Abstract:

Against Interpretation: Georgia O'Keeffe and 'the Zen of Aestheticism'

Georgia O'Keeffe's reputation as exemplary American innocent was part of the persona that circulated along with her work and with her photographic portraits, throughout her career. This essay argues that O'Keeffe's stylisation of her life and work was a response to early twentieth century structures of interpretation, and argues that, through reference to Asian metaphysics as they appeared in America in the universalised design prinicples of Arthur Wesley Dow and Eugene Fenollosa's work in particular, as well as to American traditions of 'plain speech', O'Keeffe used a formalist, aestheticist version of an Asian-inspired aesthetic to pre-empt and parry contemporary psychoanalytic readings of her work and person.

Against Interpretation: Georgia O'Keeffe and 'the Zen of Aestheticism'

"I have nothing more to say than what I painted"

In 1922 Georgia O'Keeffe remarked that despite being embarrassed by publicity she needed to be talked about because people "buy through their ears".[1] This often-repeated comment is a clear reflection of her awareness of the need to construct and manipulate an artistic persona in order to survive in the American marketplace, but it also functions, as I argue below, as a subtler marker of the particular quality of that self-fashioning. The original context for the quotation is a reflection found almost twenty years earlier in Kakuzo Okakura's popular translation of Chinese and Japanese culture in his *Book of Tea* (1906), where Okakura attributes it to a "Chinese critic, centuries ago" who complained that "people criticize a picture by their ear".[2] The *Book of Tea* offers an aestheticized version of modern life that draws from the discipline of traditional cultures, aiming to enhance life through deliberate acts of domestic ritual and self-composition. In the pages that follow, I trace the confluence between visual style and interpretation through the intensely mythologized life and work of Georgia O'Keeffe to lay out how O'Keeffe uses a style of painting and persona derived from a contemporary mixture of American transcendentalism and a formalist interpretation of Asian ideas in order to control her reception in the wake of other, often Freudian-inspired, myths that circulated around her work and biography.

Particularly after Alfred Stieglitz' exhibition of intimate nudes of O'Keeffe at the Anderson Galleries in 1921, contemporary readings of O'Keeffe's work collapsed her paintings and persona into an earthy, elemental presence, competed with the readings that saw sex in the stretched, unfurling forms of her early abstract paintings and charcoals, as well as in the more obviously "vulval" shapes of the later flowers. Photos of O'Keeffe in front of these abstracts encouraged this conflation.[3] The identification of O'Keeffe's paintings, pastels and person with the expression of sexuality, as Marcia Brennan argues in *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory*, tied together a particular set of American cultural assumptions. "The Little Galleries of the Photo Secession" grew out of Stieglitz's adaptation of European *symbolisme* into photographic "pictorialism", but also out of the example of the Vienna *Seccezion*, when the Freudian moment coincided with a *fin de siecle* glamorization of the taboo matter that Freud posited underlay the civilized psyche. The pictorialist impulse in photography acted as an American version of decadent art where the more lurid tropes of late European romanticism – languid maidens, sphynxes and nude, snake-draped temptresses – were invoked to give a coded representation of imagination, fantasy and limit experiences like dreams, sexuality, hallucinations, religious

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[1] Sharyn R. Udall, *Carr, O'Keeffe, Kahlo: Places of Their Own* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 288.

[2] Kakuzo Okakura, *The Book of Tea* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1906), 116.

[3] See *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Camera: The Art of Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

experience, and near-death states. As Bram Dijkstra points out, Stieglitz had large reproductions of Franz Von Stuck's *Sin* (1897) and *The Sphinx's Kiss* (1895) prominently displayed in the house he shared with Emmy, his first wife, and the way in which O'Keeffe debuted into the artistic community was bound up with the ways in which that community saw women, sex, art and the unconscious as equivalents.[4]

From its earliest exhibition, O'Keeffe's work was subject to a metaphorical slippage in reading that discounted her conscious decisions to the extent that contemporary criticism held that it was as if "the organs that differentiate the sex speak", as the influential commentator Paul Rosenfeld put it.[5] This biographically ascribed speech unsurprisingly comes into conflict with O'Keeffe's autobiographical accounts of voice. From the beginning of her career O'Keeffe speaks about aesthetic affect in terms of what a picture can "say", "the very basis of painting" is "lines and colors put together so that they say something", and even as late as her trips to Hawaii in 1939 she talks about a way of painting where the land is bound up with an internal space and a personal form of expression: "one sees new things rapidly everywhere when everything seems new and different. It has to become a part of one's world, a part of what one has to speak with".[6] Here, the notion of voice can be seen as marking not so much a verbal agency, but a mixture of what is presented through form, color and style, and the less easily located residue of artistic intension and expression. The "voice" is what the work says; the myth, that site of negotiation between the work, artist and public, is the attribution of that presentation to what the artist intends and communicates. It's clear that O'Keeffe feels that the visual is able to contain a precise message that is distorted when it is translated into any other modality: "I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way – things that I had no words for", "I know I can not paint a flower. I can not paint the sun on the desert on a bright summer morning but maybe in terms of paint color I can convey to you my experience that makes the flower of significance to me at that particular time".[7] And yet, the connection to ideas of voice, of speaking, and of personal communication, are precisely what she works to avoid in her interviews. When Blanche Matthias asks her about "Expressionism", a term that in a turn of the century American context was associated with the artist's "reveries or adventures in the emotional world" and with the Stieglitz circle in particular, she vehemently denies it, as she does in later years when she's asked about Abstract Expressionism: "I never think about expressing anything. I'm not so wonderful that my thoughts should be expressed that way", "I like to be interested, and I paint what interests

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[4] Ruth E. Fine, *The Book Room*: *Georgia O'Keeffe's Library in Abiquiu* (New York: The Grollier Club, 1997), 36.

[5] Barbara Buhler Lynes, "The Language of Criticism: Its Effect on Georgia O'Keeffe's Art in the 1920s" in Christopher Merrill and Ellen Bradbury, *From The Faraway Nearby: Georgia O'Keeffe as Icon* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub.,1992), 43-54. 40.

[6] Sarah Whitaker Peters, *Becoming O'Keeffe*: *The Early Years* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2001) 144; Jennifer Saville, "Georgia O'Keeffe in Hawaii" in Merrill and Bradbury, 113-126, 124.

[7] Whitaker Peters, 144; Saville in Merrill and Bradbury, 124.

me".[8] By the time she is eighty this has modulated into the bravura of the international icon and the visual is given to the viewer of an O'Keeffe as a *fait accomplit*, a block and an end to interpretation: "the meaning is there on the canvas. If you don't get it, that's too bad. I have nothing more to say than what I painted".[9]

O'Keeffe may also have rejected the term "expressionism" because it was a contemporary cliché, related to anti-rational ideas of the subconscious and the visionary that, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker argue, became particularly attached to the idea of the woman artist.[10] Elizabeth Luther Cary writes in 1923 that O'Keeffe maintained that she painted to please herself, "and there is true originality in not saying that she does it to express herself", but also because the currents of expressionism had entered into criticism too, to give forth what might have been called in the idiom of the time "dythyrambic" readings, so that, as O'Keeffe wrote in a letter to Mitchell Kennerley, "the things they write sound so strange and far removed from what I feel of myself. They make me feel like some strange sort of creature flashing in the air – breathing in clouds for nourishment – when the truth is that I like beef steak – and I like it rare at that".[11] When O'Keeffe protested that she was not an "exponent of Expressionism" she maintained both that she paints out of an un-gendered appreciation of the land, "It is necessary to feel America, live America, love America, then work", and "I want to paint in terms of my own thinking, and feeling the fact and things which men know", but also that she didn't like being called "Expressionist" because, she said, "I dislike cults and isms" and preferred that women's painting be given a "healthier and stronger title".[12] This reference to cults, isms and sickliness also carried with it decadent connotations. When Marsden Hartley speculates that "Georgia O'Keeffe pictures are essays in experience that neither Rops nor Moreau nor Baudelaire could have smiled away", he summons up the masters of the European decadent, along with all the tropes of sickness and pain that came to signify sex in the late nineteenth century.[13] "Expression" hence meant affective communication, in the sense of O'Keeffe trying over and over again to create some form of bond of sensation between the painter and the viewer, but also it was used in a Freudian sense as the opposite of a specifically sexual repression.

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[8] Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916-1929* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989) 249; Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, *Full Bloom: The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Norton, 2005) 450.

[9] Sharyn R, Udall, "Beholding the epiphanies: mysticism and the art of Georgia O'Keeffe" in Merrill and Bradbury, 89-112, 97.

[10] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013)

[11] *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics,* 186; Georgia O'Keeffe, Jack Cowart, Juan Hamilton and Sarah Greenough, *Georgia O'Keeffe - Art and Letters* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1987), 137.

[12] O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 249.

[13] O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics 170.

The idea of expression as equivalent to unwitting truth, testimony and sexual exposure forms such a part of the popular imagination in this period that, as Steven Watson describes in *Strange Bedfellows: The First American Avant-Garde*, parties and salons like Mabel Dodge's encouraged "Freuding" where party goers would free associate, more or less as a parlor game, allowing slips to 'give themselves away' at any number of points.[14] Marcia Brennan's book explains how this sexualization of the artistic impulse was very much part of the vocabulary with which contemporary American critics like Rosenfeld wrote about the whole of the Stieglitz group of painters, and, in keeping with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century fascination for typologies evident in the sexual schema of the early psychoanalysts and sexologists (as well as in contemporary theories of race), this exposure wasn't so much a trace of individuality as the essentialist mark of a type or genus of person: John Marin was virile, Charles Demuth was decadent, Marsden Hartley was dark and O'Keeffe was "Woman", she argues.[15] Period discourses like those found in works by Havelock Ellis, Otto Rank, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were rehearsed and reshaped in gatherings such as the D.H. Lawrence and Mabel Dodge Luhan circles in New Mexico, where O'Keeffe visited before she ended up settling in a more remote part of the state. These discourses, often through a model adopted from Henri Bergson's *élan vital*, all conflate sexual energy with artistic energy and reanimate the old quasi mechanical debate about whether sexual energy is the basic propellant of all other wills, whether it's the body interfering with the mind as master, or whether sexual energy is a manifestation of, for example, some larger form of religious, communal or spiritual energy. The Freudian-inflected discourse was one where people, especially women, spoke despite themselves. Occasionally this worked to O'Keeffe's comfort, as when Hutchings Hapgood persuaded her that her more salacious reviewers were just describing their own concerns (and when O'Keeffe was able to evade her part in posing for and composing the nude photos Stieglitz exhibited of her with the assertion that Stieglitz was ultimately "always photographing himself", but more often it produced a discourse where she was supposedly to have expressed herself without thought or agency.[16]

O'Keeffe's response to this biographical impulse was to counter it with a parrying autobiographical one, in the form of accounts of herself in interviews and letters that constructed her persona as "innocent". One of the reasons that Stieglitz' and Hartley's irrationalist readings stuck was that O'Keeffe herself cultivated a version of herself as unvarnished intuitive. She referred to my "so called mind" and spoke of not understanding theoretical interpretations of her work and of feeling photography as art "because I am not clogged with too much knowledge".[17] O'Keeffe's letters have a mixture of apparent simplicity and tactlessness similar to Gertrude Stein's writing; Lynes demonstrates that her letters began to break down conventional patterns of

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[14] See Steven Watson, *Strange Bedfellows: The First American Avant-Garde* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991); Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 134.

[15] Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 97.

[16] Udall, 118.

[17] O'Keeffe, Stieglitz, and the Critics, 183.

structure, tense and punctuation around the time O'Keeffe read Stein's portraits of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse in *Camera Work* in 1916, and like Stein she might be thought of as cultivating a kind of valorized American innocence captured in Emerson's call of "Here's for the plain old Adam, the simple genuine self against the whole world" and D.H. Lawrence's reading of "the true myth of America" where America represents "a gradual sloughing of the old skin, towards a new youth".[18] Despite her extensive formal artistic training, O'Keeffe discounted or downplayed her professionalism, keying her into the kinds of early twentieth century readings of the wise, wild child that Kathleen Pyne reads convincingly, where "the modernist image of the artist as a child served as a strategy by which the abstracted and simplified language of modernism could claim the authority of a true, pure, unmediated vision of the world as it is" and where the art of Stieglitz's niece, Georgia Englehart, was exhibited at 291 amidst the avant garde and "primitive" art with the title "The Child Unguided–Untaught".[19] For Stieglitz, steeped in a background of German romanticism as well as in the American strain, this wildness is both primitivized and sensationalized as he refracts it through a vocabulary of childishness and sensuous "innocence". In his famous statement O'Keeffe (who was then thirty-one) was "The Great Child pouring out some more of her Woman self on paper – purely – truly – unspoiled".[20] While the Stieglitz circle cultivated O'Keeffe's innocence in the twenties as part of an attempt to recode female sexuality as shameless, fearless and sinless (a reading which, of course, depends on the equation of woman, sex and sin being still residually present) O'Keeffe cultivated it as a kind of unknowing that consistently evaded interpretation and culpability, so that eroticism was "something people themselves put into the paintings. They've found things that never entered my mind. That doesn't mean they weren't there, but the things they said astonished me. It wouldn't occur to me. But Alfred talked that way and people took it from him".[21] O'Keeffe's later comments in the 1939 American Place program were much more acid: "Well – I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower, you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower – and I don't".[22]

"The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon"

O'Keeffe, like Thoreau, was a lifelong walker, and indeed, her work, and her attempts to parry sexualized interpretation with an assertion of her place in the American landscape might be read as an evocation of the American romantic frontier tradition that has always equated rural space with freedom. O'Keeffe maintained a relationship with an American sublime through returning

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[18] Joel Porte, ed., *Emerson in his Journals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 99; D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, vol. 2. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence*, ed., Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 58.

[19] Kathleen Pyne, "Response: On Feminine Phantoms: Mother, Child, and Woman-Child", *The Art Bulletin* 88:1 (2006), 44-61.

[20] Roxana Robinson, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life* (Lebanon: UPNE, 1989) 195.

[21] Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking Press, 1976) , n.p.

[22] Ibid.

time and time again to the grand vistas of the Southwest, eventually moving permanently from New York to Ghost Ranch in Taos, New Mexico, and then to a large, flat Spanish colonial building in the wind-scrubbed spaces of Abiquiu where she installed huge windows to join the inside to the sweeping distances outside. O'Keeffe's is the same period where Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin in Europe, and Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos in America, are writing about the city as a scattering, as a trauma to "the sensorium", and, as Marin wrote to Stieglitz in 1933, it was felt that the "true artist" needed to "go from time to time to the elemental big forms – Sky, Sea, Mountains, Plain", "to sort of re-true himself up, to recharge the battery".[23] This transcendentalist through-line does not, however, mean that O'Keeffe repeats the concern that Emerson, Thoreau and Walt Whitman had with what it means to be part of a civil body within a democratic society in any easy way. Instead, O'Keeffe's work returns to the harmonious personal consciousness as the basis of a righted existence. O'Keeffe, although once talking of the "warm grip" of the city, grew to dread the commotion of exhibition in New York so much it made her ill, lamenting to Sherwood Anderson: "I don't know why people disturb me so much – they make me feel like a hobbled horse".[24] It seems from her letters that walking between the urban and the rural allowed O'Keeffe to endure the pressures of the social in a way that parallels what Emerson wrote in *Nature*, nearly a century earlier, where the land is used as an antidote for his own, nineteenth-century modernity: "The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough".[25] In her paintings O'Keeffe reprises Emerson and Thoreau's rich and sensitive renderings of solitude, and in the myth she created around herself she perhaps reprises some of their curmudgeonliness too, if not their misanthropic leanings. It is easy to imagine Thoreau nodding approval down the ages as O'Keeffe writes to Marsden Hartley: "I wish people were all trees" because "I could enjoy them then".[26]

As Kristina Wilson writes in an article on Stieglitz's role as conduit for both the theosophical and the transcendental traditions, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century popularization of versions of religion that sought immediate, affective connection to something outside of the modern passed into contemporary discourse as a "pervasive concern with the loss of spiritual touchstones in daily life" and a resurgence of the transcendentalist idea that one could read the workings of God through direct observation of nature.[27] The natural world also functioned, I would add, as part of a secularized discourse of health that O'Keeffe, Waldo Frank and Sherwood Anderson all invested in the artists' persona. These divine workings were always at the service of the practical and tangible, the natural was married to physical, as well as spiritual, wellness, as it

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[23] Charles C. Eldredge and Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe: American and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 180.

[24] O'Keeffe, Cowart, Hamilton and Greenough, 178.

[25] Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe, 1849), 14.

[26] Udall, 129.

[27] Kristina Wilson, "The Intimate Gallery and the 'Equivalents': Spirituality in the 1920s Work of Stieglitz," *The Art Bulletin*, 85:4 (December 2003), 746-768, 748.

was for the transcendentalists at their earlier point in modernity. "I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least – and it is commonly more than that – sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements", Thoreau wrote.[28]

In 1881 George Miller Beard published the influential *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences*, where he posited that modern life was debilitating the nation in conditions of "nervousness" that were "especially frequent and severe in the Northern and Eastern portions of the United States": "The chief and primary cause of this development and very rapid increase of nervousness in modern civilization, which is distinguished from the ancient by these five characteristics: steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women", he concludes.[29] Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) also invoked this nervousness in a European urban setting, lamenting that "the degenerate is not in a condition to fix his attention long, or indeed at all, on any subject, and is equally incapable of correctly grasping, ordering, or elaborating into ideas and judgments the impressions of the external world conveyed to his distracted consciousness by his defectively operating senses".[30] (Indeed, one can still hear echoes of these concerns in Harold Stearns' *Civilization in the United States: An Enquiry by Thirty Americans* (1922), but to the contrary, where Alfred B. Kuttner's essay on "Nerves" provides a tongue-in-cheek history of neuraesthenia, via Beard and Freud, and where George Soule calls the back-to-the-land movement "a sentimental complex superinduced by the nervous hysteria of the city".[31]) Despite the near-century that lies between Emerson, Thoreau, and the Steiglitz circle, the imagination of nature as antidote to shattered "nerves" remains constant, even if the exact relationships to gender, science and communication experienced shifts and reformulations. As William Cronon argues in "The Trouble with Wildness" (writing against these myths that construct the idea of nature as an unspoilt non-human Other), wilderness has been historically claimed both as "the ultimate landscape of authenticity" and as "the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness".[32]

Sherwood Anderson's introduction to Stieglitz's 1925 "Seven Americans" exhibition also explicitly places the paintings and photographs of Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Charles Demuth, Paul Strand, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alfred Stieglitz as vessels of a kind of native experience

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[28] Henry David Thoreau. "Walking." *Excursions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton & Co., 1863), 161-214, 164.

[29] George M. Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Putnam, 1881), vi.

[30] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Heinemann, 1895), 21.

[31] Harold Stearns, ed., *Civilization in the United States* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1922), 285.

[32] William Cronon, 'The Trouble With Wilderness' in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 69.

and attention not available in the modern city, but nevertheless which provides a physical and mental antidote for that city. "The men and women of the city are very tired", Anderson writes,

> They also are tired as you are tired; life presses down upon them as it presses down upon you.
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> See them here in their moments of life – when life, pumped through their bodies, crept down into their fingers.
>
> When they were alive and conscious of all – everything –
>
> When they were conscious of canvas, of color, of textures –
>
> When they were conscious of clouds, horses, fields, winds, and water.
>
> This show is for me the distillation of the clean emotional life of seven real American artists.[33]

As Frank's sympathetic reading in a chapter of *Time Exposures* called 'White Paint and Good Order' makes clear, the smooth surface and whiteness of O'Keeffe's style and of her persona was identified with this American landscape, taken as tabula rasa and associated with clarity, simplicity and an original innocence as a deliberate counterpoint to her more sexualized depiction. "How could you expect New York to admit what it likes in O'Keeffe is precisely the fact that she is clear as water? Cool as water? New York is sure, it is too sophisticated to care for anything but cocktails. What a blow to our pride, to confess that it is neither more nor less than the well-water deepness of O'Keeffe which holds us! Better pour the simple stuff of her art into cunningly wrought goblets of interpretation. Better talk of "mystic figures of womanhood," of "Sumerian entrail-symbols," of womb-dark hieroglyphics", Frank complains.[34]

Frank chooses to emphasize the construction of the artist as cool and clear over these "cunningly wrought goblets of interpretation" as, it seemed, did O'Keeffe, and this was made manifest in a shift of painterly focus, too. O'Keeffe's career presents a striking reversal of the usual avant-gardist progression from mimesis to abstraction; contrary to artists like Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso and Wassily Kandinsky, O'Keeffe's work begun with strikingly simplified charcoal and watercolor abstractions that, as Sarah Whitaker Peters argues in *Becoming O'Keeffe*, echo the organically based decorative elements of Art Nouveau, before moving into a language of abstracted but more readily identifiable objects that she hoped would block readings of her paintings as eroticized personal expression. In 1924 she wrote to Sherwood Anderson that she had made a concerted effort to move away from abstraction into the painting of objects because

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[33] O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 211.

[34] *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics,* 254.

she didn't like the way her abstracts had been read: my work this year is very much on the ground – there will be only two abstract things – or three at the most – all the rest is objective – as objective as I can make it….". She continues: "I suppose the reason I got down to an effort to be objective is that I didn't like the interpretations of my other things – so here I am with an array of alligator pears – about ten of them – calla lilies– four or six – leaves – summer green ones – ranging through yellow to the dark somber blackish purplish red – eight or ten – horrid yellow sunflowers – two new red cannas–- some white birches with yellow leaves – only two that I have no name for and I don't know where they came from".[35] O'Keeffe's myth moves away from ideas of the subconscious, or a communication despite herself, to alignment with the landscape, where the material and natural world is given to the viewer as the primary meaning of her work, which, translated into a decorative and stylized form, move closer to a form of depersonalized aestheticism.

"Fill space in a beautiful way"

Modernist form, as it is articulated by the group of artists associated with Alfred Steiglitz's 291 gallery, ferments with anti-modern traditions and sentiments; concomitantly the suggestion of meditative attention in modernist visual simplicity might be seen as a corrective for modern "nerves". However, both the modernist "discovery" of non-perspectival modes for dealing with space, and an aestheticized approach to both those objects and space, foregrounds relationships with the lived and natural environment that was in Chinese and Japanese cultures already mythically ancient. Referring to the early abstractions that forms the first plates of *Some Memories of Drawings*, O'Keeffe comments that "along the way I had probably looked very carefully at Chinese and Japanese paintings and calligraphy before I got to the Blue Lines."[36] She read Eugene Fenollosa's *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* in 1917, and it is clear that the Asian-influenced ideas that flow throughout American intellectual history comprise a substantial part of the ways in which O'Keeffe understood both form and the practice of the artist. O'Keeffe's color-blocking and dissolution of the individual brushstroke may contain both primitivist elements of the American 'plain style' and the deliberate simplicity of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian traditions, but it certainly did not come from actual illiteracy or lack of artistic education. Indeed, as the contents of her book room at Abiquiu demonstrate, O'Keeffe too continued a thorough engagement with Asian aesthetics throughout her life.

O'Keeffe's stylization takes cues from nineteenth century attitudes to nature and art, but also from the universalizing conception of harmony that at the time Fenollosa, Arthur Wesley Dow, Wassily Kandinsky and Clive Bell all find in pre-modern cultures. The fact that these cultures are ones that the theorists all had limited access to is germane. The inherent value of decorative design prized in these interpretations of Eastern arts of living are magnified by the kind of elegant

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[35] Lynes in Merrill and Bradbury, 49.

[36] Doris Bry, ed., *Some Memories of Drawings: Georgia O'Keeffe* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), n.p.

emptying out of meaning that occurs when these same Asian traditions are read by a viewer with only limited access to their context. In searching for a style that could not be translated into a Freudian idiom O'Keeffe then adapted work that still existed on the edge of linguistic and cultural comprehension for many American readers. Dow's notion of "an impression of beauty entirely independent of meaning" has its parallels with the British art theorist Bell's influential early twenty century concept of "significant form" not just in that it sought to use form to evoke the "personal experience of a peculiar emotion", but in the sense that these design rules are translated intact, through abstract form, across cultures, between public and private spaces, and through long and complex histories.[37]

The universalizing conception of visual structure and affect evident in cross cultural responses to *notan* for Dow, spacing for Fenollosa, and significant form for Bell, had its parallels in the Freudian (and later, Jungian) inspired resurgence of the idea of a universal symbol, but for O'Keeffe they produced very two different forms of interpretation, one where form was given to us as autonomous, retinal, and decorative, and another where that form was symbolic, expressive and biographical. What is at stake here is not just the modernist divorce between visual and verbal understanding, but the idea of equivalence in general — whether a pairing between manifest and latent content exists, and, if so, whether either of these contains an interpretable trace of the biographical. While the work of art might give an equivalent to an experience, as well as constituting an experience in itself, what was at issue was whether that equivalence functioned in a symbolic or purely affective mode, and whether the assertion of latent content was admissible. O'Keeffe's negotiation of her own myth was to firmly and continuously assert the latter, whilst returning to recognizable subjects and decorative finish to attempt to shore up the self-evident nature of her paintings. In O'Keeffe's case the adoption of a painterly and personal style that mixed formalism with decorative values taken from the arts of the East functioned as a reply to the idea of latent, inner meaning.

O'Keeffe's comments never seemed to entertain a divide between aesthetic and domestic, and in this, there's strong evidence for an aestheticist current in her work, particularly in the ways in which both pictorial and environmental objects and spaces are held to control and modulate the subject's emotional and attentive response. This sense of art being the mediator between the interior and exterior lives, and of the value of what R.V. Johnson calls "contemplative aestheticism", that is, treating "life in the spirit of art", is one held in common by Zen and aestheticist traditions, and O'Keeffe's work matured at the moment when the legacy of the two was manifest in Asian-inspired arts and crafts movements in America.[38] O'Keeffe committed to art, and art teaching, she says, when she heard a lecturer talking about art as decoration – "Art, he said, consisted in putting the right thing in the right place", she remembered - and she taught

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[37] Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1903) 53; Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1913) 8,6.

[38] Kelly Comfort, ed., *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De-Humanizing and Re-Humanizing Art, the Artist, and the Artistic Receptor* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 3.

through the lens of Arthur Wesley Dow's design-led ideas about composition.[39] Dow's exercises point in a fairly literal manner to some of the elemental forms that O'Keeffe was to experiment with – trees, buildings against sky, the idea of "visual music" -- as well as valorising "an impression of beauty entirely independent of meaning".[40] Dow took seriously the ideals of William Morris, and fed it into what Morris's mentor, Fenollosa, learnt from Japanese representational systems, teaching in *Composition* (1899), that art was a call to "fill a space in a beautiful way".[41] (And here O'Keeffe also intersects with the wider currents of modernism, within which whom Fenollosa became important to not just — famously — Ezra Pound, but also, through D.T. Suzuki, to John Cage and the post-war American avant-garde). *Composition* detailed methods for making some of these supposedly universal laws less unknown and mysterious; exercises undertaken "in progressive order, first building up very simple harmonies, then proceeding on to the highest forms of composition", taught the orchestration of these colors and spaces.[42] This progressive reduction that looks to bring formal structure out from underneath surface and texture can be seen clearly in the *Jack in the Pulpit* series (1930), and was a technique that informed her lifelong practice of abstracting from planar and design elements.

In Laurence Binyon's The Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan (1911), which O'Keeffe acquired a copy of in the 1940s, O'Keeffe marks a passage on the value of emptiness that might gesture toward the pictorial valence of space in her work: "Space therefore, empty space, becomes a positive factor, no longer something not filled and left over, but something exerting an attractive power to the eye, and balancing the attractive power of forms and masses. But, to exert this power, space must be used broadly and with emphasis, as an end in itself".[43] Dow's direction to fill space in a beautiful way, was then for O'Keeffe also a matter of absorbing it and emptying it, and this appears to have also held for the lifestyle she presented in interviews, in her self-presentation through dress, and in the photographs of her homes that appeared after her move to New Mexico. As Wanda Corn states, "formalist philosophy – where emptiness was accorded the same importance as occupied space – guided O'Keeffe's entire career. It was her aesthetic as a painter, as an exhibition designer, as a decorator of her houses", and "it defined her style of dressing as well".[44] O'Keeffe's statement in 1922 that "I prefer to live in a room as bare as possible" is an attempt to construct a plain speaking, plain living, American persona, certainly, but her reasons are much more in keeping with the Asian-derived universalist aesthetics outlined by Fenollosa and Morris.[45] As Kathleen

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[39] Drohojowska-Philp, 213.

[40] Dow, 53.

[41] Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *The Poetry of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.

[42] Dow, 3.

[43] Laurence Binyon, The Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan (London: J. Murray, 1911), 76.

[44] Wanda M. Corn, "Telling Tales, Georgia O'Keeffe on Georgia O'Keeffe," American Art 23:2 (2009), 54-79. 65.

[45] O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 182.

Pyne points out, Fenollosa thought Whistler's aestheticist synthesis of Eastern and Western cultures could lead America toward a more "perfect type of spiritual living" as the individual life took on the qualities of art.[46] Okakura's *Book of Tea* makes it clear that the deliberate composition of the Japanese tea room and its rituals gives an aesthetic to live by: "The tea-masters held that real appreciation of art is only possible to those who make of it a living influence",

> The cut and color of the dress, the poise of the body, and the manner of walking could all be made expressions of artistic personality. These were matters not to be lightly ignored, for until one has made himself beautiful he has no right to approach beauty. Thus the tea-master strove to be something more than the artist, – art itself. It was the Zen of aestheticism.[47]

Asian art also suggested an ideal simplicity and concentration on the part of the artist. In the eleventh century essay on landscape that Fenollosa quotes at length, the ideal Japanese landscape painter is shown as committed to order inside and outside of his work, cultivating the sense of beauty and form through intense contemplation of isolated elements and objects. "He that wishes to study flower-painting should put one blossoming plant in an earthen pot, and look upon it from above", Kuo Hsi instructs.[48] Okakura's *Book of Tea* also reminds the reader of the links between focus and aesthetic pleasure: "one cannot listen to different pieces of music at the same time", he asserts.[49] This focus on attention is inherited from Eastern traditions by American transcendentalist approaches too, and O'Keeffe may have absorbed its principles from both streams. Indeed, this singularity of attention both traditions share may be part of the reason why Fenollosa, and after him, Dow and Okakura, became so popular with American artists (and why Fenollosa was reading Emerson while he was in Japan). Buddhist, Taoist and transcendentalist traditions set an ideally careful look against the tendency to fragment and to ignore much of what is around. Teaching art as a means of "filling space" from this perspective means teaching the use of pictorial space, but also the space of a room, or the space of the body, "when you buy a pair of shoes or place a window in the front of a house or address a letter or comb your hair, consider it carefully, so that it looks well", O'Keeffe told her students.[50] This formalist elegance functioned to construct her persona as modernist icon, demonstrating and enforcing control over her attention, her representation and her environment. O'Keeffe's walls and furniture at the Shelton were draped in white because of what seems more like extreme sensitivity than ascetic restraint: the home is made to resemble an empty exhibition space because "color does something to me", she explained to Lillian Sabine, and "in this total absence of color" she was "free to think".[51]

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[46] Pyne, 131.

[47] Okakura, 162.

[48] Ernest Fenollosa. *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design* (London: Heinemann, 1912; Berkeley: Stone Bridge Classics, 2007), 316.

[49] Okakura, 93.

[50] Hutton Turner, 3.

[51] O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 289.

Here, O'Keeffe too voices an aestheticist conception of form as a subtle machine for liberating and generating attention, intellect and emotion, at the same time as she implicitly presents her own life against a blanked background in the manner that a work of art was presented in the blank space of the new modern galleries.

Conclusion

The privileging of the artist's modes of attention in explanations of the creative process has two contrary effects on biographical interpretation, which perhaps also goes some way towards explaining how movements towards formalism and the autonomy of the work of art seem always to be accompanied by movements towards the cult of the artist's persona. Firstly, attention to the object is given to us instead of the kinds of narratives of intention and reason that form the core of biographical interpretation. Influenced by Buddhist ideas of emptying out the mind in contemplation as well as by formalist criticism, the object under study — not the artist studying it — becomes, in the accounts of artists like O'Keeffe and John Cage, a privileged center of interpretation for the reader or viewer of the work. In O'Keeffe's work this is manifest in her insistent focus on painting the Southwestern landscape. Secondly though, the canvas as a place for capturing the artist's own experience becomes a prototype for and a guide for the viewer's experience, and biographical accounts become even more valuable in the quest to corroborate and share the experience of that artwork (and here I have the reception of Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko particularly in mind). Indeed, J. R. R. Christie and Fred Orton argue that it is biography that shores up accounts of art as expression because "without it critics cannot make convincingly any claims as to what a painting is to be seen as expressing. They can only claim that a painting is expressive".[52] For O'Keeffe, attempting to direct the readings of these 'expressions', a movement from abstraction towards more mimetic flowers, fruits, shells and landscapes was not just stylistic, but was also a clear attempt to control biographical interpretation in both the sense of creating a mode of seeing and asserting the aesthetic autonomy of that way of seeing. This attempt to block paintings "I have no name for and I don't know where they came from" in favor of more obviously classifiable pieces is one that O'Keeffe sustained until the fifties and sixties, by which time work and artists' statements by the Minimalists, Conceptualists and Abstract Expressionists had produced a formalist critical vocabulary with which to discuss art that is not mimetic. What's interesting in this conflict though is not so much the question of whether the "real" content of O'Keeffe's work was female sexuality, but that the argument for art's autonomy encapsulated in the assertion that painting should be readable only in aesthetic terms – a hallmark of the modern – was coming into conflict here with the other, equally modern, forms of interpretation practiced by psychoanalysts and symbolists. This meant that it wasn't just the autonomy of art that was at stake, but that the autonomy of the American artist – and more specifically, the American woman artist - was too, and this conflict was played out on the ground of biography, and, on a larger scale, over the territories of biographical, historical and formalist art criticism. The dialectic between interpretation and disinterested forms of attention is encapsulated here in O'Keeffe's efforts to use American and Asian myths of innocence and contentlessness in a personal and artistic style to

[52] Charles G. Salas, *The Life & the Work: Art and Biography* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 12.

control and author her own reputation and to assert that her works have “nothing more to say than what I painted”.[53]

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[53] Udall in Merril and Bradbury, 97.