



Chapter I

The Erotics of Looking: Materiality, Solicitation and Netherlandish Visual Culture

Angela Vanhaelen and Bronwen Wilson

Matter for Intercourse

Interrupted from her task by our presence before the window, the woman inside looks out in response (plate 1). Daylight reflects from the curve of her head, echoing the luminosity of surface effects in the foreground. A tour de force of painted correspondences between diverse material things – metal ewer, striated vegetables, feathery fowl – intensified by the restrained palette and play of scale, the picture elicits our sensual involvement in the process of making associations between, for instance, her face with its downy tendrils and the adjacent and startlingly erotic cabbage, a transaction prolonged by Gerrit Dou's spirited play between inside and outside. Sexually charged to be sure, even baldly so, but the scene cannot easily be reduced to mere pleasures of the flesh given the ambiguity, for example, of her arrested gesture, wide eyes and parted lips. Is she looking up or returning to her labour? Do her eyes convey surprise, enticement, reticence or self-reflection? Is she soliciting us or we her?

Early modern Netherlandish artists did not write all that much about their practice and what little they did write has long frustrated art historians with its seeming refusal to divulge information about what the pictures actually mean. While art treatises devote much attention to the mechanics of art making, they contain no instructions about how to interpret the enigmatic visual motifs that recur especially in the ostensibly descriptive genres such as still life, landscape and genre scenes.¹ Instead, the treatises repeatedly describe both the making and viewing of art in explicitly erotic language.² While these sources may not say much about what artworks mean, they do explain how pictures operate. Seventeenth-century commentators called painting a 'seductress of sight'.³ They consistently asserted that the alluring surfaces of artworks that captured the world with 'sweet-flowing naturalness' were designed to attract the eager and desiring eyes of art lovers.⁴ As in Dou's painting, the implication is that pictures were prostitutes or wares that offered pleasure for money. By stimulating the lustful urges of beholders to penetrate paintings with their probing eyes, visual depictions of the visible world would simultaneously gratify artists' own desires for success and renown.⁵ The rhetoric and modes of address deployed by artists in their writings about art also engage in a process of solicitation that asks readers to be attentive viewers (and buyers), fully aware of the pleasurable seductive powers of visual imagery.

The title of this issue, *The Erotics of Looking*, evokes the intercourse engendered by the material qualities of Netherlandish artworks. The emphasis of the essays is on the

**Detail from Gerrit Dou,
Woman Peeling Carrot,
mid-seventeenth century
(plate 1).**

*The Erotics of Looking: Early
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methodological implications of paying close attention to sensual encounters with pictures. Challenging familiar interpretive models of iconography, verisimilitude and social art history especially, the essays together aim to shift the focus away from the fraught question of how to determine the meanings of pictures by turning instead to an investigation of how descriptive works announce themselves, to how they actively solicit the beholder's engagement with them. How pictures make their advances varies – sometimes brazenly, other times prudently – but what many of them share, through the suppression of narrative in favour of pictorial and material effects, is their appeal to viewers, urging them to be aware of the complex dynamics involved in looking at art. The term *intercourse*, especially its early uses, suggests these dynamics with its multiple evocations of commerce, intercommunication, conversation, sexuality, intervention, and communion.⁶

The essays in this issue explore visual forms that grapple with the material history and transformed conditions of images in the early modern period. The authors apprehend Netherlandish pictures as theoretical objects – ‘self-aware images’, to borrow Victor Stoichita's term⁷ – that pointedly draw attention to the image's own potential to reconstitute the significance of visual representation itself. The essays accordingly engage with an important historical shift, tracing the changing status of the visual image in the post-Reformation context of religious diversity, global mercantile capitalism and medical and scientific experimentation, all of which prompted new claims for imagery and new pictorial strategies that importuned beholders in persuasive, seductive and sometimes unpredictable ways.

Important to this issue is an emphasis on the loosening of the picture's ties with the central institutions of religion and politics, and a concomitant turn to close observation of the world and everyday life. In this process, as many of the authors emphasize, the concept of art itself is redefined. This orientation to the visible world is apparent in Rose Marie San Juan's suggestive analysis of anatomical illustrations. San Juan makes us see how the skull – the traditional *vanitas* signifier of *memento mori* – turns in the late sixteenth century and begins to point in a different direction – towards empirical knowledge of this life, and observation of the actual human body. By focusing on the visible material world of the here and now, rather than offering moral warnings about an invisible afterlife, the skull of the anatomical treatise reconstitutes the relationship between a traditional allegorical pictorial motif and the new kinds of meanings it could convey. These new meanings are anything but clear and controlled, however. As San Juan insists, the new image points to its own limitations, to the inaccessibility of sure knowledge and to the limits of visual experience.

The interconnected and uncertain processes of making, viewing and interpretation are at the crux of each of these papers. Christopher Heuer closely examines the material facture of Hercules Segers' idiosyncratic landscape etchings – works that forcefully draw attention to the process of their own production rather than to mimesis. He argues that the artist's manipulation of his medium – the cutting, scratching and erosion of the copper plate – materializes the slow movement of geological matter, making a claim to being of nature instead of a depiction of it. As in the case of San Juan's skull, the picture distances itself from allegory and insists on the materiality of earthly things. Craft, facture, active experimentation and practice are foregrounded; making comes before meaning here.

The value of highly experimental works of art is derived in large part from the inventive process of art making. In her important contribution on still life, Joanna Woodall reminds us of extensive criticisms of a genre seen by scholars to betray

1 Gerrit Dou, *Woman Peeling Carrot*, mid-seventeenth century. Oil on wood, 57.2 x 43.3 cm. Schwerin: Staatliches Museum. Photo: © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.



Dutch ambivalence toward mercantile and colonial wealth. Shifting the focus away from the ideological meanings concealed by the sensuous surfaces of still life to the surfaces themselves, she shows how the works extend the process of interpretation to a network of images and spaces. Still-life paintings are agents instead of objects, petitioning viewers to recognize the strategic reuse of signature artefacts, lemon peels and knives that also bring the pictorial space into consideration with the beholder's experiences of everyday life. Like Heuer, Woodall resists the notion that Dutch art merely attempts to describe or duplicate the visible world. She argues that in the wake of iconoclasm, works of art must be approached in terms of their human production, as things in themselves rather than representations of a reality – material or divine – that is situated elsewhere.

Materiality and ingenuity are similarly crucial for Celeste Brusati's suggestive analysis of 'perspectives'. Radically different from pictures in which one-point

perspective is used to arrest the viewer's movement, Dutch 'perspectives' of domestic, civic and commercial spaces deploy multiple vanishing points to enlist the viewer's mobility and thereby to stimulate visual interest, mobilize the eye and prolong the act of looking itself. As in Woodall's analysis, new modes of address appeal to the embodied experience of the beholder and encourage sustained attention. This allows us to see how inventive forms like the peep box orchestrated novel visual experiences. By depicting the visible world as variable and in flux, such experimental works prompt somatic awareness of the conundrums of vision. The interpretative possibilities that technically innovative works present cannot be separated out from their material qualities and sensory involvements, which urge the beholder to look, to move, to question and to look again.

The viewers of such works, faced with crafted surfaces rather than symbolic depths, accordingly have to experiment with the crafting of interpretations. Bret Rothstein evocatively calls the reciprocal encounter between the artist, the viewer and the artwork an 'erotics of interpretation'. In an important methodological move, Rothstein refuses to attribute text-based didactic and moralizing meanings to religious paintings. Instead, he characterizes Jan van Hemessen's sexually charged picture of the Prodigal Son story in terms of the visual sparring that occurs in complicated exchanges between the wit of the artist, the aesthetics of the work and the skills of the painting's beholders. This dynamic image, he argues, eschews straightforward moralizing religious instruction and must be understood in terms of the astonishing sexual content and aesthetic impact it had on its viewers. Again we see a turn from the imposition of familiar didactic messages to a more open-ended understanding of meaning itself as a complex and collaborative process of making. Woodall makes a similar claim in her essay on still-life painting, eloquently describing the status of these works as intense, fabricated visual experiences. The canvas is a table; the picture is a meal. Both Rothstein and Woodall describe interpretation as intercourse – a charged conversation between the generic figure of the artist and beholders who could simultaneously delight in, and experience a degree of anxiety about, the pleasures offered at the table of representation.

This insistence on an intensely sensuous engagement with the picture seems a far cry from Vanhaelen's argument, which analyses a series of texts that strategically situate Dutch descriptive art at the threshold of boredom. Working from Joshua Reynolds' and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's remarks on the boredom of Dutch painting and their influence on subsequent commentaries, Vanhaelen assesses how the apparent meaninglessness of the pictures themselves has prompted this interpretative rhetoric of boredom. Key to this rhetoric is the idea that the very emptiness of boredom can open up space for new critical and interpretative possibilities – possibilities that the structural qualities of descriptive art also provoke. This is a claim that resonates throughout the collection of essays. All of the contributions explore how, in a turn to materiality and worldliness, images self-consciously struggle with and often stage their potential to elicit a search for meaning in the face of imprecise and ambiguous information. It is this very loss of certainty – art's own self-consciousness of the growing gap between form and content – that provokes the equivocal response that Woodall characterizes as anxious pleasure, Rothstein discusses as intentional distraction, Heuer calls entropy, San Juan describes as a tension between the clarity and inaccessibility of visual knowledge, Brusati considers in terms of the conundrums and contingencies of what is seen, and Vanhaelen recognizes as a vacillation between attentiveness and boredom. Indeed, all of the authors insist on the open potential of visual images that – as in an

erotic encounter – seek to complete themselves in a series of creative and potentially generative exchanges. Artists, pictures and viewers together engender various potential meanings in a manner that is focused more on the pleasures of the process itself than on the procreative end-game of arriving at a single, sanctioned meaning.

Not anything goes, however. The eroticized dynamics of looking potentially generated both licit and illicit pleasures, and each of the essays acknowledges the concomitant tensions, anxieties and paradoxes involved. As Rothstein emphasizes, Hemessen transmutes the moral lesson of the Prodigal Son story adumbrated in the background, and thus the expectations of narrative painting, into the viewer's experience of the tavern by simultaneously courting and thwarting the desire to see. There were stakes in producing and consuming works of art, and those investments and desires were set into relief through debates about meanings that are played out in the images themselves, and through discourse between interested amateurs in the artist's studio, around the display table of the collector's cabinet, or in the household.

The gendered dynamics of engagement with Dutch pictures has long been theorized as an inherently ambiguous process, as Vanhaelen argues in her essay. Striking in this regard is Lawrence Gowing's description of ambivalent encounters depicted within, and with, paintings in explicitly erotic terms that echo those in seventeenth-century treatises: 'The attention of man to woman is finally identified with the attention of a painter to his subject.'⁸ Such attention, he implies, can be open, respectful and selfless, or possessive, domineering and exploitative. Woodall similarly concludes that still-life painting must be situated within the eroticized and potentially exploitative framework of human consumption, which sustains, reproduces and enhances life but also destroys it. San Juan reminds us that death haunts the skull as it migrates from the table of the anatomy theatre, into the printed anatomy treatise, and onto the tables of still life even as it appeals to the viewer to animate it. Brusati argues that Dutch perspectives call attention to the self-consciousness that reflexive looking engenders, prompting the mobile and desiring eye to peer and probe into painted interiors only to encounter the paradoxes of pictorial representation endemic to both vision and painting. And in Heuer's analysis, Segers' material facture frustrates the ideal of landscape as a well-illuminated vista laid out accommodately for a possessive beholder. Here, the artwork and its subject matter have independent agency that eludes the expectations and controls of artist or viewer.

The essays together thus explore how, as theoretical objects invested in their own material history, artworks themselves insist on the performative and sensual dynamics involved in making and engaging with the world. By displacing the work of making meaning onto the viewer, and by resisting the distinction between painted and visible worlds, descriptive pictures implicate viewers, prompting prolonged engagement, speculation and ethical questions about their interconnectedness with material things.

To encourage further conversation, the essays are followed by four responses that open up historiographical and methodological considerations in other contexts.⁹ Larry Silver highlights ways in which the individual essays, and the erotics of looking as a conceptual framework, intervene in wide-ranging debates in the scholarship on Netherlandish art. For Benjamin Schmidt, the work of Svetlana Alpers provides a departure point for analysis of modes of address in early modern Flemish and Dutch maps of America. In contrast to Alpers' emphasis on the optical character of maps and their commensurability with a descriptive mode of painting, Schmidt emphasizes how pictorial forms such as cartouches and strapwork assert their three-dimensional origins as crafted objects on the surface of the cartographic page. Contrasting the mobile viewer

predicated by multiple vantage points in Dutch pictures with the fixed spectator that characterizes single-point perspective, Lyle Massey draws out differences between Dutch and Italian perspective systems and their concomitant conceptions of time. Bronwen Wilson instead highlights similarities in the effects of realism and ambiguity in some Italian paintings, and how interpretive demands created by the interplay of pictorial forms foster thinking about social roles. Art mattered, as the authors observe, because the assembly of things in pictures gathered people together for intercourse.

The Social Thing

An important methodological inference of these conclusions is the integration of the study of early modern visual culture with a recent turn to materiality.¹⁰ This next section of the introductory essay aims to develop some of the larger implications of this integration. In particular, the manner in which the essays bring forward the complex interrelations between making, viewing and things presses for an assessment of how such processes contributed to new forms of association.

The types of collaborative exchanges that the essays describe are activated in large part by the agency of the material world. As Bruno Latour and others have argued, things are inextricable from the networks of people, spaces, institutions and technologies that are brought together in their material forms. In contrast to objects that subjects posit in the world, things solicit our involvement with them. They appeal to us, providing a ground for thinking. Things encourage engagement with them in specific ways through their rhetorical strategies, modes of address and configurations. In this way they gather people together, creating and responding to shared interests, while also stimulating discussion, debate and argument.¹¹ What makes the artworks in the essays things, instead of objects, is in part their striking material complexity and how that sustains viewers' involvement with them. Attending to why these artworks matter requires being open to their appeal, to how they assemble the social world and to how they engage with different points of view. Precisely because the images explored in the essays interrogate existing forms of knowledge and expectations, and create interpretative challenges, they resist prescriptive and predictable statements and instead surprise the viewer, opening up fresh possibilities for self-reflection, for imagining choices, for interrogating established social positions and forging new ones.

These insights prompt a significant expansion of Svetlana Alpers' vital assertion that visual culture was central to the life of Dutch society. Alpers importantly shifted the study of descriptive art away from iconography, which probes beneath crafted surfaces to decipher hidden depths of didactic and ideological meaning. Seeking to redress the impoverished status of northern pictures when described according to terms of reference used for Italian art, she argued for 'a certain cultural space that was occupied by Dutch images'.¹² Instead of perspective, style and 'imitations of significant human actions', Dutch pictures are like maps or mirrors that display a taste for surfaces and objective description that went hand in hand with 'an assumed identity between seeing and the artifice of drawing that is realized in the artist's image'.¹³ Alpers thus argued that for the Dutch, visual experience was a predominant way to gain knowledge about the world and the self: 'In Holland the visual culture was central to the life of the society. One might say that the eye was a central means of self-representation and visual experience a central mode of self-consciousness.'¹⁴ Few studies have received more scrutiny than *The Art of Describing*, and yet its proposition that seeing the world and pictures of it were coextensive remains a productive metaphor for what we might understand as a particular manner of being attuned to the world.¹⁵

Pressing further with Alpers' conclusions, we argue that the apparent refusal of

descriptive pictures to make overt moral and political statements, or to render an *istoria* transparent, facilitates new forms of association and networks of interaction between artworks, their makers and beholders. As this introduction has argued thus far, the very open-endedness of the non-narrative, descriptive visual mode turns interpretation itself into a contingent process of making. This process has the potential to generate inventive narratives that are not imposed by external authorities, but emerge instead from the sorts of collaborative exchanges that these essays describe. Visual and material forms of culture were central to the life of society largely because of the active and critical part they played in the creation of connections between people that were not predetermined by hierarchies of status, kinship, or vocation. While such traditional social groupings certainly continued in this period, there also emerged innovative kinds of voluntary and self-organizing assemblies of diverse individuals: publics or counter-publics that coalesced through the dynamic uptake of visual and material artefacts that fostered shared responses, interests, tastes, commitments and desires.¹⁶ As matters for intercourse, these artworks are social things.

This issue of *Art History* accordingly seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of processes of early modern public making at a time when the social structure itself was increasingly understood, not as something imposed from above, but as emerging from discussions and debates generated by the circulation of various media in everyday life.¹⁷ While Jürgen Habermas privileges the role of rational critical debate among private persons in his seminal work on historical transformations of the public sphere, this collection of essays highlights the equally important and often overlooked roles that materiality, visibility and sensuality play in the changing impulses of social organization. As Thijs Weststeijn's important reading of Dutch art treatises indicates, highly illusionistic works of art were designed to strike viewers speechless. Initial reactions to descriptive pictures were embodied and pre-rational, eliciting sensual responses and becoming meaningful through discussion, interpretation or rational critical debate.¹⁸ It is this combined aspect of public making that we emphasize here – the constitutive relation between individual pre-discursive experiences of artworks and the conversations they foster.

The appeal of realism in works of art overlapped with wide dissemination of innovative forms of visual culture that provided an avenue for the increasing involvement of private people in public life. Alpers and others have observed that visual imagery proliferated everywhere in Dutch society – printed on single sheets or in books, woven into curtains, tapestries and table linens, painted and carved on musical instruments and furniture, decorating maps, tiles, metalwork and porcelain ware.¹⁹ It is impossible to make hard and fast distinctions between art, visual culture and the material world in this context. The ubiquity of visual imagery allowed it to speak to most sectors of society, beyond the group with the means to purchase. Cultural historians Willem Frijhoff and Marieke Spies have importantly characterized the social dynamics of the Dutch cities in terms of the lively 'culture of discussion' generated by the widespread diffusion of diverse media, including visual imagery, to a broad sector of the population.²⁰ This view informs the approach of this issue, for it indicates how the unprecedented mass circulation of new visual forms challenged dominant ideas about just who could enter the public arena, greatly expanding the resources of public life for ordinary people.

In this manner, we explore the notion that the interactions of people with material things constitute public life. Hannah Arendt has argued that things occupy the spaces between people. From these in-between spaces of engagement, they compel practices of speech and action. While Arendt positions speech and action

at the centre of her definition of public life, she insists that these are ephemeral and momentary practices, and that human accomplishments are only made durable and lasting in the creation of human-made things, like works of art.²¹ As the essays by San Juan, Heuer, Rothstein and Woodall all demonstrate, Netherlandish art obsessively works the themes of *vanitas* and *memento mori*, contrasting the transience of worldly human endeavours with the enduring qualities of well-crafted artworks. As Vanhaelen highlights in her essay, this tension between the fleeting and the permanent is at the crux of Hegel's influential assertion that the central aim of Dutch realism is to capture the ephemeral materiality of daily life in order to create heightened awareness in its viewers. As Hegel states: 'to grasp this most transitory and fugitive material, and to give it permanence for our contemplation in the fullness of its life, is the hard task of art at this stage.'²² Hegel's list of the transitory matter that Dutch art grasps includes both material things and physical expressions of human communication – light shining on metal, the sun vanishing behind a cloud, the reflective surfaces of fruit, as well as human movements, postures, and facial expressions. By capturing this fugitive materiality in meticulously crafted works, this art publicizes physical matter, holding it up for viewers to consider self-consciously their own interconnectedness with it.

Consequently, the shared apprehension of a common world of things has the potential to bind people together, spurring the interrelated self-organizing actions of public life. These interconnected processes of collective action, gathered here under the rubric of 'the erotics of looking', are boundless, inherently unpredictable, playful, and pregnant with potentiality. They are characterized by openness and transformative promises: by the ability to create the world – not with an end goal in mind – but in ways that are unanticipated.²³ Social things are not constrained by predetermined meanings. A single thing is always viewed from multiple perspectives, for things do not aim to bring people into conformity. They solicit a plurality of interpretations and thus generate diversity. Indeed, polemical things are more likely to foster debate, bringing publics together through dissensus or *polemos* rather than consensus. As Arendt emphasizes, a thing must present diverse or even contradictory aspects in order to constitute plural public participation in a shared common world.²⁴ Craig Calhoun makes a similar assertion, stating: 'If people have the same views, no public sphere is needed.'²⁵ The power of artworks that are polemical things is thus their potential to reimagine, to make possible, or even to transform the social world.

This provocative theorization of art and public life challenges the Hegelian view in which the spirit of a coherent national group is expressed in the production and reception of works of art. The iconographic approach to Netherlandish art often proceeds from this set of assumptions, reading emblematic content in reference to an underlying national mentality.²⁶ Even Alpers' well-founded critique of iconography asserts a somewhat homogeneous 'Dutch' or 'northern' visual idiom, overlooking the fact that artistic production in early modern Northern Europe was exceptionally eclectic. Much of it simply cannot be categorized in terms of the descriptive pictorial mode, nor is this mode exclusive to the north.²⁷ Recently scholars have emphasized the diversity of the northern trading centres, commercial crossroads for people and things from around the globe.²⁸ This calls for a rethinking of familiar art-historical categorizations such as 'Dutch' art, bound to the essential cultural views of a specific regional, social, or ethnic group. Thus we employ the term 'Dutch' to designate a polycentric and unstable polity, a conglomeration of diverse regional, cultural and linguistic traditions. And we invoke Netherlandish visual culture in the title of this issue as a broader term, inclusive of Flemish practitioners such as Hemessen and Vesalius.

A wide array of visual forms and peoples circulated in unprecedented ways in and out of the northern cities. Traditional patronage patterns dominated by aristocratic and religious interests changed dramatically in the wake of Reformation and Revolt, and artists began to produce an unparalleled number of works for a thriving open market. Economic art historians identify this shift as an important early moment in the mass production of art: hundreds of thousands of paintings were shipped throughout and beyond Europe to its expanding colonial and trading empires in Central and South America and Asia especially.²⁹ The same trade routes enabled large-scale importation, conveying various forms of visual imagery and material curiosities from around the world into the renowned *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammern* of the avid northern collectors in the sixteenth century, and increasingly into ordinary middle-class homes by the seventeenth century.³⁰ Clearly, the work of art in this context was characterized by its ability to move across territorial limitations and ethnic divides. As Ronald de Leeuw, director of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, has recently emphasized, this global transit stimulated much cross-fertilization in the production of artworks, giving lie to the notion that there ever existed a ‘typically Dutch’ art.³¹

Given this global economic context, the art treatises’ vivid rhetoric about the erotics of making and looking must have served in part to interrogate the new public roles of artists and artworks.³² As the sale of visual pleasures on an open market became increasingly common, artists needed to promote their wares to as wide an array of potential buyers as possible. The seductive ambivalence of works sold on an open market must have been designed, as the art treatises imply, to entice anonymous buyers. While works commissioned by patrons may have aimed to express a particular moral or ideological perspective, it was more expedient for works seeking anonymous buyers to present diverse or even contradictory aspects. In other words, the non-Albertian, non-narrative art of describing was a pictorial mode that might have been especially adept at negotiating the rapidly changing markets of this period. An important implication of this hypothesis is that instead of differentiating between forms of art that were produced in either the north or the south of Europe, it is more productive to think about how distinctive pictorial modes facilitated diverse marketing and viewing strategies both across and beyond Western Europe.

In positioning descriptive artworks as seductively ambivalent material goods circulating in the context of an expanding global market, it is important to reiterate Woodall’s caveat that such works cannot be understood as everyday commodities, for they foreground recognition of the human labour that went into their making and self-consciously seek a connection with their beholders. Embodying social relations in this way, they draw attention to their status as social things that forge material relations between people, and to their potential to constitute plural public participation in a shared common world.³³ This complicates a prevalent notion, fostered in part by social art history, that Dutch art is complicit in the powers and institutions of politics, religion, merchant capitalism and early colonialism. Woodall highlights the work of Michel de Certeau that offers a nuanced theoretical model for rethinking art’s larger social functions. An approach informed by de Certeau would not discount the multiple ways that visual imagery served the authoritative historical operations of powers and institutions, but it would concurrently emphasize the capacity of artworks to ‘mobilize unsuspected resources hidden among ordinary people’.³⁴ De Certeau’s insistence on the complex dynamics of everyday life is particularly relevant for rethinking the prosaic qualities of much Netherlandish art.

We have been emphasizing how many early modern Netherlandish pictures addressed themselves to viewers. This process could join people together into

intersubjective communities, as Alois Riegl demonstrated; it also had the potential to capture the world and to subjugate it as an object for human use, as Roland Barthes asserted.³⁵ Accordingly, this volume resists theorizing the erotics of looking solely as a form of patriarchal, colonial, or capitalist domination as much as it questions the notion that the erotics of looking realized attentive, respectful or loving bonds among people and things. We insist that there is an ethics to the erotics of looking, and the art of describing adopts a particular stance by refusing to impose a correct response on viewers. Instead, it asks them to try out various positions in their protracted intercourse with visual matter.

In this way, the idiosyncratic ambiguity of the descriptive pictorial mode functions as a mode of address that enables or even demands an unpredictable range of social and ideological perspectives. In articulating the ambivalent dynamics of the erotics of viewing, this issue thereby offers a methodological framework that accounts for the apparent contradictions that operate in pictures whose open-ended meanings could accommodate differing political, religious and social views. A comic song published in 1660 describes reactions to the public display of artworks for sale at a Dutch kermis, an urban fair that mixed marketing with entertainment:

One sees a host of paintings,
With something that appeals to each and every one,
This makes the heart delight.
What this or that signifies
Is laid out by many who try
To make a conclusion.³⁶

The song evokes a lively and collaborative process in which beholders, led by their pleasures and inclinations, engage with paintings that offer something for everyone. The iconographic method is not completely ruled out here; some viewers could have derived didactic messages from enigmatic visual motifs. But the kermis song is attentive to how paintings catch our eyes and affect our hearts, and it pokes subtle fun at the possibility of one individual ever arriving at a single correct interpretation. It offers a glimpse into how pictures operated as social things, drawing ordinary people to engage with them through the pleasures they offer the eye and the wit, prompting discussion and debate, and thus potentially mobilizing unsuspected resources among people and things. By articulating the problem of arriving at an agreed-upon meaning, the song highlights what is productive about uncertainty. The reticence and intractability of the works function together with their appealing pictorial effects in a manner that encourages viewers to think, to talk, to be open to different positions, and to form provisional, incomplete and open-ended conclusions. Soliciting viewers to look and to look again, the erotic charge of these pictures and their ambiguity urges viewers continuously to reposition themselves and to keep on engaging, moving and thinking.

Notes

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1 See Eric Jan Sluiter, 'Didactic and disguised meanings?', in Wayne Franits, ed., *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, Cambridge, 1997,

78–87, 213–20.

2 Key treatises that use erotic language to describe the relationship between artwork and beholder include: Karel van Mander, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, from the First Edition of the *Schilderboek* (1603–1604), trans. and ed. Hessel Miedema, Doornspijk, 1994; Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst*, 1678, Doornspijk, 1969; Philips Angel, 'Praise of painting', trans.

- Michael Hoyle, intro. and ed. Hessel Miedema, *Simiolus*, 24: 2–3, 1996, 227–58, addresses the work of Gerrit Dou especially.
- 3 See especially the important essay by Eric Jan Sluiter, 'Introduction: "With the power of the seemingly real we must conquer and capture the eyes of art lovers"', *Seductress of Sight. Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age*, trans. Jennifer Kilian and Katy Kist, Zwolle, 2000, 13. 'Seductress of sight' was coined as a derogatory term by a strict Calvinist who disparaged the pleasures of painting.
- 4 Angel, 'Praise of painting', 243.
- 5 For commentary on these treatises, see especially Thijs Weststeijn, *The Visible World: Samuel van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age*, Amsterdam, 2009; Walter Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel van Mander's Schilder-boeck*, Chicago, IL, 1991, 8; Eric Jan Sluiter, *Seductress of Sight*; and Celeste Brusati, *Artifice and Illusion: The Art and Writing of Samuel van Hoogstraten*, Chicago, IL, 1995, 232.
- 6 See the definition of intercourse in the Oxford English Dictionary: <http://www.oed.com/>.
- 7 Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-painting*, Cambridge and New York, 1996.
- 8 Lawrence Gowing, *Vermeer*, London, 1997, 54.
- 9 The responses were solicited from colleagues with diverse interests who participated in the symposium at the Vancouver Art Gallery. They were invited to explore questions raised by the essays in order to open up conversations across fields.
- 10 See for example Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality*, Durham, NC, 2005.
- 11 Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Karlsruhe, 2005. Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin, eds, *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe: People, Things, Forms of Knowledge*, London, 2010.
- 12 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago, IL, 1983, 8.
- 13 Alpers, *Art of Describing*, 8.
- 14 Alpers, *Art of Describing*, xxv.
- 15 For a recent reassessment of Alpers that explores relations between representations of landscape and maps see Tanja Michalsky, *Projektion und Imagination: Die niederländische Landschaft der Frühen Neuzeit im Diskurs von Geographie und Malerei*, Munich, 2012. An important early review is Anthony Grafton and Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'Holland without Huizinga: Dutch visual culture in the seventeenth century: The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century by Svetlana Alpers', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 16: 2, Autumn 1985, 255–65; and see the recent review by Mariët Westermann, 'Art history reviewed XIV: Svetlana Alpers's *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*', 1983, *Burlington Magazine*, 153: 1301, August 2011, 532–6.
- 16 See Michael McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge*, Baltimore, MD, 2005; and Wilson and Yachnin, eds, *Making Publics*.
- 17 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, MA, 1994.
- 18 Weststeijn, *The Visible World*, esp. 154–8.
- 19 Alpers, *Art of Describing*, xxv. Also, Johan H. Huizinga, *Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century and Other Essays*, selected by Pieter Geyl and F. W. N. Hugenholtz, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans, London, 1968, 57.
- 20 Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, 1650: *Hard-Won Unity*, vol. 1, *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective*, Assen and New York, 2004, especially 49–50, 220–5.
- 21 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958, reprint, Chicago, IL, 1971, especially 136–9, 167–74.
- 22 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, 1975, I: 599.
- 23 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 190–1.
- 24 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 57–8.
- 25 Craig Calhoun, 'Imagining solidarity: Cosmopolitanism, constitutional patriotism, and the public sphere', *Public Culture*, 14: 1, winter 2002, 165.
- 26 See especially Eddy de Jongh, 'Realism and seeming realism in seventeenth-century Dutch painting', in Wayne Franits, ed., *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered*, Cambridge, 1997, 21–56. The aim of this essay, de Jong states, is 'to determine the original intentions of artists via the seventeenth-century mentality' (21).
- Simon Schama takes a similar approach, adapting iconography in order to interpret art as 'a document of beliefs' and visual images 'as impressions of mentality' in *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, New York, 1987, xi, 10.
- 27 Segers is a Dutch artist whose work does not fit within Alpers' descriptive paradigm. In fairness, she does point out that the descriptive pictorial mode is not exclusively Dutch. Alpers, *Art of Describing*, xxi. For a critique of Alpers' Hegelian understanding of Dutch art as emanating from a changeless national character, see Grafton and Kaufmann, 'Holland without Huizinga'.
- 28 See in particular recent essays by Ronald de Leeuw, 'Art in transit: Give and take in Dutch art', and Elisabeth de Bièvre, 'The visual subplot: Local art, global trade and the socio-ethics of exchange, Amsterdam, 1580–1680', both in Jaynie Anderson, ed., *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence: The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress of the History of Art*, Melbourne, 2009, 10–17, 296–9. On the problem of essential 'Dutchness' see Willem Frijhoff, 'Dutchness in fact and fiction', in Joyce D. Goodfriend, Benjamin Schmidt and Annette Stott, eds, *Going Dutch: The Dutch Presence in America, 1609–2009*, Leiden and Boston, MA, 2008, 327–58.
- 29 Marten Jan Bok, "'Paintings for sale': New marketing techniques in the Dutch art market of the Golden Age", in Marten Jan Bok, et al., *At Home in the Golden Age. Masterpieces from the SØR Rusche Collection*, ed. Jannet de Goede and Martine Gosselink, Zwolle, 2008.
- 30 On Dutch collecting practices, see E. Bergvelt and R. Kistemaker, eds, *De Wereld Binnen Handbereik: Nederlandse Kunst- en Rareitenverzamelingen, 1585–1735*, 2 vols, Zwolle, 1992.
- 31 De Leeuw, 'Art in transit', 11.
- 32 For more on this public role, see Angela Vanhaelen, 'Public and private intercourse in Dutch genre scenes: Soldiers and enigmatic women/painters and enigmatic paintings', in Paul Yachnin and Marlene Eberhart, eds, *Forms of Association: Making Publics in Early Modern Europe in Dialogue with Richard Helgerson*, forthcoming with University of Massachusetts Press.
- 33 Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the politics of value', in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, 1986, 3–63.
- 34 Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, new, revised and augmented edition, ed. Luce Giard, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik, Minneapolis, MN and London, 1998, xxi.
- 35 Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, Los Angeles, CA, 1999; Roland Barthes, 'The World as Object' (1953), in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader*, New York, 1982, 62–73.
- 36 Men siet veel Schilderijen / Een yder na sijn sin / Dat doet het hert verblijen / Wat die of dat beduyt / veel leggen het daer uyt / Maecken soo een besluit. Cited in Bok, "'Paintings for sale'", 21, 29. Translated by Vanhaelen.