nelson Goodman (1968), Munroe Beardsley (1970), George Dickie (1964) and Frank Sibley (1968)⁶⁷ can be traced as far back as to ninth century reflections of John Scotus Eriugena and ultimately to Aristotle,⁶⁸ via the seminal ruminations of Edward Bullough (1912), George Santayana (1896), Frances Hutcheson (1726), Immanuel Kant (1789), and others.⁶⁹ Insistence that the formulation of a sense of art should only be attempted once the artwork being described has been purged of any semblance of subjectivity amounts to an ascetic form of aesthetic absti-

65 ADC: Standards, p. 2.

66 Ibid.

67 Nelson Goodman: *Languages of Art*, New York 1968; Munroe C. Beardsley: *The Aesthetic Point of View*, in: Kiefer, Howard/Munitz, Milton (eds.): *Perspectives in Education, Religion, and the Arts*, Albany, 1970, pp. 219–237; George Dickie: *The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude*, in: *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1:1 (1964), pp. 56–65; Frank Sibley: *Objectivity and Aesthetics*, in: Benson, John/Redfern, Betty/Roxbee Cox, Jeremy (eds.), *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, Oxford, 2001, pp. 71–87.

68 Johannes Scotus Eriugena: *De divisione naturae*, trans J.J. O'Meara and I.P. Sheldon Williams, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, vol 13, Dublin 1995; Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ingram Bywater (trans.), Oxford, 1920; reprinted in Cahn and Meskin (eds.) 2007, pp. 41–56.

69 Edward Bullough: »Psychical distance« as a factor in art and an aesthetic principle, in: *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912), pp. 87–117; George Santayana: *The Sense of Beauty*, New York 1896; Frances Hutcheson: *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, W. Leidhold (ed.), Indianapolis 1726 (2004); Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Oxford 1998.

nence which, in turn, seems a rather unlikely communicative, interpretive or phenomenological basis for the (co-)construction of aesthetic value. Existing verbal description regulations, this is all to say, seem formulated to engender a surfeit of unnecessary penitence among those docents who instinctively align the focus of their descriptions with the spirit of what has been historically deemed to be an irreducibly subjective medium. That an apparent indifference to aesthetic theory renders the oxymoronic resonance of the hypothesis of an impartial aesthetic indiscernible to the generators of art access guidelines seems a dubious pretext for the unnecessary impoverishing of the richness of aesthetic experience that gallery visits are capable of yielding.

Guidelines for the generation of verbal descriptions have in this way historically emphasised the importance of refraining from the incorporation of any semblance of subjectivity within descriptions of artworks. Although a detailed rationale for this aversion has not been forthcoming, it would appear that the fixation on objectivity harboured by those who assume responsibility for the regulation of art access may be accounted for in terms of a combination of an intuitive, if unknowing adoption of aesthetic testimony scepticism, an unwarranted suspicion that gallery docents might for their own reasons have designs on the aesthetic inclinations, preferences and predilections of individuals with visual impairment, and a vague and misplaced instinct of protectiveness towards these visitors. Verbal description has become big business. Prohibitively expensive international workshops are facilitated on the cultivation of the capacity for objective description, promoted on the premise that anybody who does not facilitate access according to the objectivity imperative is doing it wrong by compromising the sanctity of a form of art engagement from which the self has somehow been extracted.⁷⁰ Josh Miele, a blind San Francisco-based scientist who has set up a freely accessible online audio-description platform as a means of democratising the domain of art access – thereby threatening the profit-making potential of the afore-mentioned initiatives – is included among the perpetrators of crimes against objectivity who get art access wrong by not prohibiting the incorporation of subjectivity within verbal descriptions.⁷¹

Although Joel Snyder's approach to verbal description – outlined with a certain authority in his treatise/training manual *The Visual Made Verbal* (2014) demonstrates an alignment with the various forms of aesthetic testimo-

70 Cf. Joel Snyder: *The Visual Made Verbal*, Arlington, VA 2014.

71 Cf. Georgina Kleege: *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*, New York 2018, p. 107.

ny pessimism that recur through the philosophical literature, there is scant indication that he has familiarised himself with any of these abundant critical sources. Similarly, his insistence on the strict maintenance of objectivity when describing art for those who cannot see it very well demonstrates an apparent disregard for a rich history of philosophical rumination on the complex interplay between objectivity and subjectivity in the generation of aesthetic meaning. Snyder's antipathy towards the transmission of insights relating to the perceived aesthetic qualities of the artworks being described would appear to reflect a wider cultural affinity with one side of the aesthetic testimony debate. Malcolm Budd, for example, suggests that the paucity of existing philosophical justifications of the acquaintance principle belies how deeply entrenched it has traditionally been within and outside the rarefied domain of formal philosophical investigation.⁷² There appears to be a prevailing innate scepticism towards aesthetic testimony, an intuitive disinclination to afford to it the degree of trust that we more readily invest in examples of its non-aesthetic counterpart. Or, as Brian Laertz expresses it, the perceived inferiority of aesthetic testimony »seems to be a fixture of the folk theory of rationality, which underlies our doxastic practices«. ⁷³ I would suggest that the widely corroborated common-sense diktat of aesthetic testimony pessimism also underlies traditional approaches to the regulation of art access initiatives for gallery visitors with visual impairment in a way that has an impoverishing effect on the depth, vigour and liveliness of the experiences such undertakings are capable of affording. Rather than subscribing to the historically accepted truism that, to use Laertz's expression, aesthetic reports are »epistemologically handicapped«, ⁷⁴ the argument presented here is that the historically widespread inclination to give subjectivity a wide berth when facilitating art access actually adds yet another layer to the already multi-dimensional forms of disablement to which individuals with visual impairment are subjected when they endeavour to indulge their innate interest in art.

From experience, I would suggest that a standpoint of determined aesthetic ambivalence serves poorly as a starting point for discussion or experiential exchange within a museum or gallery access context. Alleviating such ambivalence by means of volunteering subjective opinions about the aesthetic merits or demerits of a particular painting can seem both an act of enlivening mercy

72 Cf. Malcom Budd: *The Acquaintance Principle*, in: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (2003), pp. 386–392.

73 Laertz: *A Modest Defence*, p. 361.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 355.

towards an art access session that might otherwise die on its feet, and a useful portal through which participants with visual impairment can reflect on distinctive features of their own forms of aesthetic engagement with the exhibited artefacts. Thankfully, more recent scholarship in this area has challenged the feasibility, efficacy, and appropriateness of the strict maintenance of aesthetic objectivity within the art access domain. For one thing, the practical impossibility of observing the stipulation that describers be completely objective is undermined by the inevitable fact that in order to avoid generating descriptions of a length that render sustained attention challenging, these professionals have to select what they describe, and differences between components prioritised by different describers inevitably emerge. Similarly, as Floriane Bardini points out, differences in compositional styles are also likely to manifest a degree of inter-describer subjectivity.⁷⁵ Contemporary scholars have also begun to appreciate the extent to which the practice of purging all interpretive elements from description may prove counter-productive by precluding the vital element of imaginative or experiential connotation.⁷⁶ International divergences of convention in this regard have begun to emerge, as illustrated by Mazur and Schmiel's comparative review of the art access practices that prevail in the US and Europe.⁷⁷ European guidelines for audio description are increasingly inclined towards the conclusion that the historically practiced fetishization of objectivity can be both counter-productive and radically misaligned with the unapologetically subjective elements of creative expression.⁷⁸

Although many of the most widely applied description guidelines continue to recommend describing only that which is seen as a means of avoiding

75 Floriane Bardini: Audiovisual Translation for the Blind and Partially Sighted: Audio description, an indispensable access mode. Conference presentation: International Research-to-Practice Conference and Summer School of Audiovisual Translation 2016. www.researchgate.net/publication/323907256_Audiovisual_Translation_for_the_Blind_and_Partially_Sighted_Audio_description_an_indispensable_access_mode (25.10.2023).

76 Cf. e.g. Pilar Orero: Audio Description Behaviour: Universals, Regularities and Guidelines, in: *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2 (2012), pp. 195–202; Floriane Bardini: Audio Description of Cinematic Language: A Comparative Study of Describers' Approaches. Conference presentation: Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description 2013. www.researchgate.net/publication/301748125_Audio_Description_of_Cinematic_Language_A_Comparative_Study_of_Describers'_Approaches (25.10.2023).

77 Iwona Mazur/Agnieszka Schmiel: Towards Common European Audio Description Guidelines: Results of the Pear Tree Project, in: *Perspectives* 20:1 (2012), pp. 5–23.

78 Cf. Aline Remael/Nina Reviere/Gert Vercauteren: Pictures Painted in Words: ADLAB Audio Description Guidelines (2015). repository.uantwerpen.be/docman/irua/99e3cf/130865.pdf (3.8.2024); Louise Fryer: *An Introduction to Audio Description*, London 2016.

subjective interpretations, evidence, such as that provided by Soler Gallego increasingly suggests that many people with visual impairments prefer more subjective descriptions.⁷⁹ Although Joel Snyder's forcibly volunteered recommendations demonstrate what might be argued to be a healthy and sensible disregard for philosophical hypotheses, as a fully sighted individual, he does claim to have consulted with individuals with visual impairment when formulating his guidelines. I can only say that my undertaking of such consultation has consistently yielded conflicting feedback. As part of their reflections on patterns of difference and similarity between the ways in which they receive aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony within a gallery environment, these visitors told me that they enjoy receiving subjective insights from a describer, on the condition that these insights are not volunteered as matters of incontestable fact.⁸⁰ This finding chimes with those generated by research conducted by Orero, Bardini and Soler Gallego⁸¹ which suggest that a total lack of subjective interpretation may actually impoverish the engagement of individuals with visual impairment in the artworks explored within gallery access sessions.

In her study of blindness and the visual arts, Georgina Kleege relays an anecdote that encapsulates the core of the argument presented here – that the fixation on objectivity within the development of guidelines for verbal description is representative of a wider tendency towards the unnecessary and counter-productive withholding of vital elements of aesthetic experience in the name of access.⁸² Kleege describes her attendance of an accessible screening of Ben Lewin's film *The Sessions*, facilitated as part of a disabled student-led disability awareness initiative at Berkeley. During the screening, the captions and audio-description were turned on for the entire audience. The film is based on the autobiography of Mark O'Brian, a poet and journalist who became dependent on the artificial respiration administered by an iron lung after an accident in childhood left him paralyzed from the neck down. One of the scenes of the film involves Mark embarking on a shopping trip with one of his assistants in search of some new shirts. One of the garments selected was

79 Cf. Silvia Soler Gallego: Defining Subjectivity in Visual Art Audio Description, in: *Meta* 64:3 (2019), pp. 708–733.

80 Cf. David Feeney: A Modest Defence of Disability Simulation within an Arts Access Context, in: *MuseumEdu: Education and Research in Cultural Environments* 5 (2017), pp. 83–106.

81 Cf. Orero: Audio Description; Bardini: Audio Description; Soler Gallego: Defining Subjectivity.

82 Cf. Kleege: *More than Meets the Eye*.

audio described as being »a dark paisley button up«. A student within earshot of Kleege took the initiative of supplementing the description provided with the hollered avowal »and it's really ugly«. The experience prompted Kleege to reflect on how this instance of faithful compliance with the established guidelines for effective audio description lead to an impoverishment of aesthetic engagement. In a later scene, Kleege tells us, Mark's newly acquired item of clothing is commented on by Cheryl, a sexual surrogate employed by Mark as part of his endeavour to lose his virginity at the age of thirty-eight. »Is it racy and sophisticated?«, Mark asks – to which Cheryl responds: »you took the words right out of my mouth«. At this point, Kleege notes, the relevance of the shirt-purchasing scene becomes clear. His feelings for Cheryl have prompted Mark to allow his resolve to make a striking impression to get the better of his customarily understated or under-developed sense of sartorial taste to hilarious effect. The »failure of the describer to make an aesthetic judgment about the paisley shirt,« Kleege observes, »made it hard to assess the characters' banter about it«. ⁸³ Kleege's account of the failure of forms of access provision that are predicated on a slavish compliance with the maxim that facilitators should steer a wide berth of any avowals that bear a semblance of subjectivity or evaluation illustrate the wrong-headedness of regulating art access at a remove from informed reflection on the nature of artistic expression.

The dubious rationale underpinning verbal description guidelines

Among the most notable features of the verbal description guidelines in common usage is the dearth of sustained or critically informed rationalisation of normative directives relating to the verbal mediation of the impression generated by visual artefacts. In the absence of any discernible attempt to justify the recommended terms of art access provision, what appears to connect these guidelines with the misgivings about the epistemological credence of aesthetic testimony outlined above is the sense that both entities seem to be grounded in suspicion. In the case of verbal description guidelines, this suspicion would appear to manifest primarily in two ways: 1) A suspicion that a gallery docent might, for some reason, be inclined to dupe gallery visitors with visual impairments into some form of sightist aesthetic ideology; and 2) An unfounded conviction that these gallery visitors (most of whom are

83 Ibid., pp. 99–103.

self-selecting and have an interest in art) are aesthetically inept in the sense of being incapable of receiving information about art in a suitably discerning fashion or exercising judgement in a manner that demonstrates an appreciation of the contingent nature of aesthetic value and its verbal transmission. In what remains of this article, I will endeavour to outline why elements of the forms of aesthetic impoverishment that contemporary theorists have begun to attribute to certain elements of institutionalised art access guidelines can be traced back to the ›bad faith‹ on which these guidelines appear to be predicated, while also indicating why the regulatory demarcation of art engagement as a hermeneutic-free zone seems predicated on a misguided conception of aesthetic experience.

Another notable feature of art access guidelines is a lack of specificity about their intended function. It is not clarified with any degree of precision, for example, either in Joel Snyder's audio description training manual,⁸⁴ nor in many of the extant institutional verbal description guidelines, whether the experiences afforded by compliance with these recommendations are intended to be formally educational, primarily sociological, aesthetic, or to serve a combination of these or other ends. Openness in relation to this issue is not necessarily regrettable. Whatever particular objectives are anticipated when verbal description training is delivered, one assumes that art access is facilitated with some form of aesthetic or experiential enrichment in mind, the realisation of which one would expect to be informed by a resolve to operationalise certain conditions for knowing and appreciating artworks as art. The wilful extraction of any semblance of subjectivity seems an unlikely condition of the realisation of a capacity for art appreciation, yet that is precisely the core edict upon which verbal description guidelines tend to be predicated. In place of sustained reflection on the modes of perception and forms of understanding entailed in art appreciation, those who devise and canvass verbal description guidelines offer little apart from the repetition of the brute sermonic mantra that describers should ›say what they see‹, accompanied, on occasion, by the supplementary directive that the describer should be the eyes, rather than the brain, of a gallery visitor with visual impairment. In this way, the architects of these guidelines behave as though they had somehow settled centuries of aesthetic debate without giving any indication that they have familiarised themselves with the sources of contention underpinning these complex deliberations. It seems likely, if not quite inconceivable, that this apparent lack of

84 Cf. Snyder: *The Visual Made Verbal*.

concern for the nature of aesthetic experience is unrelated to the aesthetic impoverishment identified by several contemporary critiques of institutional approaches to verbal description.

It would be admittedly difficult to mount a credible defence of gallery docents who conceive of their purview as incorporating responsibility for the emancipation of the gallery visitor from ignorance while ushering them into a state of cultural erudition through the cultivation of good taste while also applying correctives to the artwork's obliviousness to its own meaning. In the absence of a volunteering of any credible form of justificatory rationale, it remains unclear whether a perceived alignment between the figure of the gallery docent and these critical portraits of the cultural analyst might constitute the precise foundation of the suspicion that has prompted the formulators of verbal description guidelines to suppress interpretive discourse. My experience of working in the domain of art access suggests that the positing of such a performative coupling is extremely tenuous, and that gallery docents do not approach their roles in the grip of any preformulated designs on the aesthetic predilections of visitors with visual impairment. I have been repeatedly told by gallery visitors with visual impairments that art access sessions become most animated and engaging when differing opinions about the quality and significance of particular artworks are aired in ways that directly contravene verbal description guidelines.

The depletory impact of the objectivity imperative on approaches to art access

There is definitely something to be said for the maintenance of an objective approach to verbal description. The trouble, or at least part of the trouble, with the canvassing of such an approach by Joel Snyder and others is that they do not say it – or at least do not do so in a manner that is particularly persuasive.⁸⁵ Although Snyder's treatise on the issue is peppered with an obligatory array of isolated quotations from such celebrated thinkers as Ruskin, Goethe and Valery, there is little evidence that his a-contextual incorporation of a sporadic array of aphorised insights represents more than a superficial treatment of a long-debated and potentially vital issue. The proposition of objective modes of engagement and appraisal has certainly received a sufficient degree of critical attention since the introduction of aesthetics as a formal philosophical discipline in the eighteenth century to inform a compelling argument

85 Cf. *ibid.*

for a considered rationing of subjective insight within art access provision. But the directive that we predicate access provision on a largely unjustified belief, however much that belief might happen to lend itself to potential rationalisation, seems less than entirely reasonable or satisfactory.

The most direct challenge to the logic and feasibility of the ›objectivity imperative‹ relates to the obvious impracticality of deciding, in the first instance, which artworks to describe if a wide berth of subjectivity is to be vigilantly steered. Related responsibilities, such as discerning which components of a selected artwork to emphasise within description, or formulating accounts of the nature of the impression generated by the internal relationships pertaining between selected components, seem equally dependent on subjective insight. Even the most rudimentary of trawls through the history of aesthetic theory reveals an assortment of subsidiary forms of aesthetic impoverishment generated by the imposition of strictly objective descriptive parameters. These poorly conceived and largely unjustified prohibitive stipulations obstruct several channels of potential aesthetic exploration and collective discovery that would otherwise be a valuable characteristic of encounters between people with differing sensory configurations within art access ventures. In this way, the prohibition of subjectivity effectively disqualifies the differential iterations of aesthetic experience the promotion of which art access initiatives are presumably designed to facilitate. In their apparent resolve to prevent the inequitable imposition of sighted criteria on the engagement of individuals with visual impairment with works of visual art, the guidelines serve to preclude the emergence of distinctive features of a differential aesthetic by disbarring aesthetically oriented forms of discursive and experiential exchange. In this way, dogged insistence that access facilitation is strictly beholden to an objectivity mandate serves primarily to render innately relative features of aesthetic value a closed book rather than a portal of reciprocal aesthetic discovery.

The aesthetic detriment caused by the purposeful elimination of subjectivity from aesthetic engagement within an art access context extends to the removal of the encounter between the aesthetic sensibilities of fully-sighted gallery docent and visitor with visual impairment from opportunities for forms of inter-cultural transfer that may otherwise be ideally primed for the cultivation of creativity. Citing Gertrude Stein's professed belief that creative writers need to reside in two countries, for example, Angela Ka-ye Leung and colleagues suggest that increased exposure to multi-cultural experience is positively related to such features of creative performance as the generation of insights and ideas and the capacity to conceive of remote associations

that would be otherwise unlikely to occur.⁸⁶ Inter-cultural exposure was also found by these researchers to be positively related to the development of a tolerance for and capacity to assimilate unconventional forms of knowledge while expanding on creative ideas. Within the same study, the cultivation of these creative attributes was found to be contingent on an openness to foreign cultures found to prompt an imaginatively productive relaxation of instinctive determination to conclusively resolve existential concerns.

The conception of inter-cultural transfer underpinning the reflections presented here is informed by the work of a number of contemporary theorists. Laura Marks' (2008) appeal to the importance of factoring sense experience into elected modes of cultural analysis is a formative influence in this regard. If the notion of ›sensory culture‹ is entertained in alignment with Marks' compelling demarcation of that domain, and conceived as a decisive component of a differential aesthetic (Florence & Foster 2000),⁸⁷ the role of audio description as a portal of intercultural transfer becomes evident. According to Marks, the innate »affective dimension« of sensory experience serves as both the foundation of an »immanent epistemology« and as a vehicle for pluralistic conceptions and manifestations of beauty.⁸⁸ The account of cultural mediation volunteered by Mörsch and Chrusciel (n.d.)⁸⁹ and James Winchester's (2000, 2002)⁹⁰ reflections on the transmission of aesthetic value across cultural divisions also seem pertinent here. The former account presents a phenomenon which entails people receiving information about the arts, entering into an exchange about that information and reacting to it in ways that affirm, rather than problematize, difference. My personal experiences of access facilitation suggest that bilateral exploration of diverse partialities and

86 Cf. Angela Ka-Yee Leung/William W. Maddux, Adam D. Galinsky/Chi-yue Chiu: Multicultural Experience Enhances Creativity: The When and How, in: *American Psychologist* 63:3 (2008), pp. 169–181.

87 Penny Florence and Nicola Foster, eds.: *Differential Aesthetics: Art Practices, Philosophy & Feminist Understandings*. Aldershot, 2000.

88 Laura Marks: Thinking multisensory culture, in: Paragraph 31 (2) (2008), pp. 123–137, here p. 123.

89 Carmen Mörsch/Anna Chrusciel (eds.; for Pro Helvetia). *Time for Cultural Mediation*. Zurich: Institute for Art Education, Zurich University of the Arts (n.d.). Available at www.kultur-vermittlung.ch/zeit-fuer-vermittlung/download/pdf-e/TfCM_1.pdf (25.10.2024).

90 James J. Winchester: *Understanding Aesthetic Judgments Across Cultural Borders: Bell Hooks, Kant, and Cornel West and the Understanding of Aesthetic Judgments of Others*, in: *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XXXVIII (2000), pp. 499–525; James J. Winchester: *Aesthetics Across the Color Line: Why Nietzsche (Sometimes) Can't Sing the Blues*, Oxford, 2002.

predilections represent the precise juncture at which art access sessions come to life. To prohibit such exploration in the name of objectivity is to impoverish the richness and depth of the aesthetic experiences that gallery visits are capable of affording.

Winchester (2000, 2002) contends that aesthetic understanding across cultural divides requires unrelenting and sensitive attentiveness to features of the worlds and experiences from which distinctive sensibilities emerge. If heeded within the context of Marks' plea, Winchester's insight, in its apparent alignment with the optimistic side of the aesthetic testimony debate, prompts us to question the wisdom of considering cultural situatedness without also contemplating sensory situatedness. The differences that are likely to emerge between the aesthetic preferences of individuals with visual impairment and their fully sighted counterparts should not, as Winchester expresses it, be posited as an excuse for a lack of communication.⁹¹ Rather, were the fully sighted describer to share his/her experience of an artwork with a gallery visitor with visual impairment as sincerely and as entirely as possible, and then listen with all of the keenness, greenness and alertness of an apprentice when his/her counterpart reciprocates, the type of experiential impasse that verbal description guidelines seem designed to engender might be rewardingly negotiated to the considerable aesthetic benefit of both parties. The determined impressing on blind people of the irrelevance of the aesthetic predilections and partialities of their sighted counterparts seems an unlikely basis for the generation of the type of cross-cultural transaction advocated by Winchester. Such an approach seems embedded in scepticism, concerned with a needlessly depleted form of human interaction, and motivated by an unwarranted conviction that the fully sighted docent will somehow harbour wilful designs on the aesthetic predilections of gallery visitors with visual impairment. In addition to being predicated on a dubious conception of the nature of aesthetic experience, the deliberate purging of subjectivity from aesthetic encounters between fully and partially sighted participants in art access initiatives depletes opportunity for such collective inter-cultural fostering of creative approaches to the negotiation of any evaluative impasse that might be generated in the course of the collective engagement of individuals with differing sensory configurations in exhibited artworks. While fully-sighted access facilitators clearly need to remain vigilantly mindful of the aesthetic jeopardy that might be occasioned by the wilful imposition of exclusively visual crite-

91 Winchester: *Aesthetics Across the Color Line*, p. 9.

ria,⁹² operating on the assumption that aesthetic experience is an exclusively objective phenomenon seems an unlikely and inevitably counter-productive means of circumventing such ableist forms of aesthetic imperialism within an art access context.

The casualties of aesthetic experience generated by these guidelines are too extensive to be enumerated here. An indicative shortlist of ten issues whose pursuit might help to delineate the scope of the impoverishing impact of the prohibition of subjectivity from art access initiatives is presented below. As the objective here is to re-open the portals of inquiry that the objectivity imperative would appear to firmly close, these issues are formulated as open-ended questions rather than categorical indictments:

- 1) In what way is compulsion to proceed with verbal description as though artworks are bereft of such vital qualities as mood, attitude or tone, and to refrain from rendering the manifestation of these qualities discernible, compatible with mediation of a sense of art?
- 2) How is the mandated omission of insights into how a particular features of an artwork might lend themselves to appraisal reconcilable with the emergence of interactively generated insights into differential aesthetics?
- 3) In the absence of discursive facilitation of such forms of experiential exchange, how might we advance understanding about whether discrepancies in modes or quirks of aesthetic reception are primarily critical, affective, objective, etc in nature?
- 4) On what grounds are matters of aesthetic preference deemed to be irrelevant to art engagement?
- 5) How might one refute the claim that imposing a blanket veto on subjectivity precludes equitable exploration of dependent, emergent and tertiary qualities of artworks and mutually rewarding discussion of whether differences in perceived aesthetic value might be attributable to the artwork and/or the beholder?
- 6) When artworks are reduced to the status of quotidian objects purposively bereft of impression, how might enlivening insights emerge into distinctive features of the ways in which artworks are perceived and responded to by people with and without visual impairment?
- 7) In instances where the primary thematic content of a work stems from a congruence or incongruence of subject and design or form and content,

92 Cf. Feeney: A Modest Defence.

how is this to be relayed when description is volunteered in the grip of a studied absence of subjectively evaluative insight?

- 8) If, as is widely believed to be the case, the aesthetic unity underpinning the impressions that paintings register on the understanding of their beholders entails more than the sum of the constituent elements of these paintings, how can the impact of painting be captured or communicated through a sequence of objective descriptive accounts of these components in isolation from one another?
- 9) How might a semblance of creativity be salvaged within art engagement processes if description is confined to the relaying of objectively verifiable information?
- 10) If subjectivity is outlawed within the domain of art access, how are fully sighted docents expected to learn from the experiences and preferences of gallery visitors with visual impairment?

Beauty on Trust

Informed reflection on the nature of the aesthetic experiences afforded by art engagement does not constitute the only reason to harbour misgivings about the repeated decree that subjectivity is to be stringently avoided when describing works of visual art for people with visual impairment. The relational nature of access provision constitutes equally compelling grounds for scepticism in relation to the logic and feasibility of this command. Contemplating verbal description in terms of the credibility of aesthetic testimony raises the issue of trust or ›good faith‹ as it pertains to the relationship that develops between the describer and the gallery visitor in art access scenarios. While this is clearly not the place to embark on an expansive exegesis on the richly researched phenomenon of trust, it is worth noting that many of the existing approaches to this concept emphasise both its interplay with risk perception and the innately subjective nature of the interface between these entities. Gambetta, for example, discusses trust in terms of subjective probability, asserting that »[w]hen we say we trust someone or that someone is trustworthy, we implicitly mean that the probability he will perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental to us is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him«. ⁹³ When

93 Diego Gambetta: Can we trust?, in: Gambetta, Diego (Ed.): Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations, New York 1988, pp. 212–237, here: p. 217.

considered in relation to a probabilistic conception of trust, risk – discussed by Fischhoff,⁹⁴ Luhmann⁹⁵ and others in terms of »calculated probabilities under conditions of uncertainty« (Das and Teng)⁹⁶ and its perceived role within an art access context suggests itself as a possible motive for the acute apprehension generated by subjectivity within an art access context.

Das and Teng outline the theoretical consensus that trust is »a perception about others in relation to oneself«,⁹⁷ describing how trust is earned by the trustee by virtue of demonstrations of characteristics such as responsibility, competence, goodwill and judgment that incite the confidence of the trusting party. Subjective trust therefore emerges as a feature of art access in the guise of the visitor's appraisal of the likelihood that a gallery docent might be inclined to act in any way other than one which serves his/her best interests. When considered in this context, regulatory insistence that art access should be purged of any semblance of subjectivity deprives gallery visitors with visual impairment of opportunities to make independent judgments about how any evaluative insights that might be volunteered by a fully-sighted describer might be optimally received, about the degree to which the describer should be trusted, and about whether subjecting oneself to the vagaries of the aesthetic preferences of a fully-sighted describer might constitute a risk that is worth taking. By depriving gallery visitors of self-determination in relation to judgments of risk and trust in terms of the anticipation of favourable or unfavourable hermeneutic outcomes, and of opportunities for discussion of how such a distinction might manifest in relation to aesthetic experience, the architects of verbal description guidelines are impoverishing the aesthetic experience that art engagement is capable of yielding in at least two ways. Their dubiously substantiated aesthetic strictures reduce the artefact to object while their presumptuous resolve to decide on behalf of gallery visitors with visual impairments that docents are not to be trusted to handle aesthetic value responsibly deprives these visitors of aesthetic agency by discounting their capacity for aesthetic discernment. In this way, verbal description guidelines contribute to a wider social tendency towards an ultimately inhibiting instinct

94 Cf. Baruch Fischhoff: *Managing Risk Perceptions*, in: *Issues in Science and Technology* 2:1 (1985), pp. 83–96.

95 Cf. Niklas Luhmann: *Risk: A Sociological Theory*, New York 1993.

96 T. K. Das/ Bing-Sheng Teng: *The Risk-Based View of Trust: A Conceptual Framework*, in: *Journal of Business and Psychology* 19:1 (2004), pp. 85–116, here: p. 98.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 95/96.

towards over-protectiveness with which many disabled people are all-too-familiar.

From a hermeneutics of suspicion to a suspicion of hermeneutics

Another dubious feature of widespread approaches to verbal description is the tendency of guidelines to collapse the distinction between a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion into what presents as an uncannily visceral suspicion of hermeneutics. It would be understandable were the wariness of interpretation that has been persuasively articulated by several cultural theorists in exasperated response to postmodern critical tendencies to command a certain empathy among architects of verbal description guidelines. The suspicion that appears to underpin their approach of the authorities who have assumed responsibility for the regulation of art access, however, bears scant indication of having been influenced by these critical debates. It is conceivable, for example, that Susan Sontag's celebrated take on the impoverishing and depleting impact of interpretation on the world, for example, her treatment of interpretation as the revenge of the intellect upon art, and her appeal to the need to replace hermeneutical exegesis with an erotics of art, might have been brought into service to support an argument that interpretation should be beyond the brief of a verbal describer.⁹⁸ Rita Felski's reworking of Sontag's misgivings might also have been appealed to as a point of supportive reference. Drawing most fundamentally on Paul Ricoeur's concept of a hermeneutics of suspicion, Felski's misgivings about contemporary cultural analysis highlight several ways in which the distrustful nature of contemporary approaches to critical interpretation, born of an ostensibly suspicious or resentful attitude towards creative expression, has an impoverishing impact on art engagement.⁹⁹ Equally intolerant of ambiguity and mystery, the role assumed by the contemporary critic, as Felski sees it, is as the ultimate arbiter of aesthetic axiology, a figure of authority who knows an artwork more intimately than it can possibly know itself. The task undertaken by these self-appointed cultural connoisseurs is to demystify an artwork by resolving for

98 Cf. Susan Sontag: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York 1966.

99 Cf. Rita Felski: *After Suspicion*, in: *Profession* 1 (2009), pp. 28–35; Rita Felski: *Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*, in: *M/C Journal* 15:1 (2011a). doi.org/10.5204/mcj.431 (3.8.2024); Rita Felski: *Suspicious Minds*, in: *Poetics Today* 32.2 (2011b), pp. 215–234; Rita Felski: *The Limits of Critique*, Chicago 2015.

the uninitiated its internal and often unwitting contradictions and disclosing its guilefully cloaked truths in the manner, as Terry Eagleton expresses it, of a »seasoned cop browbeating a shifty suspect«. ¹⁰⁰

It would be admittedly difficult to mount a credible defence of gallery docents who conceive of their purview as incorporating responsibility for the emancipation of the gallery visitor from ignorance while ushering them into a state of cultural erudition through the cultivation of good taste while also applying correctives to the artwork's obliviousness to its own meaning. In the absence of a volunteering of any credible form of justificatory rationale, it remains unclear whether a perceived alignment between the figure of the gallery docent and these critical portraits of the cultural analyst might constitute the precise foundation of the suspicion that has prompted the formulators of verbal description guidelines to suppress interpretive discourse. My experience of working in the domain of art access suggests that the positing of such a performative coupling is extremely tenuous, and that gallery docents do not approach their roles in the grip of any preformulated designs on the aesthetic predilections of visitors with visual impairment.

The folly of requirements to purge art access facilitation of any semblance of interpretation and of all perspectives that are other than entirely objective can be revealed by contemplating these directives in the context of Barbara Herrnstein Smith's treatment of the inescapable contingency of aesthetic value. ¹⁰¹ In the course of her reflections on this issue, a number of conditions under which certain potential meanings and values of artworks become more or less realisable are delineated. Primarily addressing literary works in a way that seems applicable to artworks more generally, Herrnstein Smith suggests that interpretation of a work is an inextricable component of our experience of it, and that hermeneutics and evaluation are two »interloping« circles. ¹⁰² Presenting experience and interpretation as mutually dependent components of the »psychological set« of our encounters with artworks, she contends that the nature of art is such that our assumptions, expectations, capacities and interests cannot be extricated from our experiences of art. In this way, experience, interpretation and evaluation cause and justify themselves and one

100 Terry Eagleton: Not just anybody, in: London Review of Books 39:1 (2017). www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n01/terry-eagleton/not-just-anybody (30.7.2024).

101 Barbara Herrnstein Smith: Fixed Marks and Variable Constancies: A Parable of Literary Value, in: Poetics Today 1:1/2 (1979). Special Issue – Literature, Interpretation, Communication, pp. 7–22; Barbara Herrnstein Smith: Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory, Cambridge 1991.

102 Herrnstein Smith: Fixed Marks, p. 16.

another. The pertinence of Herrnstein Smith's treatment of these issues to the rationale underpinning verbal description guidelines become most apparent when she attests:

While these circles are no doubt logically vicious or at least epistemologically compromising, they are also ... both psychologically inevitable and experientially benign. Undue distress at their philosophic status coupled with a failure to appreciate their inevitability will produce misguided and futile attempts to escape from them, as reflected in the familiar searches for »true« or objective value and for uniquely »correct« interpretations or determinate meanings. There is, however, no way out of these circles for the individual reader: only the recognition of their existence and, of course, the pleasure and interest of the particular experiences they yield – and, for the theorist, the possibility of describing and explaining the dynamics of their interrelation.¹⁰³

Herrnstein Smith prefers to discuss aesthetic experience in relation to its relativity, contingency or variability, rather than in relation to the concept of subjectivity which appears to strike such terror in the hearts of those who assume responsibility for devising guidelines for verbal description. Her preference is informed by a critical tendency whereby fixation on subjectivity firmly closes doors of inquiry rather than opening them. She accounts for her weariness of the history of concern for subjectivity within aesthetic contexts in terms of the epistemological and experiential stalemates to which the pursuit of such concern inevitably leads. Critical consensus about subjectivity invariably assumes one of two forms – either the blanket contention that individual taste is indisputable or the misguided conviction that there exists a converse to subjective value – an objective value that must somehow be unearthed by those with the appropriate aesthetic expertise. Within the context of art engagement, Herrnstein Smith believes the concept of objectivity to be a vacuous one, although she is at pains to emphasise that the contention that aesthetic value is entirely dictated by the whims and predilections of individual subjects is not the logical corollary of this belief.

Granting to these reflections the degree of extended reflection they merit would entail positioning existing verbal description guidelines within an expansive framework of aesthetic axiology of a scale that is unfeasible here. In place of such a substantial project, I suggest here only that, provided it is undertaken as part of an equitable experiential exchange,¹⁰⁴ the incorporation of insights that are not entirely objective within the verbal transmission of

103 *Ibid.*, p. 17,

104 Cf. Feeney: *A Modest Defence*.

information about works of visual art is not the calamity that Joel Snyder and other advocates of an exclusively dispassionate approach to description appear to take it to be. I would suggest, on the contrary, that the affordance of mutually enriching experiences of art engagement to fully and partially sighted participants in access initiatives is contingent on a creative transgression of the objectivity-fixated regulations outlined in verbal description guidelines. Such a transgression can be accommodated by displacing the suspicion of hermeneutics that appears to underpin access guidelines by a more trusting regulatory disposition.

Concluding reflections

Autarchic determinations of apposite distinctions between forms of art engagement that can be legitimately pursued from those deemed to lie unequivocally out of bounds seem a dubious basis for the facilitation of absorbing aesthetic experience within a gallery environment. The imposition of a wholesale injunction against subjectivity, combined with the decree that any aesthetic elements that the entity being described may possess must remain unspoken, appear to be measures designed to withhold any sense that the entity being described is a humanly fashioned artefact that has amongst its characteristics a capacity to occasion in interested percipients a degree of aesthetic experience. On these grounds, it might be argued that verbal description guidelines can, as a potentially debilitating form of aesthetic gatekeeping, be added to a substantial list of normalising myths about aesthetic experience that have historically impeded or delegitimised the emergence of a differential aesthetic amongst individuals with visual impairment.¹⁰⁵ For all of Joel Snyder's denunciation of the verbal transmission of subjective interpretations of aesthetic value, nowhere in his various pontifications on the subject does one encounter a persuasive argument that the prohibition of such practice is either the logical or the optimum practical corollary of any belief one might be inclined to invest in the dictum that no visual rendering of creative expression that can be described with exhaustive precision warrants the denotation of beauty.

For all of their canvassing of disinterest, the tendency of the architects of description guidelines appear to ride slipshod over a rich history of aesthetic debate about such issues as perception, attitude, gratification, judgement, experience, justice, opportunity, skills, understanding, value, wealth and welfare

105 Cf. Feeney: *Toward an Aesthetics of Blindness*.

in a way that appears to have been designed precisely with the promotion and nurturing of their own interests in mind. Snyder's dismissal of Josh Miele's attempt to democratise the domain of access provision¹⁰⁶ seems born of an anxiety about the potentially catastrophic consequences for an industry that feeds on the purposeful screening behind a paywall – that can be permeated only by individuals who are prepared to purchase a book or attend a prohibitively expensive training course – of resources designed to initiate these paying customers in the mastery of the only access-facilitation interventions that Snyder deems to be acceptable. A minority of authors on aesthetic testimony have suggested that there is reason to be optimistic about the human capacity to learn from one another about beauty.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of whether one shares the enthusiasm of these authors in relation to the feasibility of the verbal transmission of aesthetic qualities, a defence of the incorporation of evaluative elements within the verbal description of artworks might be persuasively developed in relation to the twofold compulsion to circumvent the double standards underpinning the art access industry while avoiding the unjustified embedding of art access in a groundless and distinctly unhelpful suspicion of interpretation. Whether such practice is discussed in terms of subjectivity or relativity, prevailing insistence that art description should essentially be a hermeneutic-free zone can be countered by more compelling and research-informed appeals to the inextricable fusion of experience, interpretation and evaluation within the 'psychological set' of art engagement.

An interdisciplinary fusion of histories of imaginative renderings of visual impairment and aesthetic theory illustrates the pertinence to the aesthetic experiences of people with visual impairment of such entities as notions of (un)trustworthiness, the acquaintance principle and the asymmetry thesis. If re-framed in a more considered and critically informed manner, the verbal description guidelines scrutinized above might be presented as an imaginative hermeneutic process of ›de-arting‹ in order to facilitate a subsequent ›re-arting‹ after a provisional reduction of artefacts to a series of verbal propositions. While such an approach might represent an intriguing attempt to circumvent potential for the dominant imposition of the predilections of a describer on the recipient of a description, the array of aesthetic consequences inherent in such a strategy warrants much deeper and more comprehensive reflection than appears to have been afforded by the generators of these prescriptive standards of inclusive practice. Factoring the diverse perspectives incorp-

106 Cf. Kleege: *More than Meets the Eye*.

107 Cf. McKinnon: *How to be an Optimist*; Robson: *Aesthetic Testimony*.

orated within the history of the aesthetic testimony debate represents one way in which we might optimize the likelihood that these consequences might be acknowledged and contended with in considered and creative ways that are more dispositionally aligned than existing guidelines with the imaginative sensibility that underpins artistic expression.

In the preceding reflections I have outlined a richly complex history of aesthetic debate with a delineative nonchalance that admittedly belies the exasperation I expressed at the apparent indifference towards this history betrayed by those who have taken it upon themselves to regulate the domain of verbal description. Their inescapable imprecision notwithstanding, the ultimate objective of these reflections has been less to generate a definitive account of this history, than to suggest that this history needs to be reckoned with, less to conclusively resolve the debate about the credibility of claims that words are entirely capable of doing justice to beauty, than to suggest that the domain of art access would be enriched were verbal describers, whatever beliefs they might happen to harbour in relation to this dispute, were to volunteer their small contribution to the facilitation of an engaging gallery experience as provisional agents of the optimistic faction of the aesthetic testimony debate. It is only once the exploratory reticence of prevalent verbal description guidelines has been displaced by the aesthetic enthusiasm of this position that fully sighted access facilitators can truly apprentice themselves to the defiantly subjective expertise of gallery visitors with visual impairment in ways that can begin to affirm anything other than a fully sighted aesthetic and make tentative inroads into the vital task of challenging the experiential power imbalances that have historically characterised the domain of art access.

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