

*“Untitled” (Portrait of an English 300 Student at Phillips Academy)*

The first writing I did in English 300 this year came in a form Ms. Albert dubbed a “reflection post.” I’d go on to write around ten reflection posts between the fall and winter terms in her class, each one a 20-minute, in-class piece comprising a single body paragraph, bookended by a couple sentences providing context and a conclusion. The first reflection post took our class by surprise for a couple reasons — mostly the time pressure and structural expectations, but also because the subject of our analysis wasn’t literature at all, but Juan Sánchez Cotán’s *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber*.

The painting in question resembles the archetypal concept of “art” better than any piece we would read in Ms. Albert’s class. As such, our analysis — to the extent we were capable of it in the twenty minutes we had — was predictable and perhaps formulaic. A seventeenth-century still life painting, the most interesting analytical conclusions we had to draw about Cotán’s artistic choices described the drama or anticipation evoked by his use of light and positioning of his subjects.

I remember this piece as an introduction to Ms. Albert’s teaching style — which focused much more on in-class analytical assignments than discussions or other projects — more than an artistic experience. Over the next two terms, we would go on to read *A Small Place*, *Exit West*, and *Americanah*, books whose focus on political themes ran overtly through our lessons. Around December, Ms. Albert assigned us Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” reading, which continued with the theme of focusing on the meanings we associate with art over artists’ intentions.

When Annie Dillard writes that “there is no such thing as an artist,” my mind is drawn back to Barthes’ idea: the meaning we derive from a piece of work has no necessary relationship to its creator’s intentions. In Dillard’s words, “there is only the world, lit or unlit as the light allows;” an artist can reveal to us only that which already exists, and an author has no control over our reading of their work. To me, W. B. Yeats strikes the same chord as he describes the “Artifice of eternity,” a phrase that contradicts the pre-modern view of art as holding inherent meaning — or what John Keats might describe as “eternity;” that the equivalence of truth and beauty is “all [we] need to know.”

I identified myself through an interest in history for as long as I can remember. It's instinctively difficult for me to separate art from its social context because social context is the lens through which art makes the most intuitive sense to me. Without some sense of historical cause and effect, art becomes an abstraction in my eyes, and I accordingly had some initial resistance to this idea. As the winter term progressed, we continued to explore the relationship between artists and their work, focusing on whether the two could be separated and what analytical benefits this might provide.

Historicism is a theory of philosophy that holds that historical events and patterns cannot be analyzed without considering their context. It strikes me now that the issue I had with the Death of the Author was not that it was a necessarily flawed way of interpreting art; it was, rather, that I approached art from the perspective of analysis rather than interaction. I sought to assign art an absolute meaning, when Barthes meant for me to recognize that art's applicability extended beyond a simple rationalization of its purpose.

My perspective here changed rather recently, and not in a literature course at all. This term, I chose to enroll in a photography course for the first time. I had been sorted into the beginners' elective during my Lower year, and have found it the most straightforward of the arts for me ever since. When photography first came to be as an art form, the consensus of the artistic establishment held that photography removed the role of the artist from the production of artwork. Returning to Dillard's image of the candle, most contemporary artists felt that the perfect recreation of pictures facilitated by photography meant that the candle could be captured perfectly, there would be no engagement with the light, and the photographer as an artist did not exist.

This, of course, is nonsensical. From the moment they came into being, photographers have been deliberate in their framing of subjects, use of light, and editing of photographs — their engagement with their art didn't accommodate existing convention, but it has always been a process of deliberate artistic decisions. I intuitively understood that photography *was* art because of my engagement with its practice, but I began to understand previous artists' inclination towards viewing it otherwise. No matter what a

photographer did with their images, they remained reflections of a reality that existed independent of them. A photograph would always contain some level of truth existing outside of time.

As I took up photography for another term at the end of March, my schedule shifted me into a new English class to accommodate the change. *This* is the first writing I did for Mr. Bird's English class, and so I've had a little time to make sense of what we talked about this term and how it might figure into the Death of the Author.

Our reading of *King Lear* was guided explicitly by reminders of the cultural landscape Shakespeare oriented his work towards; I did not find the Death of the Author there. But in *Holy the Firm*, the narrator's voice brought me back to this idea. While knowledge of Dillard's process writing *Holy the Firm* feels as though it sheds some light on the meaning of the book, I find myself taking its prose very much at face value. When Dillard asks questions of God's nature, I don't wonder what that might indicate about her political ideology; I noticed myself separating Dillard from her work far more than I had the authors and narrators of Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.

A couple weeks ago in photography, we discussed an untitled artwork known as "Portrait of Ross in L.A." This portrait is manifestable — that is, it is neither physically permanent nor singular. *Ross in L.A.* takes the form of a pile of candy, with all details other than its 175-pound ideal weight left up to the curator. This artwork — emblematic of the modernity that photography's pre-modern critics scoffed at — owes much of its emotional significance to its historical context. Observers are encouraged to participate or watch as their peers take candy from the pile — which starts at a human weight, but wastes away in the same vein as experienced by victims of HIV/AIDS. As with AIDS, the viewer can only watch or make the problem worse.

It is significant that Félix González-Torres created *Ross in L.A.* in 1991, at the height of the AIDS crisis and months after losing his partner to the disease. It is also natural to assume this invalidates the Death of the Author, as one doubts the artwork would have the same emotional significance without this context.

At the same time, however, there remained one constant about the artwork that could hint at its human meaning regardless of context: the 175-pound weight it shared with González-Torres's partner. While it certainly doesn't mean the same thing in isolation as in context, this fact remains constant. In other words, "Beauty is truth, and truth beauty," whether the artist lives or dies, *Ross in L.A.* holds meaning. The meaning it held to the artist is important — but we can remain in conversation with the work with or without that understanding.

I cannot analyze *Ross in L.A.* through a historicist lens while separating it from its artist. I assumed that fact necessarily invalidated the Death of the Author. I don't feel that way anymore, because (I think) I no longer conflate historicist analysis with true understanding.

When Keats wrote that "Beauty is truth, and truth beauty," he meant not only to say that truth and beauty were factual and constant, but that they represented the *only* factual constants in our lives. If I agree instead with Yeats, that "eternity" exists as an "Artifice" constructed by humanity, I must come to terms with the latent postmodernism of this position; Yeats doesn't have to say the author is dead for us to grasp how the idea underlies his words when he tells us meaning is constructed and therefore inconsistent. It is thus that I make my peace with the Death of the Author: by applying it to my engagement with art without erroneously attempting to understand it through the lens of analysis.

Here, then, is my *Portrait of an English 300 Student at Phillips Academy* — an essay that won't quite mean the same thing to Mr. Bird when he reads it as it does to me while I write it, or even as it will when I proofread the piece before handing it in tomorrow afternoon. Understanding me and my influences will give it a meaning that can be picked apart and rationalized, but this way of interacting with my writing isn't any more artistically valid than making judgments based on the reader's own experiences. I, the author, nothing am. And all the same, this is an untitled portrait of my life.