

On the Uncanny Subjectivity of Art

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Abstract

A critical phenomenology is paired with qualitative data in order to understand the character of subjective experiences of uncanniness through the encounter with art. We are confronted by art as the beings we have been, without recourse to the use of art as a way in which our beings might concretely improve themselves, either through rewriting themselves as part of the larger world or by giving ourselves a dedicated auto-history. It is this feeling of insubstantiality, borne on the currents which move us away from all solid projects or monuments, that disconcerts us the most. The experience of this non-presence in art uncovers the absence of presence in being and world. We have been absented from ourselves in some ethically culpable manner, and to be fully present as beings who live on in the face of death, is to take into an interiority of being the Nothing which stands as our alterity.

Keywords: uncanny, art, subjectivity, being, Nothing, anxiety.

Art does not act on the authority of imagining, because it presents its meaning within the sensuous and dispenses with seeking beyond the given (Dufrenne 1973, 205).

Art often appears otherworldly. Its vision seems not of this reality, but of something beyond. Its guide is occlusive, even deliberately coy. What it sees it sees for us, but does it let us observe the entirety of its truth? Vision is itself an attempt at revelation outside of the limits of sight, and can come across to us as having its own form of dogmatism which ironically limits our ability to see its virtues. But at the same time the

naked sword of vision cuts through the stuff of this world, and stands alone on the horizon it has alone created.

One of the insights the vision of art presents to us is a fuller understanding of the moment of this world's motion. It is well known that certain works freeze or capture such moments – the painting of scenes as tableaux, the sculpture as pose, the musical work as the expression of a single emotion untrammelled by distraction – but beyond these more transparent and referential examples, there is also the moment of the world's being which is more rarely related to our being in the world as it is. Indeed, this kind of vision often suggests to us that there is either more to life than we usually give it credit for, or that there is extant, contiguous but not overlapping with it, another life, qualitatively different, and to which access is restricted. The role of art in the lives of worldly persons takes on a function similar to species of religion. That our world is richer than its mundane life suggests is kindred with the world extending soteriologies of Western belief systems such as Islam and Christianity. The next world is linked to this one as its ideal extension, and one must perform the arts of humanity on earth to move beyond their sullied place and fallen state. That our world may be overcome in its entirety is kindred with the world denying transcendentalities of the Eastern systems, such as Buddhism. The next world may be attained only by vanquishing the present human world from one's spirit and vision. Either way, we are involved in an attempt to improve ourselves, to make ourselves more beautiful. Nazism was hardly the first incarnation that the world may be made a better place through the violence of expurgative death, although it was the first to link this idea specifically with art and thus make it into both an aesthetics and an ideology. The risk that may then immediately be understood when one experiences art as something possessing *Unheimlichkeit* is that it proffers to special persons the seer of its vision. In other words, akin to religious revelation, the ones who undergo the transformative rite of passage of visionary art might well think that they have been specifically chosen for such an increase in being because they already have some extensive and expansive version of humanity bred into them.¹ If this breeding is

associated with anything other than art itself, the consequences of this belief will be disastrous for all humanity. This is the truest lesson of the uncanny in art.

With art, however, we do not need to decide whether or not it is the case that the mundane world needs be overcome or merely extended. Art gives us the option of continuing to live in the world, our being itself both overcome and extended, as in the hermeneutic experience. The transformational quality of the aesthetic encounter is enough to push us on to a new version of ourselves, as well as having the ability to preserve what it is already about us that will serve as the ground for the growth of the new. The seeds, the earth, the water and the sun are contained within the aesthetic experience. What the character of this new species of life will be is of course shaped by many other things, but nowhere else, it seems, do we find the confluence of the ingredients of new life more intensely focused than in the presentiment of art.

The uncanny of art's presence in the world reminds us, perhaps more than anything else, of its usual absence in our lives. We may feel remorse or regret at this news, for knowledge about the absence of the 'larger truth' is itself not usually taken as good news. But this simple relation of presence and absence does not fully describe the effect of art's uncanniness. Indeed, the oddly circumspect but also invasive and trembling presence of that very absence – we now know it to be true that we have been absented by the presence of Being, that upon our stage has trod only beings like ourselves, and those too much like ourselves have been our interlocutors – is rather better described as 'non-presence', a kind of *parousia*. There is something missing from both our vision and from our consciousness. Yet we do not immediately comprehend just exactly what this absence signifies regarding its substance. 'What is the matter?' is a common enough query asked by our compatriots when they have observed in us the charge of the uncanny, but it is just this kind of question that lacks the definitive and substantial response of referentiality. We are, in fact, not at all sure what all this was about, or what has just transpired. We do know, however, that we have been altered, that our substance was originally lacking and it was this

absence of the stuff of truth or of beauty, the good or the spirit etc. that put us 'at risk' for the encounter with plenitude, sometimes playful and sometimes playing. This knowledge itself has its own trembling uncanniness about it, or better, it is our understanding of ourselves as part of the general absence of our ideals in both our lives and in the world that stuns us with the resonance of the uncanny, as it often takes some time after such experiences to 'shake them off,' as it were.

The analysis of art through a phenomenology of the uncanny must proceed from this fact alone: *that the experience of non-presence uncovers the absence of presence in being and world.* There are categories of what was 'supposed' to be present, and what was supposedly present within these aesthetic encounters, as we will see below. But whatever we may make of what we are missing – have we been morally culpable, are we living in ugliness or self-deprecation, do we know only other versions of ourselves as other persons, are we simply 'uncultured' and ignorant? – it is the radicality of the new 'knowingness' that the presentiment of art makes fully present to us that we must confront. Simply put, we are confronted by art as the beings we have been, without recourse to the use of art as a way in which our beings might concretely improve themselves, either through rewriting themselves as part of the larger world or by giving ourselves a dedicated auto-history. It is this feeling of insubstantiality, borne on the currents which whisk us away from all solid projects or monuments, that disconcerts us the most. We have been shown up to be less than we had thought in a powerful way, but we are not at all sure how to proceed with remedying the situation, and we often end by questioning the value or the relevance of the uncanny, just as culturally we have at length begun to question the once-presumed existence of the otherworldly itself.

The Nature and Effect of Aesthetic Uncanniness

But what is the nature and effect of aesthetic uncanniness? We can speak of it in a number of ways: "The poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche..." (Bachelard 1964, xi). It is the 'opposite of causality,' for "In this

reverberation, the poetic image will have a sonority of being. The poet speaks on the threshold of being." (Bachelard 1964, xiii) Anything irruptive to the general run of living on – which in itself can be said to consist of everything sudden in an auto-history of self-sacrifice – can appear as uncanny, which, after all, has its base meaning in the experience of the abnormative. No other meaning need originally be ascribed to what is deviant other than a transgression which is part of the norm and not at all alien to it. At the same time, we are seldom content to leave it there. The cliquish and obfuscatory attempts of Romantic period occultists, who tell us that 'there are things you should not know' remind us of nothing more than the early Pythagoreans, protecting the sacred mysteries of the square root of two or other 'irrational' numbers. This kind of defense of the would-be uncanny has no merit. No, the uncanniness of human experience, though rare when compared with the wide-awake-everydayness of the mundane, nevertheless has something profound to speak to us about concerning what it means to be fully human, and art attests to this dimension of being which, for a moment, coincides with the Being of beings in the world.

If Freud noted that within art there was something alive and sonorous beyond the formal content as well as the form of media of the work (cf. Horowitz 2001, 119ff), and at the same time having its source of action not in our own normative observation of the work of art – one says to oneself, 'I am in a gallery to see art,' etc. – then we might also describe this dimension of being as being able to be at the threshold of itself. That same liminal space which we have heard the poet speak of is the step into the house of aesthetic experience: "This is the uncanniness of art that needs interpretation by a psychical work that is never done. It is, we might say, the traumatic kernel of historical knowledge." (Horowitz 2001, 119ff) It is troublesome because it constitutes precisely an interruption of the flow of living on, but not one critical enough to be fatal to the threat of being itself. Though it is a "...minor crisis, this crisis on the simple level of a new image, contains the entire paradox of a phenomenology of the imagination, which is: how can an image, at times very unusual, appear to be a

concentration of the entire psyche?" (Bachelard 1964, xiv). What power does it have to break through the normative run, and "...react on other minds and in other hearts, despite all the barriers of common sense, all the disciplined schools of thought, content in their immobility?" (Bachelard 1964, xv). The answer appears to lie within the question. It is the very immobility, not of thinking or of thought itself, but of discourse and paradigm, either socialized as the culture or learned as a higher culture, that blockades the entrance to any liminal space. We are *too* human in our discourses, in the sense that the fully socialized human being is a co-conspirator employed at the local social prison. If we are to become as well humane, then we must pay heed to what unsettles the order of social reality, and presents a reality that human science must also interpret, but that the rest of us can ignore if we wish: "This prehuman way of seeing things is the painter's way. More completely than lights, shadows, and reflections, the mirror image anticipates within things, the labor of vision." (Merleau-Ponty 1964 b, 168) It is this interiority of art that lends itself to our perception that the uncanny is something occluded, only partially exposed in the aesthetic encounter, alluded to, but included within our conscious horizon as one glimpses the loom of a distant ship through the binoculars when looking out to sea. But it is not art that occludes. The hiddenness of our beings is hidden within us, and is brought into the lighted space of being through the aesthesia of encounters with works of art. By bringing into our present the presence of what is 'more than us', art heralds the sacred spheres of what must be general, and not specific, to humanity: "Anguish arises when the anxious individual is not himself stretched tight by the feeling of superabundance. This is precisely what evinces the isolated, individual character of anguish." (Bataille 1988, 38-9) This 'state of grace', opposed to the semi-conscious anesthesia of living on, confers upon us not a soteriological privilege – as was assumed in the pre-modern spaces of the sacred associated with religion and all of the works of art that had as their purpose the increase of only Being – but the grace through which we can endure the struggles of daily life.

We can proceed from events which are apparently immediate and transparent: "What a gesture expresses is 'there' in the gesture itself. A gesture is something wholly corporeal and wholly spiritual at the same time. The gesture reveals no inner meaning behind itself. The whole being of the gesture lies in what it says." (Gadamer 1986, 79) We can proceed here as social beings as if we know the whole story. This is, in base and relatively anonymous form, how social relations operate. We stereotype the other as a category. We do not need to know them as a person. We do the same for social interaction, hardly heeding the depths of wellspring for each and every person's behaviors, though a detailed genealogy would reveal a more authentic pattern to social life. The pragmatics of living on dictate these courses to us, and, akin to the discourses, we are content to leave well enough alone. It is enough of a challenge, admittedly, for each one of us to face the uncanny ability of life to waylay the 'best laid of plans.' So a phenomenology of the aesthetics of being in the world need not be a harbinger of a homiletic. Like Weberian science, this new knowledge of self-understanding which we seek through art can be taken as a fresh perspective. It may indeed change our lives so that our reflections match our experiences – so that thoughts catch up with truths – but it alone cannot make the difficult decisions for us. This other level, where reflection must always and already become self-reflection, imposes itself upon us when we consider that there is in fact nothing so transparent about even mundane social reality: "At the same time every gesture is also opaque in an enigmatic fashion. It is a mystery that holds back as much as it reveals. For what the gesture reveals is the being of meaning rather than the knowledge of meaning." (Gadamer 1986, 79) It is in fact the depth of social interaction in everyday reality that sets the stage for the profundity of art, for we are very often introduced for the first time to the subtlety of the former only through the latter. Unlike science, however, our subjective encounter with the work of art does not provide as sure a guarantor of predictive certainty. Its presence must rest within our own, and we may well include it as part of the decision-making that must occur in ethical spheres of social action. Just because the nature of the work of culture is given a

kind of pre-giveness through art should not suggest that this clarity is fully portable across social spheres, say, from that aesthetic to that ethical, *pace* Wittgenstein's suggestive remark. If it is true that in the realm of artistic expression "...there is no need for a code or convention of interpretation; the meaning is as inherent in immediate experience as is that of a flower garden" (Dewey 1980, 83), then it is equally true that the flowers in that garden have been socially arranged – the very term garden refers to such a construct – and that implies directly that there must be an *a priori* and rather formal code by which we can understand the experience to be an immediate one, and not one of or requiring further reflection. This is all too similar to the surface debate between empiricism and rationalism, where Humean experience, the source of all knowledge, is questioned along the lines of the nature of human experience: 'What must there be in order to have an experience (at all)?' a Kantian might ask. If construct validities like 'motion' and 'body' are part of the response to such a query, then such universal forestructures of consciousness might well be taken for a part of nature, or even part of the non-purposive *telos* of such a nature: "Whatever is alive has its source of movement within itself and has the form of self-movement. Now play appears as a self-movement that does not pursue any particular end or purpose so much as movement *as* movement, exhibiting so to speak a phenomenon of excess, of living self-representation. And in fact that is just what we perceive in nature..." (Gadamer 1986, 23). Even such a phenomenon has its uncanniness rooted in the fact that we expect some source of movement that could be demonstrated to be external to the object or to the organism. How is it that we even have a consciousness, let alone a reflective and duplicative one? How is it that the movement of beings corresponds to that of the nature of Being? Without the metaphysics of an idealism which suggests form regulates and 'predates' both appearance and content, an understanding that cannot in itself explain the concept of form or the cosmogony of the prime mover other than that of a regressive creation, one must look for the apparently unlikely and strangely present non-presence of being within one's own perception. Not an anthropism, not a solipsism, but a

recognizance that one is also part of the nature of being even as one rescues the instrumentation of beings by becoming alert to this presence: "...this sense is immanent in the sensuous being its very organization. The sensuous is given first and sense is regulated by it." (Dufrenne 1973, 12) Immanence is a characteristic of the sacred as well as of the irruptive. In such a sense as that phenomenological, immanence is the character of what cannot be characterized merely as sense, or through the sensate structure of consciousness. Ritual, vision, the solidarity of orison, the glossalalia, or the 'speaking in tongues' of diverse tensions come to find a home in the succor of the hypostasized community. All these we search for in art. But they confront us most precisely with the sudden presence of the uncanny that is already within the relationship between art and its public. Art confronts the individuated observer and forces him to consider becoming a double; both as the other in the work, but also as another observer who also encounters the same work Art serves the hypostatic purpose of ritual for a society that is suspicious of the politics and normative social control of ritual: "A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. This fact, I think, is the explanation of that feeling of exquisite intelligibility and clarity we have in the presence of an object that is experienced with aesthetic intensity. It explains also the religious feeling that accompanies intense esthetic perception." (Dewey 1980, 195) Yet just because we have the feeling of intensity does not mean we have any formal clarity as to what exactly is possessing us. Indeed, it is this 'oceanic feeling' that Freud famously disdains that contains all of the vastness of the cosmos, yet also all of the vagueness that is echoed in reflection with others about the event after it has been experienced. Persons communicate 'as if' what they knew was the same thing, or as if their experiences of it generated the same feelings and meaning for them. All of this, in sober second light or apart from the group, or without the markers of art itself, seems quite unlikely, even romantic. So we are left with the sense that what has occurred has indeed done so at the expense of full and certain knowledge of it, and could have only occurred in this manner, whatever

rationalizations may be supplied later on. We must come to the conclusion that "Something in art must resist coming to conceptual clarity despite sustained reflection on it, and so art must be the bearer, not just of instance of the uncanny, but of the dynamic of uncanniness itself." (Horowitz 2001, 126-7) Certainly in modernity, art often ironically appears as the most normative experiential space in which to go searching for the abnormative. Indeed, this serious journey can be co-opted by fetish and market, as well as rationalized settings of observation as in the Louvre or the Vatican, where guided tours take the place of self-reflection. Because these spaces where art is archived, the modern reliquaries of the sacred objects, are as such socially sanctioned spaces of deviance and subjectivity, it is possible that they ultimately defeat the very thrust of the uncanny with the parry of the hyper-rational.

Yet the sensibility of such places should not impinge on the things that they house and sanctify. Their utter spatiality is itself a sign that one needs some room to negotiate new chambers of the heart of beings. Present fullness demands of us that we also fully attend to the present in which we encounter the gift of hypostasized consciousness. The task falls to us more fully when we attempt to link the uncanny with the context in which it apparently occurred: "It is impossible to understand perception as the imputation of a certain significance to certain sensible signs, since the most immediate sensible texture of these signs cannot be described without referring to the object they signify." (Merleau-Ponty 1964 a, 51) Our very objection to the uncanny – in the form of the *ungeheuer* of alienated being, of homesickness or discomfort that exclaims within us that we wish to return to what we know, or can know – is the first and necessary part of action directed toward the object or the work of art that brings it into our field of sensibility. We know first and foremost that it is strange to us, but even this zero degree of experience allows all further ones to evolve. What the ends are include a new knowledge that part of our very selves was also strange to us, and that part of ourselves may well be strange to others. With the uncanny, the hermeneutics of existence is radically delineated. We must face ourselves as if we know not who we face, nor who must do the facing. In this

estrangement of the uncanny we are made unfamiliar to what we have been. This is essentially the characteristic of all hermeneutic experience, such as that it at first overcomes prior prejudice by ignoring it, by pretending that it did not exist. In this way, the uncanny short-circuits our expectations, both of our own reactions and of what art might or should be like. It forces us to scramble in front of it, its play is unforeseen, and we have no immediate defense against it. As with the once unfamiliar *topos* of modernist painting, "We must make an active contribution of our own and make an effort to synthesize the outlines of the various planes as they appear on the canvas. Only then, perhaps, can we be seized and uplifted by the profound harmony and rightness of a work, in the same way as readily happened in earlier times on the basis of pictorial content common to all." (Gadamer 1986, 8) If in agrarian societies there was an aesthetic solidarity more mechanical than in our own, it was still the narrative that images portrayed – as if the momentary morality of this or that symbolic juxtaposition, the Knight and Death, or St. Jerome and the Lion, etc. – was at once part of a larger ongoing narrative but also, and more importantly, could leap out of such a syntagmatic chain of signifiers and become the most salient of significant symbols. The uncanniness of pre-modern art assumes one knows the story well, and thus is prepared in a very different sense for a sudden vision or revelatory inspiration that might occur in its presence. Yet further back, the great pilgrimages of the medieval period attested to the profound desire on the part of human beings to indeed encounter aesthesis in the form of itself as a sacred subspecific. Art in the service of an organized belief system was able, through the experience of its awesome vaults and spires, to transcend the mere norms of ritual and worship which also took place in the same spaces and within the gaze of the same works of art. Rituals of all kinds being as well theater, need their stages, props, scripts and actors. But it is the setting that backdrops and allows the scene to transport us outside of the mundane spheres of social life which have their contrasting settings. At the same time, the sacred is only understandable as something from within which the uncanny may present itself if

we do not completely forget the social scenery where such events occur much more rarely: "The builder, then, does not set apart and enclose a void, but instead a certain dwelling place of forms, and, in working on space, he models it, within and without, like a sculptor." (Focillon 1989, 76) Insofar as architecture is akin to the organ of musical instruments in its relations to other art media, the architect is the composer of spaces, spaces through which time is diverted in its regular flow in calculated ways. There is a damming up of the tensions between past and present, and thus a more intense character of life can be presented there. We are more aware of our connections with the tradition and with the dead in these places than in any others. "He is a geometrician in the drafting of a plan, a mechanic in the assembling of a structure, a painter in the distribution of visual effects and a sculptor in the treatment of masses." (Focillon 1989, 76) When we, at long last, weary of the regularity of the flow of temporal life and its necessary routines, enter both into and unto such a space, we are ourselves opened up by its architecture. We become more intimate with its surroundings in the same way that we become greater adepts and acolytes regarding self-understanding. Other humans created this place, but once created its voice is that of both their collective labors but as well, holds within its chorus a new voice, far older, of the tradition and what may lie beyond it. We are emptied of our quotidian cares, we are shaken from our ennui, we are uplifted from our marginality, and we are arrested in our imagination. We are presented with the words of life writ large, with a textuality as ancient as the social contract, though in a grandiose and static form: "The reader of the Text may be compared to someone at loose end (someone slackened off from any imaginary); this passable empty subject strolls – it is what happened to the author of these lines, then it was that he had a vivid idea of the Text – on the side of a valley..." (Barthes 1977, 159). Here, then, is a recipe for the abiding taste of the other-world.

The Unsettling Force of the Uncanny

But the notion of the threshold for which art is the handmaiden does not include all forms of the uncanny. And in fact the uncanny relies heavily on our imaginations, cultural as these are, but also personal and based on specific sets of experiences no one else has quite been involved with as have we. If part of that which we are to understand as part of ourselves is that we too, within the interiority of being in the world, possess and are possessed by the uncanny, then this other part of our being takes the form of a character from the other-world. Even in modernity, it is the unconscious that speaks to us of this relation metaphorically using the *Traumdeutung* of idiosyncratic allegory, but as well the patterned symbolic structure of the culture of the day; the train, for instance, no longer augurs a guise of death to us as trains have faded from the actual landscape, have become quaint rather than threatening and thus have become mute as symbols of the imagination. We thus need a world where its denizens and their scenes have a particular use: "...he could use them to elucidate his problems of the union of soul and body. I myself consider literary documents as *realities of the imagination*, pure products of the imagination. And why should the actions of the imagination not be as real as those of perception?" (Bachelard 1964, 158) Yet there is a difference here, one that presents itself to us as a different reality. The order of reality corresponds to the nature of order in worlds that are usually set apart, but yet come together through the human imagination. These worlds might be characterized in a number of ways, nature and culture, the mundane and the extramundane, heaven and earth etc., but in each dyad the other is always present. Their *reality* is indeed of an equal stature, but only because they co-mingle. Culture is one of the adaptive results of nature, the judgement of what is extraordinary based on our knowledge of the routine, paradise our ultimate aspiration for this world and not some other. The true difference between them is marked by the manner in which they are presented to our consciousness: "There is no obscurity of feeling, which knows the expressed object, but only for the understanding, which knows the

represented object." (Dufrenne 1973, 411) As with all things elliptically apophantic, all events that might come to us as epiphanies, it is only our perspective of worlds in collision that allows the feeling of union with the sacred through the vehicle of art's uncanniness to be known without ambiguity. Many research participants spoke 'around' the experience of the uncanny: "I can't say that I have ever had an experience with one particular piece of art that affected me greatly. But I have seen many pieces of art that left me in awe, and speechless, absolutely marveling at the creativity and ingenuity of human beings." (FTNA). What we are experiencing truly is different in the sense that it comes to us, not in no uncertain terms, but with no terms other than a negation of the quality of living ever onward towards death. Yet it is our very knowledge of what this latter quality is, both in its overwhelming but finite quantity and its moment by moment ambiguity, that allows the feeling of the uncanny to be ironically transparent: "Such fullness of emotion and spontaneity of utterance come, however, only to those who have steeped themselves in experiences of objective situations; to those whose imaginations have long been occupied with reconstructing what they see and hear. Otherwise, the state is more like one of frenzy in which the sense of orderly production is subjective and hallucinatory." (Dewey 1980, 72). The full presence of the present is held within the confluence of the attention it takes to focus on the work of art. Since art challenges our mundane expectations, our predictive and predicative assumptions, we are stilled by its presence. We must contemplate its surfaces or its sonorities, and we must then begin to feel our own presence in a world that has itself been stilled. Perhaps what is generally characteristic of the uncanny in art is this lack of motion, almost as if our heart has been stopped and we are close to a kind of death. The temporary absence of the motion of the world and the dynamic which includes ourselves in its motion is oddly disconcerting. There is an aloneness to our experience while at the same time a very clear awareness that we are not alone, but have been joined by another voice, perhaps long dormant, which awakens itself through our presence. None of this appears to have anything to do with how we usually live and speak:

"...there are no commonplace expressions, like gestures or grimaces, of a sense of mass and power, of a delight in nature [] and that further explains why expressions of the latter sort are less frequently discussed; they are simply not encountered very often by most people." (Sircello 1972, 63) If not, perhaps, we would not in fact become so suddenly aware that there has been a shift in the worlding of the world, a movement towards the moment that encapsulates our existence. We are forever held within the now, and just because this will also ever pass on does not negate its only present function of letting us be. There is an immediate analogy to the work of art as it is used in subjectivity with the kinds of discourse which attempt to hold on to the moment and force its acquiescence to either projection, memory, or identity. But it is the presence of the uncanny that unsettles these ideas of stasis, because it is the uncanny which can arrest the entirety of the world and our being at once, and does not rest upon the contrivance of projects which must remain in a world which passes like clouds.

The Existential Dimension of the Uncanny

When art is expressed as what appears to be our everyday language, the effect is even more startling, as we are made aware that language itself, even without poetry, entails the essence of being as existence and not stasis: "The intellectualist philosopher who wants to hold words to their precise meaning, and uses them as the countless little tools of clear thinking is bound to be surprised by the poet's daring." (Bachelard 1964, 146) As with art in general, the truest sign of the uncanny is that it brings us home to reality. What is now made real for us is the fact of our existence and the fact of the world, ever ambiguous and ever passing, and the discomfort we feel in the face of reality is that we can never truly find a home in such a world, never truly become at home in language, unless of course we adopt the uncanny into ourselves. This adoption implies that there is a home for what is homeless in humanity, and that this home is within our own beings. If, as Bachelard continues, 'language itself dreams' (Bachelard 1964, 146), then the dreamless dream of living on takes place in and as language,

and its significance is held within the reality it can construct, always a moving target, already an anonymity and a question. And this realization takes place not through the language of ordinary speech and writing alone, but in any media in which art finds its own home: "There remains an ineliminable connection between what we like to call the wordless language of music and the verbal language of normal linguistic communication. Perhaps there is also a similar connection between the objective vision with which we orient ourselves in the world, and the claim that art makes upon us both to construct new compositions directly from the elements of the objective visible world and to participate in the profound tensions that they set up." (Gadamer 1986, 38-9) Very often it takes something other than 'normal communication' to get the point across in its fullness of presence. We are, indeed, more often led to rationalize this or that event through the over-much pseudo-interpretation that has its origin in the idiomachies of 'live and learn' or 'that's life.' But just exactly what is this life that we are learning from, and what is it that we learn? Or is it not that we learn to live, rather than the more blithe manner of happenstance such idioms suggest? No doubt we also do not learn, depending on the context, or that we may equally learn not to learn. The fullness of the present's presence presents itself to us as irruptive and unwilling to let us unlearn its lesson. Like anxiety proper, the uncanny, very often seen as a vehicle for the former, has a positive existential function for us. It does not know how to 'leave us alone' as do other persons, many of our memories—pride can conquer conscience in this regard, as Nietzsche famously noted—or even social institutions once they are satisfied in their bureaucratic requirements. The uncanniness of the uncanny is that it is ever-present, waiting pensively in the shadows of the everyday, whose light cannot fully illuminate every space of being as it flickers its way to and from its mundane zenith. Research participants were quite aware that they had been enveloped by the penetrating penumbra of the uncanny in their various encounters with art. The following was suggestive of many other examples:

I had just been permanently estranged from my spouse through the perambulations of her mental illness. I found myself in the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and when I encountered the large Rembrandt housed there – a Biblical figure whose name I cannot recall, but whose story was one of gender role and betrayal; Rembrandt shows her in the act of plunging a knife into her side, looking at the viewer with great remonstrance – I gazed at this painting and immediately fell to my knees with sorrow and wept, right in the gallery! I realized later that I had been suppressing the guilt I felt in losing my wife through such a horrible betrayal – that of illness, certainly, but also that I had betrayed her somehow by not seeing her through it. (FTNA)

What was already present comes only to its full presence in the void of rationalized meanings. Sometimes this presence, and our presence within it, is an abyss, bringing to the fullest consciousness – which also includes the unconscious and the consciousness of others insofar as they are relevant – our character and role in this or that life event. What occurred is what is now occurring to us. We have felt its whole for the first time. Indeed, the uncanny reminds us that we seldom feel the whole of any part of our lives, as the onrush of time keeps our focus from discerning the true shape of things as they hurtle by, rather like looking at a rushing river. The foreshortening and distancing of running and coursing water precludes a certain focus, and to rest one's eyes on one spot in the river is to see merely the flow of different waters, constant and continuous. When the aesthetic encounter recreates the work of art as a quasi-subject in the world of both subjects and objects, it immobilizes us as a quasi-object. The effect is often dramatic and transformational, as well as intensely disturbing or yet comfortable, pending the association: "There is interest in completing an experience. The experience may be one that is harmful to the world and its consummation undesirable. But it has aesthetic quality." (Dewey 1980, 39) That we need to know only ourselves in such a moment, but that we come to such a self-understanding through the work of others, and furthermore that it leads to an understanding of an other which had been effaced or forgotten, are the hallmarks of authentic and dramatic living: "This is the metaphysical reason for the concentration of drama in time, of the condition of unity of time. It is born of the desire to come as close as possible to the

timelessness of this moment which is yet the whole of life." (Lukacs 1974, 158)

However full the encounter with art makes the present, it does so by the suggestion that what is present is so by virtue of the movement of being from another kind of time, and from another world than our own. Just as we are judged by the present, the situations we have created or find ourselves in, we also, by implication, suggest to ourselves that another kind of judgement is also pressing in upon us, and this too emanates from another kind of world or being. The uncanny in art thus confronts us with a set of simple questions: What kind of being? What kind of judgement? What are we to do in the face of the beyond? Research participants were apt to make the idea of other-worldliness into a stringent allegory, and not merely a metaphor, but an aesthetic analytic need not pursue any native position that stretches beyond the pragmatic counsel of art itself. If the work of art is confronting us with our deficits, it also reaffirms our strengths, and in fact uses both weakness and credit to render its communication to us with greater clarity. Whatever it is we are missing, in other words, art can supply if we are open to its insight. Whatever it is we possess, art can magnify if we are open to transforming our experience, sharing it within the new realm of aesthetic quasi-subjectivity. We need not be, then, too apt in our approximation of this world's flaws when we encounter what we take to be a better world through the windows of the arts. It is not as if we alone embody all the frailties of the human subject in the world. No doubt we each of us have our fair share of them, but art does not personalize in the sense of finding fault with *us*. One of the major ways in which art touches our being and changes its vision over the generations is that it can have similar effects on many different kinds of persons. Although participants in this research were also apt to personalize their encounters with art, once again an analytic cannot afford to dwell on the supposed idiosyncracies of each person's soulful experience as if this were the end of even the data.

We must surmise, rather, that the aesthetic object now re-presented in the world as a quasi-subject also takes action in that world, action which transforms its own presence by altering the course of our perceptions. The quasi-subject has a kind of moral volition, and if in its self-representation it takes on the trappings of an intentional stance borrowed from the mythological narratives of the age in which art began its moral career, it does so only to impress upon us its historical as well

as its ultimate relevance. We do the same. We are also not embodiments of a morality *per se*, but remain, nevertheless, moral beings in a world which has been shaped by the principles of morality and of late, anti-morality. The light or the darkness that we find ensconced as tropes of the other-world are made fully present in this one through the aesthetic encounter. Art makes plain the ideals of good and evil in a world where such a moral spectrum is moribund and sometimes bankrupt. At the same time, art reminds us that even if such a worldview and its evaluations are mute, persons practice a pragmatic version of these judgements regularly, and those that are subject to them feel such as are their consequences to be very real.

Conclusions

The full presence of non-presence in the present is a reasonable working definition of the uncanny. We have seen that it is a necessary phase or experience within the aesthetic encounter, but of course it is not limited to the work of art and its public. Perhaps it may also occur during the trophotropic states of consciousness, where our senses are not aligned with sensory inputs, or less often but still common enough, in religious venues, as well as the sudden events where the character of the neighbor appears within us. However this may be, we do know that the uncanny cannot brook the world as it has been. It has a mission to disturb it and ourselves within it, otherwise our experience of art is predestined from the outside, from indeed that self-same world that art is supposed to extend and open up. If we are not challenged openly and transparently by the opacity that the uncanny swirls around us then we can be complacent to the point of being manipulated by what gives the appearance of being aesthetic. Gadamer reminds us that this is the source of both artism and the artful use of art forms for ulterior motives, such as in advertising: "We notice that such art has designs upon us. All kitsch has something of this forced quality about it. It is often well meant and sincere in intention, but it means the destruction of art. For something can only be called art when it requires that we construe the work by learning to understand the language of form and content so that communication really occurs." (Gadamer 1986, 52) The apprehension we feel in front of the new and strange is what gives these communications the aura of the vision. We no

longer set out in socially sanctioned quests for such visions, as did traditional social organizations, but nevertheless, we as human beings still require of ourselves that we experience them, for the 'destruction of art' implies the loss of humanity, and where we burn the books of what it means to be human, we next burn ourselves.

NOTES

¹ Questions relating to the subjective experience of what proffered itself as uncanny or eldritch were asked of forty persons, artists (FTA) and non-artists (FTNA) alike. Some of their responses from interview and survey transcripts appear in the below to lend another kind of ground to the philosophical understandings of aesthetic experience.

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