

Randall, or The Painted Grape
and
**Beyond Ekphrasis: The Role and Function of
Artworks in the Novels of Don DeLillo**

Jonathan Gibbs

Thesis submitted for the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy
at The University of East Anglia, Department of Literature,
Drama, and Creative Writing, July 2013.

© This copy of the thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognize that its copyright rests with the author and that use of any information derived there from must be in accordance with current UK Copyright Law. In addition, any quotation or extract must include full attribution.

Abstract

This thesis is presented in two sections: firstly, a novel, *Randall, or The Painted Grape*; and secondly, an essay, ‘Beyond Ekphrasis: The Role and Function of Artworks in the Novels of Don DeLillo’.

Randall, or The Painted Grape is a novel about the Young British Artists. It takes the form of a fictitious biographical memoir of an artist, Randall, written by his friend Vincent, after Randall’s death. This memoir is interpolated with sections treating Vincent and Justine, Randall’s widow, following their discovery of a series of previously unknown paintings by Randall.

‘Beyond Ekphrasis: The Role and Function of Artworks in the Novels of Don DeLillo’ discusses critical approaches to the treatment of artworks in fiction. It considers existing theories of ekphrasis (the literary description of a work of art) and explores how far these theories, which most often treat poems addressing paintings and sculptures, can be applied to prose fiction, and to post-representational and conceptual art forms. Taking examples from three recent novels by Don DeLillo: *Falling Man*, *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist*, the essay looks at ways in which novelistic ekphrasis can engage with non-literary art forms that differ and go beyond those put forward by canonical theories of ekphrasis.

These include: the treatment of the art encounter in an extended narrative; the ethics and etiquette of representation; the use of structural rather than descriptive mimesis; and the possibility of a non-paragonal, or non-confrontational, relationship between the treating and treated art forms. Finally, with reference to *The Body Artist*, the essay suggests the possibility of a ‘reverse ekphrasis’, by which the novel as a whole can be read as a representation of an artwork that is nowhere fully described in the text.

List of Contents

Abstract.....	2
List of Contents.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Section One: <i>Randall, or The Painted Grape</i>	5
Section Two: Beyond Ekphrasis: The Role and Function of Artworks in the Novels of Don DeLillo	268
Chapter One: Introduction.....	269
Chapter Two: <i>Falling Man</i>	284
Chapter Three: <i>Point Omega</i>	299
Chapter Four: <i>The Body Artist</i>	314
References.....	334

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my primary and secondary supervisors, Professor Giles Foden and Dr Jake Huntley, for their help and encouragement.

Note

Randall, or The Painted Grape has been edited for length for the purposes of this thesis.

SECTION ONE: Randall, or The Painted Grape

Untitled (Vincent)

Vincent was looking out of the window. He had been looking out of the window, he realised, for he knew not how long, lost in the endless, and endlessly spectacular view, or the lack of it. Somebody had spoken to him.

He turned towards the sound of the voice.

‘So sorry to disturb you, Mr Cartwright. I wondered if you would like something to drink before your meal.’

He blinked up at her, at her lips and cravat, her smile, infinitely understanding. Her cheek, as she canted towards him, was held aslant, as if for a kiss.

‘Thank you. Some water would be lovely.’

‘Of course. Would that be still or sparkling?’

‘Oh, it really doesn’t matter. Just as it comes.’

He enjoyed matching her airy delivery, as if nothing that occurred up here could ever be made to matter. He stretched the line of his smile, and she seemed to take this, correctly, as his final word on the matter.

To have a thousand people hanging on your every desire, and to want nothing, he thought. A Randallism.

He watched her move off down the aisle, then let his gaze drift over the rest of the cabin, an informal audit of the seats occupied and seats empty. This in itself was a sign of the times: to fly to New York, at six hours' notice, and come on board to find seats to spare. Though he'd have flown cattle, if truth be told.

He paused at the thought, imagined himself saying it to Justine: the manner in which he'd say it. I'd have flown cattle, if truth be told. He gave a brusque shake of the head, that was almost a shudder, as if to try and shift the excitement he had allowed to build inside himself. He rubbed his face, put on his glasses, and went back to his reading.

He read slowly and carefully, taking a sheaf of a dozen or so pages onto his lap at a time. It gave him a little lift of nostalgia, just to have the stuff in his hands, to run the pad of his thumb over its surface, or down the sharp line of its edge. So far as he could tell he was the only person working from paper: from here to the bulkhead, not so much as a book, just the usual permutations of palm, tablet and scroll. The feel of it seemed appropriate to the matter in hand, to Randall. To the historical past, and the artefacts that attested to it. To the physical fact of the work of art, stuck there in the world.

And it was something real to give to Justine. This stack of sheets, a good inch-and-a-half thick, hummingly fresh from the printer.

She had something to show him, she had said to him.

Well, he had something for her, too.

As he read, he made occasional unvoiced exclamations at the words on the page, different ways of expelling a breath that charged it with a particular, private meaning. This one might have stood for exasperation, or annoyance; that one for amusement. At one point he took out a silver-plated propelling pencil from its case and went to mark the manuscript, but hesitated, and did not.

When his food came he put the papers back into their wallet. He was barely reading the words in any case. They evaporated too easily from the page, reconstituting themselves in the air before him as a sort of reverie or memory play, where what was truly remembered merged with what was imagined, and, for him, no more than for anyone else, there was no telling the two apart.

Likewise, the film he watched after eating offered nothing but a shadow commentary on the thoughts awoken by the manuscript: of lives shared and divided, friends dead, friends divested and friends removed. Movements together, movements apart, and, very occasionally, glorious, heart-quickenings movements in parallel, towards some still unknown destination.

There's something I want you to see, was what she had said, when she called. She wouldn't say what it was, but she was insistent he come over as soon as possible. Drop whatever it is you're doing, she said. Well, he said, he had nothing to drop, which was truer than he would have liked to admit.

It was something to do with Randall, that much was obvious, but he didn't press further, lest she relent and tell him what it was after all, dissolving at a stroke the need for him to make the trip at all. It must be something big, though. A previously unknown work – a great lost sculpture? It was possible. An illegitimate child? Or a laptop, with his autobiography on it? *The Confessions of Randall*. Christ, that would be just like him, wouldn't it, after all the months and years that Vincent had spent wrestling his own thoughts into some kind of order, stopping and starting, starting over, going on bespoke writing retreats with teaching by published authors, and eventually abandoning it altogether.

His hand moved to the wallet on his table with the manuscript in it, and he rested his fingers on its cover. Whatever it was that she wanted him to see, her insistence on him flying to New York to see it involved – or so it seemed to him – the need for him to

see it in person, in the flesh, but also the need for him to be there, *with her*, when he did. The exact relation between these two things was not his to know, but it was something he could enjoy adjusting in his mind, first this way and then that, as he sipped at his water and gazed out of the cabin window into the deep, companionable void.

Once through customs he gave the cabbie the address in Tribeca and sat back, tense and exhilarated, for the drive in. He'd never liked air travel particularly, but the journey on from the airport, that was different. The way it dropped you slap-bang into the kick and swell of life, after the enforced quiescence of the flight, and brought your heart rate up to the correct speed for wherever it was you'd arrived. Berlin, Jo'burg, Tokyo, or New York.

He found himself sitting forward in his seat, picking out sights as they went. He saw the empty shell and spindly concrete mushrooms of the State Pavilion. The Cinemascope ad screens placed on either side of the Long Island Expressway, lounging like poolside movie stars against the vertical spikes of Manhattan. The canals and waterways flashing with the last flat light of the dipping sun. The skyscrapers, as they approached and overtook him, changed from the stacked microchips they seemed from a distance to some other, more confusing *trompe l'oeil* constructions: patterned motorways leading to the heavens. Everywhere, people, being New Yorkers, caught up in the workaday drama of it. The garbage trucks and street cleaners, homegoing workers, breezy cyclists.

It was six years since he'd last seen the apartment; two years at least since he'd last seen Justine; seven since Randall's death. It was a sad, paper-thin irony that, after everything they had been through, in whatever configurations, it should have taken Randall's death to put Vincent's name next to Justine's on an official document, as trustees of his estate, along with his London and New York dealers. How like him,

Vincent thought, to create such an intricate cat's cradle of obligations and tensions, and then step deftly out of it, leaving them all roped together, held mute in place around that central absence.

At the building he paid the cabbie and gave his name to the concierge, who phoned up, then waved him on to the lift. The last in a line of four, it went straight up to the penthouse. When he stepped out into the lobby she was already there.

'Vincent,' she said.

'Justine.'

He abandoned his case, leaving it to rock on its wheels as he stepped into her embrace. There was a split second – he could feel it, even as their bodies came together – when it could have been a brief, token hug. But it held, and lengthened, as if some mechanism had stalled, a cog slipped, or as if the muscle memory had taken over, overriding the social niceties. He didn't want to breathe.

He shunted his chin minutely on her shoulder, until it found its place. His nose in her hair, his arms spanning her back, one over her shoulder, the other under her arm. Her breasts pressed between them, a barrier, or the opposite of a barrier. The fit of them, even after all these years; the unchanged drop of the nape of her neck; the scent of her hair, as it fell over her ears; the way that, after a long moment, that he would have had still longer, she moved her hands to his arms, and gave him two brief squeezes there, the signal to disengage: all these things moved him.

He stood back and took her in anew. Their eyes flicked across each other's features, scanning and assessing, logging the sly depredations of age. He was aware of being hugely affected by the lessening of her beauty. It had not gone, so much as tilted in the light, lengthening like a shadow at evening.

He smiled, and she did too, each letting their own, particular version of happiness play out across their face.

‘It’s good to see you,’ she said.

‘You know, that’s just what *I* was thinking. It is *so* good to see you. You’re looking wonderful, by the way.’

She said, ‘Thank you,’ in that strange, impossibly knowing way she had, that he’d never got to the bottom of, as if she was responding to what he’d meant to say, rather than what he’d actually said.

‘Come on in. How was the flight?’

‘The flight was fine.’

‘And thank you for coming so quickly.’

Vincent made a hopeless gesture, that only betrayed the obvious fact that thanks were beside the point, that he’d have rowed across the Atlantic in a kayak if she’d only asked, but thankfully she’d already turned and was leading him through into the entrance hall that opened on to the great lightbox of the apartment.

Apartment: it was too small a word. Justine and Randall’s loft was a modernist cathedral that had settled atop a brownstone, a world-class gallery that someone had happened to roll a few pieces of furniture into, as if for an art installation. He’d been here before, of course, and chanced across it plenty of times in magazine spreads, and books, but even then, in reproduction, it never failed to astonish, to *gladden* him. Not that he could have lived somewhere quite so dramatically, forbiddingly perfect, himself, but he was pleased that someone he knew did, and that he could be made to feel comfortable there.

He walked towards the nearest window, those massive floor-to-ceiling sheets of glass that made of the city just another work, another piece in the curatorial scheme. Manhattan: rising from the ground like a manifold shout, an endlessly complex, endlessly extended chord. The myriad lights. The hollowing dark of the Hudson. The sky, purpling to dusk.

He turned back to the room. Yes, it had changed, a little, from how he remembered it. Yes, it was still the same. Still Randall's, full of his presence. There, dominating one side of the space was his *Mental Mickey*, the huge angry cartoon mouse bursting out of the wall, manfully huddling a swaddled baby the size of a golf bag in its bright yellow arms.

Justine was at the kitchen counter, pouring out drinks. Vincent looked to her, as if asking for permission – and she nodded, as if permission were needed – and he headed over, letting down his shoulder bag onto a sofa as he passed.

He stood under the mouse and looked up at it. The bodywork must have been resprayed, it was so much more vivid than he remembered. He went up on tiptoes and brushed his fingers along the creature's fibreglass leg, raised for its leap through the wall.

She came over with the drinks. He struck a pose under the sculpture.

'Good to see it again?'

'Very good.'

He took his drink and they clinked glasses and he drank, watching her over the rim as he murmured his thanks. She had become, he decided, more glamorous than ever. There were wrinkles, but each wrinkle was, like the sparrows to god, known, cared for, indulged.

He had his hand up on the foot above his head and he knocked his fist on it, for the low hollow sound of it.

'Is there much else of his here, then?' he said.

'Oh, bits and pieces. We can do the tour if you want.'

Whatever it was that he'd been summoned here to see, then, he was happy to note, it wasn't so urgent that it ruled out the play of a certain decorum, a decorum that played out with something like flirtatiousness.

She gestured for him to walk with her, and they went, at gallery pace, taking in the wall-hung pieces, the floor-standing sculptures, the vitrines and display cases. He spotted one of Tanya's pieces from the boat show, for the Great Day of Art, a threaded pillar of multi-coloured fabric winding up seven feet from the ground like an Indian rope trick, complete with its splatters of paint.

'Ah, of course,' he said, mock-earnestly. 'A historic piece.'

'I quite like it, actually.'

She was serious, he saw.

'Well, it wouldn't be here if I didn't, would it? Despite everything.'

'Quite.'

She linked her arm through his, and they moved on.

'Seriously though, I do worry sometimes that I'm gradually erasing him from the place. The last thing I want is to end up living in a mausoleum.'

'Of course.'

He nodded at the trio of canvases set dramatically at the far end of the room, away from the huge windows, and they headed towards them. A Bacon pope, a Warhol electric chair, a Koons.

'Aha,' he said.

'Yes.'

'The competition.'

'Indeed. You know they're the only things that have stayed put, right from the word Go. Pretty much the day we moved in. Everything else was just: schoom-schoom-schoom. You'd just get used to something, then, bam! There he'd be, with his Oompa-Loompas, manhandling a dozen more bubble-wrapped monsters out into the middle of the room.'

They stood in front of the three paintings. Justine laughed, a soft breath of remembrance, and went on:

‘Lining them up and then walking up and down in front of them, like some, I don’t know ...’

‘Like a sergeant major.’

‘Yes.’

‘On the parade ground, inspecting the new recruits.’

‘Yes, exactly. Or a merchant in an Egyptian slave market, choosing girls for his harem. Lifting their chins, checking their teeth. Matt, bring over the Kippenberger. Go there, next to Nuala. Now, both of you, go and stand over there by the Goldins.’

She was doing his voice, the gruff yowl of it, with the hint of a Brummie burr. He spoke, trying to match it.

‘The *cataclysmic juxtaposition*.’

‘You thought he wanted them to climb down off the wall and have it out with each other, right there in the middle of the floor. Warhol versus Koons. Sargent versus, I don’t know, Hockney. Ding-ding, round one.’

He leaned in to look at the paintings more closely and she let him, sliding her gaze off on a slant.

‘And you’re still buying new stuff?’ he asked, as they moved off.

‘Hardly ever. Larry gives me the nod every so often, some bright young thing he insists would go in the collection *just so*, but my heart’s not in it.’ She shrugged. ‘Really he just wants the name on the chit. You?’

‘I had to put a stop to it. I was just buying up old stuff, from back in the day. Hanging around auctions like a ghoul, like some rich old sod drooling over vintage Hornby sets.’

They passed a bronze torso he couldn't place, with feathers and what looked like drinking straws protruding from its sides; a pair of stacked breeze-block plinths each displaying a Sarah Lucas *Nud*, as grotesquely erotic as ever; a photograph of someone's foot, stuck directly on to the wall with viciously thin pins – a Tillmans?

Then, only now coming into view, on one of the interior walls, round the side of the entrance, and positioned so that you wouldn't see it unless you'd been led there, Vincent saw something that stopped him where he stood.

It was one of the *Sunshines*. He moved without thought, going straight towards it saying 'Oh my' as he went. It was, he knew instinctively and immediately, from the size of it, and the darkness, one of the originals, the absolute originals: a self-portrait from Gina's studio, that first time. And just not one of. *The* original. Randall's own.

'Good God, Justine. Where did you get this?' He turned towards her. 'Is this what you wanted to show me?'

'No. No, it's not.'

He looked at her and she smiled, an infuriatingly patient smile, and he wondered for a moment at the smile, then turned back to the painting.

'Turns out we had it all along,' she was saying. 'He found it a year or so before he died, wrapped up in one of the warehouses, but I didn't get around to hanging it until recently. You recognise it?'

'Do I? God, Justine. I haven't seen this in, what, twenty-five years.'

Its smallness was what struck him at first. No more than four by three. Its delicacy, too. *Mental Mickey* had been buffed up, made to shine as bright as it ever did, but this, for all its exuberant slamming together of colours, seemed unassuming, almost drab. Properly lit, the lurid lime green splodge, smeared across its orange background, would be acutely, eye-grabbingly unpleasant. Leaving it like this allowed the colour to hedge into the background.

The patina of the ink, up close, was what set it apart from the obvious Warhol comparisons. Something almost visible, being dragged along under the surface. His eyes followed the texture and movement of the ink. He thought of sand at low tide, how it lay in ripples and ridges, dragged grain by grain into a particular arrangement by the departing sea.

He shook his head, as if in disbelief.

‘What are you thinking?’

She was right next to him, and he had to suppress the impulse to take hold of her, to squeeze her arm, or drag her against him, or into him; to butt his head into her body, her shoulder, her breasts: anything to get across that what he was *thinking* wasn’t the half of it. He contented himself with pulling a face, an attempt to fit all of this – or the sense of the scale of it, of the inexpressibility of it: of seeing it, and her, and this place – into his expression.

She stayed silent, letting him look. Then, eventually, she said:

‘Have you seen *you*, then, recently?’

‘How do you mean? His one of me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not in ages. There’s Jan’s one in Amsterdam, of course. But it’s been years. And the other one of me, that went to Sheikh Hamad, I guess that’s still in Qatar. I should have bought it when I could. There’s no way I’ll ever be able to afford it now.’

He turned towards her. ‘You haven’t found another one, have you? Of me? That’s not what this is?’

He could see in her expression quite how much longing there must have been in his, and he blushed to see it. She smiled, shook her head.

‘Sorry, no.’

They ate at the large frosted glass table by the kitchen, with its sprouting vases of dipping red flowers, and oriental lilies. The conversation kept to safe topics, careful questions answered in considered, uncomplicated terms. He asked about Joshua, and she told him he was well; better, really, than he'd ever been. Living in Brooklyn, and studying at the New York Film Academy, though he still had his room here and usually spent a night or two with her every week or so. No doubt he'd drop by at some point over the next couple of days. She talked a little about the consultancy, the time she spent in Japan, less each year, the work she did for the Zen Temple here.

When she asked what he'd been up to, he didn't mention the manuscript, instead evoking a quiet existence of gym, golf, the uninvolved day or so a week his directorships demanded, a bland roll-call of unengaging social engagements.

Afterward, she made coffee and carried it to the set of sofas by the north-facing windows. He sat down, with his bag beside him, and took out the leather wallet, ready for her.

He waited until she looked up from pouring the coffee, then he said, 'I've brought something for you. Something that I want you to see.'

'What's this, then?' she said, passing him a cup.

He wondered, as he held out the wallet to her in return, could he discern the first glancing edge of falseness in her voice? She took the wallet, and turned it in her hands, looking up at him enquiringly. It occurred to him: she already knows what it is.

'It's just something I've been working on,' he said, 'In my spare time.' He was aware suddenly of how fast he was talking. 'Spare time, being, obviously, something of an asset right now. I should have had it wrapped for you, or found a box or something for it, but there you go.'

She smiled, then opened the flap and edged out the block of paper.

He cleared his throat. ‘I’ve been trying to write about Randall. Just, you know, what happened. What it was like, the whole mad thing.’

This time she didn’t look at him, but took up the first page. He craned his neck to follow her eyes. The text on the cover sheet seemed awfully big: ‘Everywhere I Look: A Memoir of Randall’ it read and, underneath, ‘By Vincent Cartwright.’ In fact, he had been in two minds as to whether to include a title like that at all, but it seemed wrong not to have anything, to just thrust your words without warning into someone’s face.

‘It’s not very ... I mean, it’s not finished or anything. It’s a bit weird, I suppose.’

‘Wow. How long have you been doing this? Have you got a publisher, or an agent or something?’

‘God, no. It’s not at that stage, nowhere near. I don’t even know why I’m doing it, really. But, well, I wanted you to see it.’

She looked at him, then looked at the next page. He could read, or recognise, the words, upside down. ‘The first time I laid eyes on Ian Randall Timkins, better known to the world as simply Randall, the celebrated and reviled artist of the 90s and 00s ...’

He felt his confidence wash from him. Whenever he had thought about this moment, even just hours ago, on the flight over, it had always been the handing over that he imagined. The gift of it, the revelation. As if two hundred pages of prose could be taken in at a glance, like you take in a work in a gallery. The thought of her actually reading it was, he realised, agonising. She might even want to read some of it right now. Or, worse still, feel obliged to do so.

She skimmed a moment, then flicked on a page, then ten, then opened the sheaf at halfway and flicked her eyes over what she found there. Then she replaced the top half of the stack.

‘Vincent, thank you. I’m going to have to read this properly.’

She rested her palm on the top sheet, a gesture of benediction, or containment, then sat herself upright, stretching her back, and looked straight at him.

‘But maybe I’d better show you first what it was I wanted *you* to see.’

‘Okay,’ he said. He said it slowly, dragging the word out. He didn’t want to appear too casual, but nor did he want to leave himself exposed. It might not be that important at all. Or else it might.

‘Right then.’

She passed the manuscript back to him and he slid it back into its wallet. She rose and he followed her across the main living area of the apartment into a corridor that led to a large private office. There were computer desks and high shelves stacked with books, box files and other random objects. In the middle of the room stood a large architect’s cabinet with six drawers and, for its top, a square lightbox, its surface cloudy and opaque.

She unlocked the cabinet, then took from the top drawer a portfolio, four or five feet long on its longest side, which she placed on top of the cabinet.

She undid the zip which ran along three of its sides, then paused and looked at him. He gave her a look of bemused encouragement, and put on his glasses, to show he was ready. Her smile back was short and tight, like the smile of someone struggling with a key in a lock. It said that what was coming was important, after all, and probably not a thing to smile about. He went on smiling, to show that he understood, that that was fine.

But still, he thought, he wanted this to be over, whatever it was. He wanted to go back and find the ambiguous, fuzzily significant mood of the evening so far, that seemed to have vanished all of a sudden. He wanted to tell her that, whatever it was, it didn’t matter – that it was her he had come to see, not this thing of Randall’s. That, much as he loved his friend, and honoured him, nothing to do with him could mean as much to him, now, as he felt that she did, or might again.

She laid the portfolio open. In it was paper – works on paper, big sheets, a number of them, covered with a protective sheet. She turned the whole thing on the light box so it was facing him, then lifted away the top sheet.

It was a watercolour, barely smaller than the portfolio, rough at the edges and curling slightly. It was a portrait, a nude: it was a woman sitting on a bed, leant back on her elbows, hands between her legs, holding apart the folds of her cunt.

Vincent looked up at Justine, giving himself only enough time to see if she was looking at him. She was. He looked back down, and felt the familiar, creeping sensation of vertigo, of being put on the spot. He forced himself to look harder, to *see* the painting. It could have been Schiele, could have been Freud, a sicker, more morbid Freud. The aggressive, angular style that chipped away at her flesh. The dark, deliberate lines of what was probably pen ink following the edges of her limbs, that bled slightly into the pale wash of the paint.

He reached out and placed a finger on the painting.

‘What is this?’ he said, sounding almost angry. ‘You’re not telling me this is him, are you?’

Justine did not answer his question, but shifted the painting sideways onto the open lid of the portfolio, then the next protective sheet, to expose the next piece. It was her – it was Justine – on her knees on a bed, the same anonymous rumpled bed as the first one; he noticed the sheets, the dishwater grey for the material and dark inked cracks for their creases. Randall couldn’t have done it, he thought, it was too good. Could he?

She was leaning on her elbows with her face resting on her fists, eyes bulging and tongue lolling like a dog’s. The artist had lingered on the face, working the paint to blend the red of the cheeks into the other features. It was grotesque. A plump, happy Justine, as doughy and plain as the first woman was squeezed and twisted. Behind her, barely filled out by comparison, a cartoon, was Randall, one foot up on the bed, hands pressing down

on her arse, neck tendons straining and face uplifted in the agony of release. A third figure stood watching, sketched in pencil only.

‘Justine, you’re going to have to help me out here.’

She held his gaze and shifted the second picture, to show the third.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said, catching the edge of a laugh.

He was looking at a pen and ink drawing of himself. Himself, fucking Randall. Randall standing with one foot up on a chair, while he – Vincent – worked and pushed at him from behind, hands tight around his waist, forcing him up on his toes. The Randall figure was arching away from him, his fingers splayed in stiff bony bridges against a wall not shown, as if they could conduct along them and discharge the pain explicit in his face and his posture. The look on his own face was, horribly, one of eager surprise. He was twisting to look around from the back, his face aglow like a child at Christmas, for the sight of the presents heaped up under the tree.

Vincent put his hand to the sheet again, and shifted it, hearing the sound it made against the sheet underneath.

‘How many of these are there?’ he said.

‘Here? I’ve got about ten of them here.’

‘*Here?* There are more?’

‘Oh yes, Vincent. There’s more.’

He closed his eyes, and spoke, clearly and deliberately.

‘Look, just to be a fucking idiot for a moment. Are you seriously telling me these are his?’

And he opened his eyes.

‘As far as I can tell, yes, they’re his. That’s why I wanted you to see them. I wasn’t about to trot off down to Christie’s with them, was I?’

‘Sure. But did you *know* he was doing these?’

‘Of course I didn’t know he was doing them,’ she said, evenly. ‘I only found out they existed four days ago. And well, look, do you know who she is?’ She shifted the pictures to point to the first one, the woman on the bed.

‘No. Should I?’

‘It’s Con Eckhart.’

‘Con Eckhart at *Sotheby’s*?’

‘Yes.’

‘Shit.’

‘Yes, well. Let’s see who else we have here.’ Justine covered up Con Eckhart with herself and Randall, then Randall and him. Underneath was a naked man standing, one hand resting on the hilt of a huge medieval broadsword that he was holding point down next to him, while two women knelt before him, mouths open to accept his cock. The man was Ethan Schultz, petrochemical billionaire and one of Randall’s biggest American collectors. One of the women was Francesca DiMattio. The other was Yana Baxter. The next picture showed a three-way arrangement between Ed Ruscha, *New York Times* art critic Chizuko Itou and Larry, Randall’s US dealer, each with a hand inserted up to the wrist into one of the others’ mouth, anus or vagina. What he was looking at, if it was by Randall, was incredible. It was a million things, but the thing that it was before it was anything else was incredible. This isn’t what he did. Or rather, this is exactly what he did, but not like this.

The paper shifted, and he was looking at a most strange composition, with Jennifer Lambert, director of the National Gallery of Art, squatting over a recumbent Randall like an imp out of Goya, one hand around his erect penis, the other holding back her black bobbed hair, while she pissed in a soft sputtering stream into Randall’s open mouth.

He looked up at her.

‘Has Larry seen these?’

‘Vincent, please. He’s the *last* person I’d show them to.’ She leaned towards him, over the portfolio, spacing the words. ‘The only people who have seen these paintings are you and me.’

He turned back to the remaining pictures. They showed similar couplings and combinations, and though he didn’t allow himself to linger he gradually began to accept how good they were: the colouring, and the line. *Were* they Randall? Or could he have got someone else to do them, to his instruction? He put his hand to the face of Kurt Liebkind, from Art Basel at Miami, thrown back in wavering ecstasy as Randall and Tom Nasmith each bit down on one of his nipples. It wasn’t just that they were so grossly, venomously offensive, but that they were so embarrassingly intimate. They had none of the too-good-to-be-true verisimilitude of photo-realism, that let you doubt it because it seemed so real. This was rough, and immediate, and it was impossible to believe they weren’t from life.

He slid Liebkind over and there – it was the last one in the pile, or the next to last – was a Randall, alone, masturbating, his right leg raised and his left arm arced over his head, like he was doing some demonic monkey dance. He thought of Hindu deities, Shiva or Kali. The gargoyle face, similar to the one Randall had given Justine in the other picture, deliberately making himself look foul and ridiculous.

Under it was a painting of Vincent himself and Justine.

He felt the skin on his temples tighten, a rush of something leaving or passing through his head.

They were fucking against a wall, she flopped forward on to it, torso and belly pressed flat, and arms stretched out above her head. She looked fat, the round weight of her near-most arm half hiding her face. He was behind her, his arms reaching around her body, hands cupping her breasts, even as she used her breasts to squash his hands against

the wall. His bent knees pushing into the backs of her calves, forcing up her buttocks towards him. His face on her back, skin against skin, turned sideways towards the viewer, the painter. Both of them with their eyes closed and their mouths open and trying, at least, for happiness.

She came around the table to stand next to him.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it,’ she said.

He laughed, from relief. ‘Yes, I suppose it is.’

He touched the painting, then went to realign the last one, of Randall, so he could look at them together. The sound of the grain of the paper as it slid, sifting, across the one beneath.

‘Well, Justine. I don’t know what to say. They’re quite extraordinary.’

‘Vincent.’

‘Yes.’

‘These are sketches.’

‘Sketches? How do you mean?’

‘The real ones are in oils.’

‘The real ones?’

‘Oils and acrylics. There are over forty of them.’

‘Fuck me. Where?’

He caught the smile as it twisted itself in the corner of her mouth. She looked down and began sorting the watercolours back into one pile. ‘Well, yes. Not here. I’ll show you tomorrow. Sixty watercolours, hundreds of drawings, thirty or forty *major works*, some of them six by ten.’

‘Christ. I don’t know what to say. And they’re all...’

‘Yes. They’re all like that.’

‘Fuck me, has he left anybody *out*?’

‘No. I think it’s fair to say that anybody who could possibly be offended by them, by what they show, and what they seem to say, is in there. Now then.’ She closed the folder and put it back in its drawer, then locked it and pocketed the key. ‘Would you like another drink?’

He got halfway to the door, then stopped.

‘Are they good though?’ he said, and he heard the husk in his voice, how it nearly gave way to something else. ‘I mean, these are good, but could he paint? Really?’

‘Oh, he could paint alright.’ Then, quietly, ‘Some of them are quite magnificent.’

She switched off the light and stood, holding the door open for him.

‘Justine,’ he said, and he waited for her to look at him. ‘You know that thing I gave you to read?’ She nodded. ‘You’re not going to read it, are you?’

‘Not if you don’t want me to.’

‘No, I don’t. I don’t want you to. Don’t read it.’

‘Okay, I won’t.’

‘Thank you.’

Perfect Circle

The first time I laid eyes on Ian Randall Timkins, better known to the world as simply Randall, the celebrated and reviled artist of the 90s and 00s, was at the party to celebrate his degree show at Goldsmiths, in the summer of 1989. I went to the show not because I had any interest in up-and-coming artists – I was a trader at LIFFE in the City and the only art on my bedroom wall was a framed and signed poster of supermodel Cindy Crawford – but because of a woman I knew. She was called Emily and she worked in marketing, specialising in ‘guerrilla marketing’, the seeding of products among taste-setters and early adopters. One of her clients was a brewer that wanted to get a buzz going for a new brand of imported beer, and part of how she did this was by identifying groups of hip young things in the worlds of music, art and fashion, and offering to supply their events and parties with cases of the stuff, often hundreds and hundreds of bottles. Despite what you might think this was often a thankless task – those hip young things tended to show their gratitude for all this free booze by being at best condescending, at worst dismissive or actually quite vilely nasty – and I sometimes used to go along with her as moral support.

Randall's degree show came the year after the Freeze warehouse show, organised by a young Goldsmiths artist called Damien Hirst, which featured a swathe of his contemporaries from that college, some of whom (Mat Collishaw, Sarah Lucas) went on to huge success. Hirst himself was hit by a train and killed, apparently when drunk, not far from his childhood home in Leeds, in February 1989. He remains an ambiguous figure in the myth and history of recent British art, seen by some as a tragic lost figurehead. There are even those who say that Randall only ever finished what Hirst had started, stepping into his shoes and taking the credit for heading up what would come to be called the Young British Artists. While there may be a grain of truth in this – Randall did know and admire Hirst, who was two years ahead of him at Goldsmiths – the truth is that Hirst was untested as an artist. His contribution to Freeze was by all accounts uninspiring, consisting of a pile of painted cardboard boxes, and a pattern of coloured dots painted directly on to the wall. Neither has survived. The show, however, was a seminal event, for the sense it gave that, despite the recession, London was ready to challenge New York and Berlin as a centre of the art world. This sense of excitement was something that Emily thought she could use, which is why we found ourselves that hot July evening in this particularly dingy corner of south-east London, so far from our usual stomping grounds.

We were late arriving, and when we got out of our cab, there were people streaming out of the college building. When I asked someone where the private view was, they laughed and told us not to bother. The free booze had run out and everyone had gone to the pub. Fair enough, we said, and followed along.

The Duke of Devonshire was the pub of choice among Goldsmiths art students at the time. It was a traditional boozier, the sort of place that doesn't exist anymore, with bad beer and worse wine, its comprehensively ruined furnishings lost within a fug of

cigarette smoke. I hated it then, but of course now I look back on it with unalloyed nostalgia.

The clientele of the Duke was a volatile mix of art students and locals – proper drinkers, as permanent and raddled as the furniture. They regarded the students with absolute disdain, while at the same time tolerating them as an unending source of moans, bitching and letching. Randall, of course, they loved. It was always fun to watch him wade into the thick of their tables, pint in hand and fag in gob, shaking hands and exchanging greetings left and right. The old sods would welcome him among them like one of their own, pulling out a chair and slapping it on the seat to get him to sit, asking him how the bloody hell he was doing.

‘How are the old folk, then?’ we’d say, when he joined us, laying on the Cockney accent. ‘How’s old Bert? How’s old Martha?’ And he’d reply, ‘Fine and dandy, people, fine and dandy.’ Then he’d tap the side of his nose and say, ‘Got a sure thing from Eric, in fact. Tomorrow at Aintree. Can’t lose,’ and we’d laugh, but I don’t suppose we could have said any longer who we were laughing at: them, or Randall, or ourselves.

The top room was where we went that night. I remember standing in the scrum of the downstairs bar and looking at the stairs, which were practically impassable from the bodies squeezed on to them, sitting and standing and leaning, all gabbing furiously, deafeningly away. My heart sank. We could have been back in the City with everyone else, at Harry’s Bar, or moving on somewhere for food. I wondered how easy it would be to find another cab out here.

‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ I said to Emily.

She did, so I got us drinks and we made our way up the stairs, stepping over and around the legs and elbows. The room was rammed. Everyone was jostled together in one thick morass, their drinks pressed up against their chests. The noise was relentless, a battle between the music, coming from a DJ set up at the far end of the room, and the

barrage of human voices, all of them raised to levels of hysterical, drunken excitement. We inched our way through the jam of bodies towards the DJ, asking for sightings of Randall as we went. We repeated our request to the nodding, bobbing figure at the decks, headphones clamped to one ear in that self-absorbed, cooler-than-thou pose these people always had. He bent down to talk to someone behind his table and the someone stood up to see who it was.

The someone was Randall, holding a screwdriver and a length of speaker cable, jack plug dangling comically.

‘Hi, you’re Randall, right?’ I shouted, leaning right across the table to him.

‘Yeah,’ he shouted back, grinning wildly as looked from me to Emily and back again.

‘I’m Vincent. This is Emily. She’s from Second Sight PR.’

‘Hang on,’ he said. ‘I’m coming round.’

He came round the table and shook our hands. He pumped my hand hard, embarrassingly so, as if we were his oldest pals and he was particularly glad that we of all people had come. I got that heart-sinking feeling you get when you realise you’re trapped at a party with the saddest, geekiest of the guests.

‘So, did you see the show?’ he asked.

Emily shook her head. ‘No. We ended up coming straight here, I’m afraid. We should really pop our heads in, though, shouldn’t we?’

But Randall just laughed. ‘Sod that. If you’re that keen you can come back and see it another time. We’re here all week.’ He did a little sweep of the arms, like a bad comedian. ‘In fact,’ he said, ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if we were here all week. Come on, there’s some people I want you to meet.’

I assumed this was some kind of low tactic, and we were about to be off-loaded on to the saddest and geekiest sub-set of this crowd of basically, as far as I was

concerned at the time, Class A geeks and saddoes. But no, as it turned out, they were his friends, his friends among this crowd of his friends, the inner circle. Present on that first occasion were Kevin Nicholson-Banks, Tanya Spence, Frank Greene, Gina Holland.

There must have been a dozen other names of that stature in the room (Gary Hume says that he was there), but those were the ones that I remember. They were the ones that we broke into the college with that night.

Randall led us over to the huddled group off to the side of the DJ's table and shouted a round of introductions that no one could hear. They seemed happy enough to let us join them. We tried to show interest, and ask them about the degree shows, but they waved the questions down. They seemed happier just being loud and joking and dancing, or doing the closest possible approximation of it. I assumed they were all on ecstasy. You'd have to be, would have been my thought, to be actually enjoying yourself in a hole like this. (Though the last time I set foot in The Duke of Devonshire, which must be ten years ago now, I was served a café macchiato better than any you could have had in London in 1989, outside of Soho.)

Fine, I thought, so long as we're here, there's no point in acting like a ponce. I counted heads in our little group, excused myself and went to the bar to get in a round of tequilas. You will occasionally find someone in life who doesn't like champagne, but no one – no one under thirty – ever turns down tequila. They warmed to us considerably after that. Randall seemed – not pleased as such, but gratified, as if the tequila was a genuine and considered gesture. Which had the strange effect of making me think that maybe it had been.

Pen portrait of the unknown, pre-fame Randall: a tall, frizzy-haired, lumpen idiot of a man, too sparky and genial to be the brute you might have taken him for across the room. The hair pulled back in a ponytail, one stud earring in the left ear. Mouth always hung slightly open, to give you a sight of the far from perfect teeth within it. Huge,

grabbable nose. Oblong face the mottled colouring of cheap meat, spam maybe. Dry skin, shaving rash and dandruff.

Maybe I'm laying it on a bit thick, but no one ever accused Randall of being one of the beautiful people, inside or out. The hair was particularly unpleasant, the hangover from his teenage years spent as a committed metal-head. When he arrived at Goldsmiths, aged twenty, he was by all accounts still sporting his studded denim jacket, with Eddie, Iron Maiden's skeletal zombie, leering out at you from its back. It was acid house and ecstasy that cured him of that inclination, just as it was the rave scene, rather than any image consultant or ultra-fashionable hairdresser, that eventually lost him the ponytail.

You might say that, in repose, it was a horrible, even an unforgivable face. But it never *was* in repose. The eyes never stopped looking, flicking this way and that, but always returning to dig into you, as if he was expecting you to do something extraordinary – or extraordinarily stupid – at any moment. The mouth, with its shark-like incisors, always showing the first millimetre of the next smile, the next goofish aphorism or ranting, reeling proclamation.

As for clothes, it's a fair guess to say he was wearing a plaid shirt, or similar, jeans or combat trousers, and that perennial item: his leather jacket. If there's one thing that somehow *stands* for Randall, in those early years, it's the jacket. Blazer-cut, rather than biker-style, crinkled and split in a hundred places, it must have come from the sickliest animal in the herd. It survives in a hundred photos, but the article itself went on to the Millennium Eve bonfire at Peploe, the house in Cornwall belonging to Gina Holland's family that, for a decade or so, became our circle's spiritual retreat. I remember coming across its half-burned carcass lying in the ashes of the fire on the morning – or, more likely, the afternoon – of New Year's Day, 2000, a pitiful, stillborn phoenix. That event, too, will get its moment in this story: the Millennium, which

everybody – not just us, *everybody* – thought was the beginning of something. Of course it wasn't. It wasn't the beginning of anything. It was the end of something.

When the pub kicked out, we headed back to someone's house. (Emily decided to call it a night, and I put her in a cab home.) What happened then is the perfect opportunity to show how the reality of being around Randall differed from the myths and tall tales that have tended to grow up around him. I don't want to suggest that everything you might have read or heard about him is wrong, or hopelessly exaggerated. It's more complicated than that. And, over the years, I've been as guilty as anyone of adding to that atmosphere of hype, of accentuating the exotic and the outrageous for the journalists, and the collectors, and just the ordinary people who asked, when they found out that I knew Randall, what he was *like*. Perhaps the simple fact is that an event or moment such as those I experienced with Randall has to be embellished or inflated when you tell it to someone who wasn't there, just to give a sense of the scale and the thrill that you would have got, to be there, inside that moment. So, to set the record straight (if such a thing is even possible) we didn't actually 'break in' to Goldsmiths. Randall didn't vandalise his own show, or try to set it on fire. Nor did he climb in through a window, although he, and the rest of us, did climb out of one.

What happened was that, as the party downshifted from dancing to sitting, people did get around to talking about art, discussing the different degree shows: the good, the bad and the wonderfully, peerlessly awful.

At one point I turned to Randall and asked him what it was he'd done.

'It's called *Perfect Circle*,' he said.

He took a final, squint-eyed draw on a joint, and passed it to me.

'*Perfect Circle*,' I said.

‘Yeah. There’s this famous story about the Renaissance painter Giotto, who lived in Florence in the thirteenth century. He’s got this great painting of Judas giving Jesus the traitor’s kiss.’

‘A fresco.’ This was Kevin Nicholson-Banks, sat on the floor, head tipped back on the sofa, where someone, possibly a girl, was stroking his hair. ‘Early fourteenth century. The Scrovegni chapel in Padua.’

Randall gave Kevin an ironical salute, and went on. ‘Anyway, Judas looks really creepy, he’s shorter than Jesus and kind of ugly and bulky and he’s got his arm up on Jesus’s shoulder, like he’s going to wrap him in his cloak and drag him down to hell.’

‘He looks like a fucking monkey. That’s what he looks like.’

‘Thank you, Kevin. Anyway, that’s not the point. The point is, one day the Pope sent a messenger to Giotto because he was thinking of commissioning some work from him, some *frescos* or whatever. The messenger asked him for a sample of his work. Presumably he was expecting Giotto to give him a few nice Biblical scenes to take back, but Giotto just took a piece of paper and painted a perfect circle in the middle of it, and gave him that.’

I laughed. ‘Good man. Did he get the job?’

‘He did. I guess the Pope knew his shit. And so, all I’ve done is copy Giotto. He had to convince God’s representative on earth he had the shit. I’ve got to get convince a bunch of professors and external examiners. Obviously, I’m not putting myself up there with Giotto, but I thought, if I can produce a decent circle, then how can they not pass me?’

‘And? How do you think you’ve done?’

‘Not bad. I guess I’ve done about four thousand circles. I reckon there are six or seven really good ones.’

‘How about now?’ I asked. ‘Could you do one now?’

I think this was the point at which Randall really noticed me. Perhaps this was even when the possibility of our friendship was born. For myself, I'd only known him a few hours, but still I knew, or perhaps I didn't know, but it was true nonetheless, that I wanted to know him better. He had something I wanted, though what it was I couldn't have said.

'I think we could do that. Yes.'

Someone passed him a piece of paper and a pen and he kneeled on the carpet and cleared a space on the coffee table. He settled himself – there was a lovely touch of the maestro in the way he shot his sleeves, rolled his shoulders and coughed – then he tucked his elbow into his side, gave a couple of quick ghost arcs above the white and calmly, not fast at all, drew the pen round, barely touching the paper, it seemed, but leaving a line behind it. One movement, and it was done.

It was indeed a very good circle, and I clapped and whooped along with everyone else, though I couldn't help looking round to check for tell-tale smirks or other evidence of conspiracy. I was enjoying myself tremendously – I'd turned down the offer of an E, but was carried along on the general tide of positive vibes, a vicarious high – but I wasn't yet comfortable enough in their company, let alone in my understanding of art, not to worry that I was being taken for a ride.

Randall turned in his chair, acknowledging the general approbation, and waved the piece of paper towards me.

'There you go,' he said.

I grinned, and reached out to take it. It felt, that moment too, like a connection being made. But, just as I was about to take hold of it, he whipped the sheet back out of my grasp.

'No,' he said. 'I've got a better idea. Let's put it with the others.'

His eyes were fixed on me, but I could tell it was the reaction of the others he was waiting on.

‘Come on. Vincent hasn’t seen the show. What better time?’

In the end it was about eight or nine of us that made the trip out of the house and up the road to the college. Some of us may have been apprehensive about the plan, or dubious as to its chances of success, but we all, drunkenly, or druggedly, but anyway obediently, trooped along behind him as Randall strode up to the entrance.

He leaned close to the doors to look through them, then rapped on the glass. After a moment the security guard appeared; of course, he knew Randall. He opened the door and listened while Randall sweet-talked him into letting us in. The degree show at this time was held in the Richard Hoggart building, the Georgian red brick building that is still the college’s public face. (In 2005 Randall and I, together with Justine and myriad other luminaries, attended the opening, around the corner, of the Will Alsop-designed Ben Pimlott building, with its eye-catching ‘squiggle’ sculpture, which is where the degree shows are held these days. I remember standing with Randall out on the roof terrace, underneath the sculpture, on a blustery and rainy January evening, and marvelling at the view of London – New Cross being, no less than Primrose Hill, somewhere that gives you a *perspective* on the place. Specifically, it shows the way those twin eruptions of finance, the City and Docklands, old money and new, dominate the skyline. Goldsmiths seemed like the third point of a triangle, part of an exercise designed to chart the invisible flow of money and influence around the capital.)

The guard accepted our promises to behave, and not to take too long, then Randall stood holding the door as we filed in. It was my first time inside the building, obviously, and the long corridors and marble floors looked far more impressive in that severe, mechanical light, devoid of people, than they ever did during the daytime. We went through a couple of sets of double doors to the gallery rooms, and I was given a

tour of the other students' work. There was some photography and the odd weird painting (Frank Greene's early 'acid cloud' pieces were there) but most of it, it seemed to me, was installations (Gina Holland's betting shop, complete with shop dummies, Aya Inouye's rugs made from unstitched canvas sneakers). I observed these solemnly enough, but I had no way of getting a handle on them whatsoever. They looked to me like nothing more than poorly executed parodies of what sculptures are supposed to be like, that had been stood squarely in the middle of the big, white-painted rooms as if to shame them.

Then we came to Randall's space.

There was a long table in the middle of it, covered in pieces of paper, some of them messily collected into piles, some spread out, as if at random. Pots with pens, brushes and other bits and pieces, an office chair on wheels. There were more sheets on the floor: a carpet of rejects, scuffed and torn. And on the wall, pinned or taped, more again: these the chosen, the miraculous few that approached perfection. Each sheet blank but for its circle: some thin of line, some thick, some monochrome, some coloured. The walls made for a gallery of empty targets, a hundred zeros without a one to put in front of them.

'They're all the same,' I remember thinking, as I strolled around the room, can of beer in hand, looking at them all and trying to look like I was thinking the kind of thoughts I guessed the rest of them would be thinking; trying to *think* the thoughts. 'All circles are the same. There aren't any other kinds.' That was the limit of what I my hazed, untutored brain could produce.

Taken as a whole, it was certainly impressive. At that time of night, with our words and footfalls echoing off the white-painted plywood flats that divided the room into individual spaces, but without diminishing the sense of Georgian grandeur, it was certainly spooky. Drunk, and a bit stoned, and otherwise intellectually high on my

sudden ingress into this strange new world, I was perfectly willing to accept that it was art.

Randall wanted to decide where ‘my’ circle should go – he had a scoring system, with different bits of wall given over to the different grades – so we amused ourselves for a time by debating its merits and deficiencies, sharing round the beers, smoking more cigarettes and joints out of a back window.

Then things got a little silly.

Someone made a paper aeroplane from one of the circle drawings on the floor, and aimed it across the room. Someone else responded, and soon we were in the midst of a full-on paper ball fight, that quickly spread out into the other rooms. For five, maybe ten minutes we charged around the suite of rooms, ducking and lunging and hiding and hurling our ineffectual missiles, swearing and joking and reeling out quotes from films. Someone fell into a tall, thin sculpture made out of umbrella frames, and then got roundly pelted as they tried to put it back together. As well as each other, we used other art works, installations and paintings and photographs, as targets. The artists made yelping reference to liminal trajectories and the necessity of reconfiguring the canon as they hurled around their scrunched-up balls of paper.

Interestingly, although we used the sheets on the table and the floor, no one touched any of the ones on the wall – I say interestingly because, looking back on the show, and with a degree more knowledge about how to read these things than I had then, it is clear that the quality of the best circles was not what the show was about. Randall constantly railed against what he called ‘the tyranny of technique’. Anyone who thought art had to be skilfully executed, or look good, was in thrall to outmoded ideas. Randall must have found it ironical to the point of quaintness that we – even the most advanced, theoretically-minded of his peers – left the most ‘perfect’ circles alone.

It was Randall who drew the game to a close, by, characteristically, upping the ante. He came to a standstill by the open window that we were smoking out of, his chest heaving with laughter and exertion. He put a cigarette in his mouth, picked up a ditched plane from the floor, twisted it into a spill and put his lighter to it, then used the burning sheet to light his cigarette. I stood next to him, took an offered fag and leant in, but it burned out before I could get the cigarette going. Randall lit another sheet, and that one did the job. We'd got three or four sheets in flames, passing from person to person, before the fire alarm went off, together with the water sprinklers.

We rushed around under the fine spray, laughing and choking, trying to gather together as many of the sheets as possible and shelter them under the table.

'The guard's coming,' someone shouted, and, giddy with delight, we exited, one after the other, though the window on to the sloping, moon-green back lawn, which, together with the distinguished, ivy-covered rear façade of the building, gave me the impression we had stepped through some kind of magic portal into the grounds of a country house somewhere far away from London.

The guard appeared at the window, and told us to clear out, which we did. Most of us went back to the house, where I was allocated a sofa, and I crashed out.

The next day was a Saturday, and I came round to find a slow, hung-over routine of sorts taking shape about me. Breakfast was being cooked in the kitchen, and people were drinking tea and coffee and smoking and reading the papers. They were piled up on the table, all of them: the ones I read, the ones my parents read, and the ones my bosses read. How insanely bored, or brainy, you'd have to be, I remember thinking, to want to read *all* the newspapers.

Someone brought me tea, and a pint glass of orange juice, someone else pushed a packet of painkillers across the table, and a packet of fags, and a couple of sections of

newspaper. It was a series of gestures that suggested unquestioned acceptance and I found it, in my vulnerable state, quite affecting.

‘Where’s Randall?’ I asked, eventually, immediately feeling silly for asking.

‘Oh, he’s not here,’ I was told. ‘He went back with Evelyn. I’m sure he’ll put in an appearance at some point, though.’ The person – it could have been Kevin, I’m imagining his rolling, refined Scottish accent as I type the words – looked up and yelled, into the air, ‘What are we doing today? Does anybody know?’

At the time I would have been trying to work out who Evelyn was – there had been no sense, the previous evening, of Randall being part of a couple – but writing those words, I’m remembering how this became our catchphrase, or rallying cry, over the long months, and brief years, that followed.

‘What are we doing?’

Bellowed by Kevin, or Randall, or me, or any one of us, in any one of a number of houses, or pubs, or clubs, or galleries. It was a call-sign, a way of gathering the troops when they had become too widely dispersed in the crowd.

‘I don’t know,’ would come the reply, in a ragged chorus.

‘Doesn’t *anyone* know what the hell we’re doing?’

‘No!’

Kevin was the only person from the circle who could be said to be Randall’s equal. He was certainly the superior intellect, and no less forceful a personality. While Randall was well read, he couldn’t construct an argument like Kevin could, and tended to fall back on the explosive – even nuclear – maxim or slogan.

Kevin was a leaner-in, a finger-on-the-table jabber, a counter-off-of-points on his fingers. Randall, by contrast, was a looker-away, a virtuoso of the vague, condescending smile. Or perhaps that’s not quite true. That makes him sound aloof. He wasn’t aloof,

there was nothing he loved more than getting right into the nitty-gritty of an issue. It's just, he wasn't ever coming at you from a stable, thought-through position. He was like a caustic, sardonic Socrates, if that's not putting it too strongly, less interested in forming his own argument than in spotting the weak link at the heart of yours, and then, once he'd found it, forcing you back onto it until it collapsed under the weight of your logic.

Randall and Kevin resented one another, but, to start with at least, that resentment took the form of an intimate rivalry. This worked to both of their advantages, as if they knew that if they kept pushing each other, goading each other on, they would eventually reach a level where it could be established, in full view of everyone, exactly which of them was the winner. Kevin with his insistent good looks – give him a moustache and he'd have passed muster as a Second World War flying ace, though at six foot four he would have been rather cramped in a Spitfire cockpit – versus Randall, with his infuriating ability to triumph in any conceivable social situation, despite his extremes of behaviour. His pissing in pot plants at social functions, his leading the Groucho Club in a raucous 'Time Warp' from atop a table, before windmilling off the end of it into a miniature palm tree, his sneezing beer down the front of a blouse of a journalist from the *New York Times* at an opening at Victoria Miro Gallery, then taking off his shirt for her to wear, the journalist obliging his sense of occasion by stripping off and putting it on, then and there. Kevin hated playing second fiddle to all of this. And why wouldn't he? He was, for many people, the better artist. Snapped up by Anthony d'Offay more than a year before anyone else had a gallery, with sell-out shows in Hamburg and Los Angeles while the rest of us were still dancing the night away in Hoxton, and yet all anyone wanted to know about was Randall, Randall, Randall.

There was no shortage of talent in the circle, but there was a sense that the potential was pooled. Everyone was *good*, but not everyone would make it. Except those two. It was almost as if the rest of them knew their place, and their job. They were like

the boosters on a space rocket; there to give the velocity needed to escape the pull of gravity, but destined to fall away once their fuel was spent. They would disengage and fall back to earth. They would not see the planet framed in a porthole, would not step down from the capsule, would not plant the flag.

In a way this makes them more interesting than Randall, or interesting in a different way. What is it like to be ambitious, and talented, but to know that you are not touched by genius. And to know it precisely because you have sat at the feet of genius, sat in illegal drinking bars with genius, and the bar at St Martin's Lane, staggered erratically down the Embankment with genius, arms around each other's shoulders and bellowing filthy songs to the moon and tramps and lampposts?

From that year at the college, were, as I said, Kevin Nicholson-Banks, Frank Greene, Aya Inouye and Tanya Spence, all of whom went on to significant success in the art world. Others from that year were certainly part of the gang, but never really made it big, for perhaps equally pertinent reasons: Gina Holland, Malcolm Donner, Debbie Reid and Mikhail Krenz. Some weren't artists at all, but were just students or ex-students at the college, like Evelyn Betts, or Tara Lewis. And then there were the rest of them, the random individuals who had found themselves caught in this strange orbit. The character actors and the bit parts, the one-line extras sat around the fire at Peploe, or making up the numbers at an opening, or generating the noise and crush at the party for 'Everywhere I Look'. Those on the edge of the circle, that meshed it to the world at large. The posh girls who liked artists and private views because they'd maybe had a bad experience with musicians; the trust fund kids who liked sitting around doing coke and talking about Situationism and Deleuze; the non-aligned intellectuals and journalists who moved with ease between artistic and literary circles, picking up titbits in one and trading them on in the next. They're the ones that I want to celebrate, in part, with this book. Randall was self-created, in many ways, but they created the conditions for him.

What about me? I must have seemed an unusual addition to the group; I seemed it to myself. What did I know about art? Nothing. What intellectual grounding did I have? None. I'd gone straight from school to the City, where I worked first in the back office of a medium-sized investment bank, then as a floor runner, then as a trader. I was twenty-two years old, two years younger than Randall.

Equally, you might ask: what makes me think I can write a book about this immensely important, and immensely complex, cultural figure, about whom everyone from the Prime Minister to the last London cabbie has an opinion, not to mention every journalist, every art critic? When there have been hundreds of thousands of newspaper and magazine column inches puffing him up, knocking him down and generally picking him apart, both before and especially after his death, hundreds of hours' worth of television, not to mention three full-length biographies of varying quality.

Why me? What have I, a former investment banker and 'wealth consultant' with too much time on his hands, got to add?

Well, I could point out that I know more about art – the theory and practice of making it, the confidence trick of looking at it, and the strange, holographic game of buying and selling it – than I did then.

And for that I have Randall to thank, Randall who once said, 'There's only two things you can do with art: make it, and buy it. Everything else – talking about it, thinking about it, selling it, looking at it – either comes under one of those two, or doesn't count.'

But that's not what leads me to put pen to paper. I was there, not as a participant, but as a witness. I got to see how a group of people manoeuvred themselves to a position of dominance within the capital's art world, and how a nation, titillated by their antics and self-belief, took them and placed them at the apex of their culture, and all this at a moment when the world looked to London and declared that it was, once again,

swinging. I saw all this – and what followed – from the inside, but from the outside edge of the inside, if you see what I mean. I wasn't an artist, I wasn't a critic, I had nothing to gain from my proximity. Nothing but Randall's friendship.

That is why I am sat here, stabbing hesitantly at my laptop in the shuttered midday shade of the kitchen of a villa in Tuscany, with its tiles cold to my feet and the slow, Mogadon cooing of the doves from the still, bleached-glare garden. Typing and deleting and retyping and staring blankly at the screen. Randall was my friend – the best friend I have had in this life, or am likely to have – and if his work and to a certain extent his life are to continue to resonate with people after he is dead, then I want to ensure that the man I knew is a part of what people remember of him.

Or, to be self-obsessed about it for a moment, the debt that this book is trying to repay is the one I owe Randall for making me the person I am. Not that I have him to thank for the villa in Tuscany. I earned that. And maybe I would have ended up with the same or some equally good art on the wall without him. But I wouldn't be sitting here in the kitchen, trying to write about him, trying to weigh out a lifetime's debt in words and sentences – if he hadn't shaped my view of the world. He shaped *me*. There, if you were looking for one, is my definition of friendship. If knowing someone doesn't change you as a person, then they're not a friend, they're an acquaintance.

A small amount of context, then: as short as I can keep it. I was born in 1968 in Sleaford in Lincolnshire, and my family moved to Buckhurst Hill in Essex when I was ten. My parents divorced when I was sixteen and I, like Randall an only child, stayed on in the house with my mother. With Randall it was the other way round: it was the mother who left, emigrating to South Africa, and it was his father who guided him through the rest of his teenage years on a Northampton estate.

My own father was a financial analyst, and thanks to his contacts I spent a fortnight's work experience at an investment bank when I was fourteen – licking envelopes and running out for coffee and bacon sarnies – but I was hooked, and went back to work during the school holidays. I did try staying at school for A-Levels, but the thought of actual wages sitting there ready to be earned while I sat thumbing through text books was too much (and the thought of going to university and delaying my earning potential another three years made me positively sick with anxiety) and I quit halfway through my first year.

In 1989 I was making £40,000 a year, plus bonus. I drove a Porsche 944, had a rack of designer suits and took two long-haul holidays a year, plus plenty of weekend breaks to Prague, Berlin and Barcelona. I had two pensions, and played the market on my own account, though I wasn't into casinos or the horses. Like many of my peers I had a retirement target – for me, of retirement at thirty with £10 million – and like most of them I hit the target, but didn't stick to the deal. I discovered, like we all did, that making money is more fun than having money. Despite all this I still lived at home, sleeping in the same room I had when I was ten.

The impact on my life of meeting Randall and the others was immediate and total. I felt like I'd been given a window into a life, and I didn't know if I wanted to join it, or visit it, or watch it from outside, but I did know that I wanted in. After that first night at Goldsmiths I left two or three messages on Randall's home number before I got a call back, an invitation to head on over to the Devonshire that evening.

I was nervous going back. Walking into the pub's upstairs room, dressed this time in jeans and Chelsea boots and – a new purchase, this – a distressed leather jacket, I couldn't hold back a grin. Randall waved me over and moved up his chair to make space for me at the table.

'Vincent. Good man. How's tricks?'

‘Tricks are good, Randall.’

‘The Footsie holding up? Money still circulating?’

This genial piss-taking about my occupation was, I quickly learned, compulsory, almost the price of my admission. I was unsure at the time why I had been welcomed into the group, but in retrospect it’s easy to say that Randall treated me like some kind of mascot, a manifestation, or symbol, of financial success. I stood for money. I showed how money could enter their lives, as it had entered mine.

‘Just about, just about.’

In case it’s not obvious, I don’t pretend to be able to recall these conversations verbatim, after more than twenty years. But, when I close my eyes, this is how they play out. There are documents for some of what follows – emails, press cuttings, videos found online, my notebooks of Randallisms, photos, even tape recordings – but, for the rest of it, just the hypnotic drone of the doves to lull me into the past, and, in the evenings, the gentle oil bath of good Italian wine.

I went back that night expecting to talk more about the degree show – I had a few lines and opinions rehearsed – but that, it quickly became apparent, was old news. Their talk was of the next show, the one that they would put on themselves. Something to take up the gauntlet thrown down by Freeze: who was going to be in it, and where it would be held. It had to be somewhere big, somewhere unexpected, somewhere *fun*. Someone wanted a disused power station, someone else one of the military-use tunnels that apparently ran in a clandestine network all around the underside of the capital, or a squat in Camberwell, a drained swimming pool.

I sat, drinking, content to listen in as their plans drifted higher and higher into the realms of fantasy, until Randall turned to me, brow dipped and showing a sharkish tooth, and said, ‘Come on, Vincent. Mister City. Your lot must have some nice empty office somewhere we can have for a few weeks.’

‘God, I don’t know,’ I said, both thrilled and flustered to find myself put on the spot. ‘An investment bank doesn’t take up much space. We’ve only two locations in London as it is.’ Randall narrowed his eyes, an encouragement to do better. ‘But, I mean, our clients. There’s bound to be someone with something, especially at the moment. There are a fair few over-extended portfolios around just now.’

He – they all – nodded sagely, as if what I’d said was an important insight, instead of a wry, self-deprecatory dig.

Randall just said, ‘Excellent work’, and turned back to the others.

As it happened, I didn’t have long to wait for an opportunity to play my part. A week or two later I got an invite to the bank’s box at Lord’s, for a Test match.

I pitched it to Randall and Kevin the following evening. We were at Kevin’s house, getting ready to go out to a club. I warned them that it was far from being a sure thing, but that there were bound to be some potentially very useful contacts there.

‘Vincent, I fucking love you,’ Randall said, putting his arm around my shoulder. ‘You’re absolutely the *richest* person I know.’

‘For the moment,’ said Kevin, inspecting his face and hair in the mirror. ‘For the moment.’

On the day of the match I was a mess of conflicting anxieties. I wanted the plan to work, of course, but I was worried, too, that Randall would find the whole affair pathetic, and would end up lumping me in with my colleagues, who could be quite offensively shallow, if you didn’t know how to take them. I was aware, too, that Randall had the potential to embarrass me quite severely, possibly even harm my career.

When I met him, outside the Tube, I was relieved to see that he had made an effort with his clothes. He was in a cream suit, a natty blue-and-white striped shirt and a somewhat battered panama hat. The outfit may have been an ironic statement on his part,

but – to bounce the irony right back at him – he fitted in perfectly. This was Lord's, after all, not Ascot.

There were twenty or so people already in the box, which was one of an interconnecting pair. It was mostly men – traders, clients – with the odd wife or girlfriend. Everyone was decked out in the weekend uniform of light summer suits, or slacks and a blazer. Barry was there, my old boss and mentor at the bank – the man in fact who had nudged the invite in my direction – together with a few other board members. They had a group of clients with them, carefully corralled off from the rest of us behind an invisible velvet rope. He gave me a wave of acknowledgement, mimed putting a glass to his lips and pointed at his watch.

It was a good hot July day, with one of those curdled-milk skies, the clouds all shrunken gobbets, as if there's something toxic in the sunlight. Waves of applause lifted up to us from the stands. The commentary fizzing from a transistor radio in the next box. The *thock* of another cork exiting the neck of a bottle, sounding in fact rather like a stroke being played. Whistles, shouts, the odd far cry of an appeal, as strange and abstract and archaic as that of a newspaper seller. I couldn't tell you what the match was, but I was surprised at Randall, knowledgably discussing the players' form with the people sat around us.

We didn't see Barry properly until a good few hours later, after lunch, by which time we had made absolutely no progress with our mission. We were sat at the back of the box, knocking back coffees to sober ourselves up when Barry landed himself with a grunt in a chair at our table, and clunked down an ice bucket with a new bottle of champagne in it. The man was a hero to all the young traders and workers in the firm, but to me was something more. We were very different – he was private school and university-educated – but still there was something rough around the edges about him, that gave me something to aspire to.

I made the introductions, calling Randall ‘an up-and-coming artist’.

Barry clearly found the idea of me hanging out with artists a funny one. He peered over the top of his sunglasses at me – if Randall hadn’t been there he would have made some insinuating and doubtless homophobic remark – and then turned to Randall.

‘Enjoying the game then?’ he said.

‘Absolutely. I mean, what’s not to like?’ Randall gestured with his glass, a brief circling movement that took in the surroundings, the weather, the cricket, the free booze. This seemed acceptable to Barry. He took his bottle out of the bucket and untwisted the foil, waving off the offer of help from a hovering waitress. He popped the cork and refilled our glasses, with that waiter’s trick of holding the base of the bottle in his palm and tipping the whole thing.

‘So, Randall,’ he said. ‘You’re, what, a painter? A sculptor? Or one of these new ...’ A wave of the bottle stood in for the word. He was half watching the game even as he spoke.

‘Yes,’ said Randall, and he copied the gesture with his hand. ‘I’d say that about sums it up.’

‘So,’ Barry said, once he’d taken a drink. ‘Painting’s dead, is that it?’

Randall gave a moue of his lips that was something like a shrug. ‘I think no one should have any more reason to lay paint on a canvas today than they would to dig up and ravish the corpse of their favourite dead grandmother.’

Barry laughed at this. His eyes were hidden by his sunglasses, but I could tell from the way he shifted himself in his chair that he approved. He fished out a cigarette packet, plugged one into his mouth, then offered the packet to Randall. Randall took one.

‘Go on, then,’ Barry said. ‘Let’s have it.’

‘Well, in a nutshell, what’s done cannot be redone. The history of art is a history of dead forms. You’ve got to find some new way to say the same old things.’

I sat there, shitting myself, hoping against hope that Randall wouldn't be too much a prick, wouldn't think Barry wanted him to gas on about art theory as if this was the Devonshire. In fact, he did know how to keep things brief when necessary. And, also, this was the first time I'd heard him express his theory of artistic development, like this, in plain terms. There are plenty of quoted examples of it, but I can pinpoint one exactly. An interview with Lynn Barber in *The Observer* in 1998:

Once something's been done, you can't do it again. Painting, sculpture, drawing, conceptualism, it's all a search for new means of expression. An art gallery or museum is nothing more than a parade of interdictions made concrete. For an artist, the ultimate vanity is to think that you might have found the last remaining form, closed off the last avenue of experimentation. Bang! Art is dead, finally. That's what we're all aiming for, in the end. When we get there – and it might take an apocalypse to do it – it will be like Year Zero. All bets off, all restrictions repealed. We'll be back at the cave wall, at Lascaux, scratching away with sticks and charcoal. And I'll be there, at the front of the queue. Until then, though, painting's ... not dead, exactly, but cryogenically suspended, let's say.

There was a roar from the crowd. Someone's century. We added our diffident applause to the rest of the ground's.

'So, for instance, you couldn't do a portrait of me, then?' Barry said. He blew out smoke, as if to neutralise the question, but there was an edge to his voice that I recognised, and that made me uncomfortable. 'Just a sketch, nothing fancy. What'd your rate be for that? Fifty? A ton?'

Randall grinned at me – that same grin he'd given me the night of the degree show, when I asked him to draw the circle. Don't draw a fucking circle now, for Christ's sake, I thought to myself.

'A hundred,' he said. 'I think we can do that.'

They shook on it, then Barry signalled to a waitress.

'Excuse me, love. Do you have some paper and pencils or something?' His voice, just that bit louder than was needed, turned heads momentarily in our direction. This was just the sort of thing we loved, that the office thrived on. Contests, bets, anything that put people on the spot, or in conflict with each other. It was like an off-duty version of that critical moment on the floor – watching the numbers climb, totter or drop into a spin, waiting for the one perfect second to make a move, to sell or buy. Getting in first, or toughing it out, to see who could make the best, closest call.

Barry extracted two fifties from his wallet, holding them slightly crimped, his thumb running down their middle. A few people had come over to see what was going on. Barry brandished the notes at them, as if they were witnesses to something, before sliding them under an ashtray. He had just started arranging himself in his chair, when he stopped.

'Now there's a thought,' he said. 'Andy, you wouldn't pop next door and see if Jan's still there, would you? Drag him over, if he is.'

Jan, I guessed, was Jan de Vries, chief operating officer of a large institutional investor that put a lot of work our way. I gave Randall a significant look, as if to say, this could be someone *very* interesting.

Andrew came back with de Vries, a tall, extremely well-dressed man, as slim as his suit. He had one of those severe, northern European faces, that seem to say: you're enjoying yourselves now, but soon it will be winter. De Vries, for all his philanthropic work, and his pre-eminence in his field, was not what you'd call an approachable man.

‘Jan,’ said Barry. ‘Excellent. You’ll like this. I’m about to sit for my portrait.’

He spread his arms wide, but de Vries hardly seemed impressed. He stood there, like someone in a receiving line at a funeral, hands crossed loosely in front of him, and said, ‘Oh?’

‘This is my portraitist, Randall. And that’s Vincent Cartwright, one of our hungry young traders. Randall, this is Jan de Vries.’

I’d pushed back my chair to get up, but Randall was ahead of me. The bottle and glasses rattled on the table, from the jolt he gave it as he stood. His voice, when it came, was cracked and reedy.

‘Mr de Vries? Mr Jan de Vries?’

De Vries nodded yes. He took Randall’s offered hand.

‘Pleased to meet you. How are the de Koonings, Mr de Vries?’

De Vries put his head on one side, retaining Randall’s hand in his grasp. A smile threaded itself along the line of his lips. ‘They’re very well, thank you,’ he said. ‘You are a fan?’

‘Oh, absolutely. And it’s so good to have them back in Europe, don’t you think.’

‘Well, I agree, of course. Randall ...?’

He left the word hanging, an interrogation.

‘Just Randall, actually. I was at Goldsmiths.’

‘And you’re about to do Barry’s portrait?’

‘Something like that, yes.’

‘Well, please don’t let me stop you.’

De Vries stepped back from the table, refusing the chair I pulled out for him, and took up a stance at the rail that marked off the hospitality section from the grandstand seats, allowing him to keep half an eye on the game.

Randall and Barry went back to their places, Randall shooting me a loaded glance. What he couldn't tell me then, but did later, was that de Vries was a legendary collector of modern and contemporary art, most notably for his championing of young European artists, at that stage largely Dutch and German ones.

Barry set about selecting his desired pose. 'I'm hoping for something I can hang in the boardroom,' he said, for the benefit of his onlookers. People laughed, more came by, heads were poked over shoulders. We were a focus of attention.

Meanwhile, Randall sifted through the pens and paper that had been provided for him, then he steeped his fingers and looked over them at his subject, sizing him up.

After a moment he stood and made his way round the table – 'Excuse me, thanks, excuse me' – to the cloth-covered trestle tables right at the back of the box. We watched as he collected an ice bucket, then another, then scooped the ice from these two into a third. Barry, though, held his pose, gazing doggedly out over the ground, as if to have turned and looked would have been a sign of weakness.

Randall brought his bucket back over and transferred the ice from it into the bucket already on the table. Then, still standing, he took up our bottle of champagne and topped up our glasses, mine and his and Barry's, before putting it to his mouth and draining the last of it.

Then he reversed it and pushed it down into the bucket, neck first.

The table wobbled as he leaned his weight on to the bottle, forcing it in, the ice cracking and shifting. He packed the ice cubes around it to keep it in place, then, slowly, took his hands away.

The bottle stood, stable, tipped at a slight angle.

Very carefully Randall moved the bucket to the middle of the table, then made a little gesture with his hands, like a magician revealing his trick.

There were a few bewildered laughs, but the general sense was of crashing anticlimax.

‘Is that it?’ Barry said, but I could tell from his face that he was angrier than he would allow himself to show. He looked around the table, working his disbelief to get the response he wanted.

‘You asked for a portrait,’ said Randall, calm as you like.

‘Fuck sake,’ Barry said. I could tell he was struggling to keep on top of his sarcasm, presumably for the benefit of De Vries. What had begun as a fun diversion had fallen dramatically flat. I was appalled. I could see my career imploding in front of me in slow motion, breaking apart like a crashing Formula One car. There were a few nervy laughs.

‘You going to pay him then, Barry?’ someone said.

‘Of course, of course, why wouldn’t I?’ Barry said. He slipped the money out from under the ashtray and tossed it on to the table. ‘Though for a hundred quid a full bottle might have been nice.’

I watched Randall, willing him not to take the money.

He took the money.

‘I think you’ve got yourself a bargain, actually,’ he said. ‘Though obviously it will cost you a certain amount in maintenance. You don’t want the ice to freeze together completely. There’s got to be some give in it, as if the bottle might go over at any moment.’

Barry’s laugh would have sounded almost indulgent, if it hadn’t been dismissive.

‘You actually expect me to take this home and keep it in my freezer?’

‘Well, it’s yours. Give it ten years. I shouldn’t be surprised if you’ll be looking at ten, twenty, thirty grand.’

‘Ten years?’ Barry leaned forward. ‘You think I want assets that take a *decade* to mature? You don’t know very much about how money works, do you?’ He was playing to the room again now, holding up his glass for someone to refill it. ‘Anyone want to go long on a bottle in a bucket?’

More laughter, but I watched as Randall reached for the bucket again. He’d torn a shape out of one of the fifty pound notes to make of it a strange, off-kilter oblong, like a thick, curved banana. He wiped it carefully through the condensation on the outside of the bucket, to dampen it, then pressed it to the glass of the bottle. It lay slanted across like a ragged second label. Like a mouth. A wide, ugly mouth. It was crude, but it was spot on. He turned the bucket back.

‘There we go,’ he said. ‘Barry, by Randall.’

Barry sat there, frozen, glass in hand – almost, in fact, like a sculpture of himself. ‘For fuck sake,’ he said again, but it went unnoticed under the general reaction to the new, improved portrait. There were a few whoops, laughter, some still cagey, some more gleeful. Someone clapped, a loud empty sound.

‘Nice one.’

‘He’s got you there, Barry.’

‘Look. It’s Barry – waah!’

There was, indeed, something about the note stuck on the glass of the bottle, something about its shape, its blocky oval-ness, that seemed to conjure Barry. The Barry whose roar you could always hear above the migraine-inducing cacophony of the pit, who stalked the office like a slave driver in a Roman galley, juggling phones at his desk and barking instructions at people stood five feet away. The wailing, childish gape of it, with the queen’s face mooning lugubriously out from the side. Her smile, so wan, and so sure in its wan-ness; it must be the second most famous smile in any portrait, after the *Mona Lisa*.

Compare those two ladies to the mouth on Randall's Barry – an angry, complaining mouth, verging on the hateful. In my memory it takes on something, too, of a Bacon Screaming Pope – the raw, skinned pain, the scream beneath the skin.

‘The thing is ...’

We all looked up. It was Jan de Vries. He had left his place at the rail and was standing above us. ‘The thing is, Barry,’ he said, and I see him, hand in trouser pocket, as he speaks, the other hand hanging limp at his side, ‘art doesn’t behave like your normal stock, not in the long run. It’s not a bond. Bonds don’t notice who it is that’s bought them.’

De Vries’s expression was open and relaxed, but there was something about his eyes, something that reminded me of Randall. That spark of distant veiled intention, that was always burning away at the back of them.

‘I’ll give you a thousand for it,’ he said.

Barry looked up at him. ‘Jan, come on. You’re not being serious.’ He indicated the bucket. ‘Don’t tell me you actually think this is worth something?’

De Vries made a moue with his lips. ‘I give you a grand for it now. I bet you I can get ten for it in two, three years.’ He turned, for the first time, towards Randall. ‘Is this your thing, then?’

‘My thing?’

He gestured. ‘Is it representative?’

‘No. I mean, yes. I suppose so. In fact, I’ve got a show coming up in a couple of months. A group show. You’re certainly more than welcome to take a look at that, when it happens.’

‘When it happens.’

‘Or before, I mean. In fact, we’re looking for involvement right now. Sponsorship and so on. There are some very exciting artists on board. I’d gladly talk you through it.’

De Vries turned back to Barry and spread his hands.

‘There, you see. Art is not the same thing at all. That conversation, for instance, would be illegal, would it not? If it had been about stocks.’

Barry looked up, hand shading his eyes against the afternoon sun. He looked again at the bucket, then back to Jan.

‘Well, Jan. Now I think about it, perhaps I’ll hang on to my portrait after all.’

Jan took out a pen and a business card and wrote something on the back of it. ‘Don’t be silly, Barry,’ he said, ‘It won’t do anything if you keep it. Only if I buy it. Surely you see that.’ He passed the card to Randall. ‘There you go. Give Henrik a call. He’s my buyer. Barry, good to see you. Thanks so much for the invite and sorry I can’t stay longer. I’m expected elsewhere, alas. You’ll have the money in the week.’ He looked his watch, and sighed. ‘Right, I’d better get someone to come and pick this thing up before it goes off.’

And with that, Jan De Vries moved his gaze once around the table, without it alighting on any one of us, and then made his way to the exit, leaving what can only be called a stunned silence in his wake.

I hustled Randall out of there as soon as was humanly possible. We progressed, in triumph, across town to New Cross, first to Kevin’s house, and then on to the pub. It was a good, drunken, celebratory evening. I was a marvel, a networking maestro, and newly crowned Marketing Consultant to the still un-named but now far-more-likely-to-exist show, and Randall had a work in the collection of Jan de Vries.

It's strange how acceptance into a group works. You might not see how it happens from the outside. It's in the way someone slides up on a bench, or the willingness with which they move their chair up to give you space at the table. It's in the offering of a pack of cigarettes, or in the manner of its offering, the sense of whether it's being counted. It's in whether your name sticks, your jokes carry, your comments are allowed to matter. It's in the way that, at closing time, with jackets being pulled on and pints downed, someone invites you back to someone's house, or – more than that – doesn't have to, because your inclusion is assumed: 'You coming then?'

Yes, I had money. I bought rounds. (The tequila became something of a signature purchase.) I tried not to flash it around – though, in later years, when they had more of it themselves, I saw how they had learned how to do just that from me.

Of course they mocked me for being a city boy, for knowing sod all about art, and of course I played up to the caricature, but then everyone was mocked for something: Kevin for his obsessiveness, and his politics, Tanya for her fake dyke-ishness, Gina for never being able to finish anything. Randall, too, for his god complex, his tendency to sit on top of things and watch us all, with an infuriating Zen calmness, when he was the least Zen person on the planet, as if he knew at every point exactly what everyone is going to say, or do.

As it was, Randall and Kevin went along to meet Jan's art buyer, Henrik Klass, with a portfolio of work from the artists in the circle. The upshot was that the property development arm of de Vries's company agreed to sponsor the show, which was soon named 'Everywhere I Look I See Death, Death In Everything I See' (after a huge black and white painting by Louis Burnham of a baby crying, an image he'd copied from a poster he'd bought from the new defunct high street store Athena). The company picked up the cost of the necessary permits and licences, and printing the catalogues – which

meant they could be done properly, with a full colour images and a catalogue essay by Claude Jacobs, then a Philosophy of Art PhD student at Goldsmiths.

Henrik and Jan visited Kevin's studio soon after, while the show was still in preparation, and bought two of his pieces for £12,000 the pair. This was by far the biggest sale any of us had ever achieved at that time, and Kevin diverted a fair amount of it to paying for the show. This is worth remembering when people talk about Randall as the prime mover of the YBA group; Kevin was the first artist to achieve real commercial and critical success, if not cultural notoriety, and indeed it was Jan de Vries's interest in him, or at least Klass's interest, that guaranteed the success of *Everywhere I Look*. Indeed, Klass hadn't thought much of Randall's work, passing over his pages in the group portfolio almost without comment.

Things moved quickly. The disused Shandy Street pools near Mile End was settled on as a venue, and everyone set about trying to accumulate enough decent work to submit. Kevin, encouraged by his sales to de Vries, wasted no time in making bigger and more impressive pieces in what would become his trademark style: abstract and sometimes semi-figurative sculptures in iron and high-carbon steel and featuring often dangerously sharp edges – like 'a Henry Moore fashioned from lethal Japanese kitchen knives', as Jacobs put it. Tanya Spence had her knitted genitalia, which for *Everywhere I Look* she displayed under a set of glass cloches that had once belonged to her great-great-uncle, who had been a noted horticulturalist, under the title *Schwert and Scheide*; Malcolm Donner had his tediously brilliant hyper-realist paintings of food (de Vries bought a particularly unsavoury one of fried eggs afloat in a sea of baked beans); Frank Greene more of his acid clouds. There were mannequin assemblages from Gina, humorous photos of dogs from Andrew Selden, Aya Inouye's road work installation.

Randall, though, was blocked.

At weekends I went round to the Deptford studio he shared with Aya and listened, for what seemed like hours, to him rant, invent and expostulate. Trashing his old ideas, angrily throwing up new ones, only to bring them directly back down again. De Vries's purchase of the portrait of Barry had thrown him. Like *Perfect Circle*, it had been a brilliant improvisation: a marker of talent, rather than an expression of it. It wasn't, in the collector's word, 'representative'. More pertinently, it wasn't *repeatable* and, if there's one thing they'd had drummed into them at college, Randall said, it was that 'you have to have your thing'.

A Randallism: 'A monkey who sits down at a typewriter and comes up with *Hamlet* is a marvel of nature. But the one who comes up with the *Complete Works* has a *career*.'

During his years at Goldsmiths, where tutors such as Michael Craig-Martin very much encouraged students to experiment across the available forms, Randall had largely worked on installations, usually involving television sets. This was around the time that the cathode ray design, with its weird, curving, staticky screen and huge bulging back, was being replaced by the far slimmer LCD and plasma versions, and you could find obsolete sets quite easily, at council tips or in skips – we used to spend whole nights driving round London, scavenging.

Now that the opportunity for genuine exposure loomed, though, he decided they simply weren't good enough. 'Nothing *surprising*,' he'd say, stood in a rage of impotence in the middle of the junk. 'Nothing *untoward*. Really, television. Who gives a shit?'

The breakthrough came one Sunday afternoon, during the slow comedown day at the end of a long weekend's clubbing. There weren't any true hardcore ravers in the

group, but clubbing was one of the mainstays of their social life, the other, of course, being sitting in the pub and talking.

During the week, drinking and talking; at the weekend, dancing and getting off your tits.

It would be difficult to state exactly how rave *inspired* the YBAs' art, other than the fact that they saw in the whole scene something absolutely new and distinct from what had come before, and that they felt something similar was possible in art. Of course, in retrospect, acid house looks far less unprecedented than it did at the time – you can trace its musical heritage back through techno to Kraftwerk, and its social one back through Northern Soul and, in a way, punk. It was the drug, ecstasy, that was new. Similarly, the YBAs owed plenty to Warhol, Koons, Fluxus, Duchamp and Dada: take your pick. The lines of influence are always easier to draw backwards, either because posterity offers a more secure perspective, or because what survives is defined by grand, historical tendencies that are invisible at the time of their operation. So, just as the new drug amplified and facilitated the music of the late '80s and early '90s, it was the fervid reception, the attendant pulse-quickenning thrill – the hype – that made the art of that time seem newer, fresher, more exciting than it maybe actually was.

Sundays, then, were traditionally a day of chilling out, and coming down from whatever we'd taken the night before. There was lots of smoking, lots of drinking orange juice and coffee, lots of watching videos – Švankmajer, Tarkovsky, John Hughes. That Sunday, as on many of them, we were at Gina Holland's house – me, Gina, Randall and Kevin.

It was a big house, in one of the nice streets of Bethnal Green, and, most importantly, centrally heated. Gina was a generous host, as she was generous with much else. In fact, this made her position in the group problematic. Although she did her best to hide it, she came from money – just as Kevin came from culture, me from suburbia

and Randall from the estates. The Hollands were farmers and landowners in Somerset back as far as the druids, and Gina's father owned a food processing company that produced, she said, half the cheddar in the country.

So, while some of the circle were living the traditionally penurious existence of artists down the ages – Randall and Aya both slept in their barely heated studio for long stretches of time, and they weren't the only ones – she had a large studio on the ground floor of her house, kitted out with all manner of equipment and materials. Although Gina was not without talent, she struggled to settle on a medium, flitting from painting to printing to sculpture to photography and so on. Crucially for everyone else, for whom kit and material represented a significant outlay, she was always happy to pass along stuff she no longer needed. So there was some quiet disappointment, if not outright resentment, when Gina eventually settled on performance art as her chosen medium – an art form that called for the absolute bare minimum of expensive, borrowable or inheritable kit.

That Sunday, then, in Bethnal Green.

Randall had sloped off to the toilet. It would be hard to say if he had been gone a long time, but when he came back it was in a state of some agitation. He cleared a space on the coffee table – shifting glasses and plates, spent cans and ashtrays – and started laying something out on it. Nobody paid much attention, until he said, 'There we go. What do you think?'

Laid out in a row on the low table were three pieces of toilet paper, each smeared with a patch of brown, where it had been applied to Randall's arse.

'Oh, for fuck's sake.'

'That's gross.'

'Randall. Get those off my table *now*.'

So, yes, you could say that the original response of Randall's peers to this zeitgeist-defining work, as it would come to be, was largely identical to that of the great British public, when they were brought before one another.

'No, no,' said Randall, waving his hands. 'Don't worry.'

'Don't worry? You're showing us your shit? It's disgusting.'

Kevin had returned to his supine position on the sofa. 'Disgusting?' he said. 'It's not even original.'

'I know, I know,' said Randall. 'But this is different. Bear with me.' He adjusted the sheets, spacing them to his liking. 'Which do you think is the best one?'

'The *best one*?' I said.

'Can we ask where you're going with this?'

He said nothing, but sat back on his haunches. He waited for us to look at him, then held up his hands in front of him, measuring an imaginary frame.

'Screen prints. Big as we can get. Warhol colours. *Big*. Gina, you've got some ink lying around, haven't you?'

She nodded.

Kevin swung his long legs down from the sofa and looked again at the three sheets, touching one at the corner to set it straight on the table. What a moment ago had been a poor joke was, somehow, suddenly a serious proposition.

You often get people saying, 'I don't understand conceptual art.' Well, here, if you want it, is a perfect working example of conceptual art.

'Conceptual art – art you don't have to see to get.'

Another Randallism, to go alongside the more famous 'Modern art – art you don't have to like to buy.'

Imagine a square of toilet paper with your shit smeared on it. Now take that shape and imagine it printed up in lurid clashing colours – pink and turquoise, lime green and

purple – and hung on a wall in a gallery. It's not difficult. After all, once you've got over your natural squeamishness as to what it depicts – or whence it derives – it's not an unpleasant shape: random and abstract, but also earthy, mysterious and suggestive. 'A Rorschach blot of the soul,' as Claude Jacobs had it in his catalogue essay. Certainly, a *Sunshines* canvas is capable of bringing to mind many things beyond the bare fact of its origins.

And that's what they did, Randall, Gina and Kevin, that day: analyse it, deconstruct it, work it up. Beyond the obvious references, that it looks like a Warhol screen print – 'Warhol doing Rothko' – they talked about Piero Manzoni, an Italian artist who sold tins packed with his own excrement as 'Merda d'Artista'. (This in 1961, incidentally, the year before Warhol showed his first Marilyn and Campbell's Soup paintings.) They also dropped in references to the Hubble Telescope images of distant nebulae, and at the other end of the scale, electron microscope images of chromosomes and viruses. They talked about how these types of advanced scientific imagery used what's called *false-colour* – bright, non-naturalistic tones – intended to make the image as clear as possible, though it can't have hurt the Public Understanding of Science that they also make it look good. When did that start to happen, Kevin wanted to know. Could it be that the scientists, in their desire to get their discoveries across to the wider public, were themselves influenced by Warhol and Pop Art?

This, I was coming to understand, was how you made art: hypothetically, discursively, hungeroverly. You come up with the idea, then you test it, turn it as you'd turn an object in your hands, interrogate it until it gives up its underpinnings and allusions, its theory and significance. And of course its degree of originality.

'Everything's derivative,' Randall said to me once. 'It's just a question of whether anyone else has ripped off what you're ripping off.'

‘But what if you’re copying their copy? Doesn’t that count?’ I said, somewhat belligerently.

He clapped a hand on my shoulder.

‘Vincent, my boy, we’ll make an artist of you yet.’

‘So if I just photocopied the *Mona Lisa* and stuck it in a frame, that’d do, would it?’

‘Ah, that’s been done.’

‘Of *course* it has.’

‘Duchamp.’

‘Okay, so I’m copying Duchamp.’

‘Not if you didn’t know he’d done it.’

‘So how am I supposed to show who it is I’m ripping off?’

His hand, still on my shoulder, contracted, a brief, conciliatory squeeze.

‘That, Vincent, is where the true art lies.’

A professional wine-taster, he said another time, can tell what you’ve been drinking by sipping at a glassful of your piss.

Aya had turned up by now and the four of them took positions for and against – rather how I imagine lawyers discuss patents – but it wasn’t long before we moved downstairs to Gina’s studio.

Gina and Randall scurried around getting the kit together: the polyester mesh, the wooden frames to hold it, drawing fluid and screen filler to make the stencil, a random collection of half-full pots of ink. Kevin was bent to the construction of one of his clever little cigarettes, carrying on the critical discourse with Aya – dry as it was to me, this abstruse, jargon-heavy idiom was, for them, a medium perfectly suited to flirtation. I took photos, excited at the prospect of seeing this art work, which I had just had elucidated and explained to me for half an hour, actually become real.

It's worth pointing out that, whereas most of the *Sunshines* canvases you see in galleries around the world were produced on the massive industrial machines at Randall's Cambridge studio, the first few dozen were made by hand. Randall, with Gina's help, copied the shape of the chosen shit stain, enlarged ten or so times, on to a piece of fine-meshed polyester screen, and filled it in with soluble drawing fluid. Once that was dried they applied a screen filler to the frame and then sprayed down the whole thing in the sink, washing away the drawing fluid to leave the solidified filler stuck to the screen in a negative of the original shape.

We produced ten prints that first day, squeegeeing ink through the mesh screen on to the canvas, all of us helping out with pouring and inking, holding and handling sheets of canvas, cleaning frames. It was great, messy fun. Randall experimented with different ink weights, and often took a brush to the ink before it was dry, to give it texture, add in the little darker spots made by flecks of semi-digested food, or a stray hair.

Once the five best prints were taped up side by side on the wall, we stood and looked at them. Randall's own faeces, blotted and smeared on to absorbent paper, were transformed into this bright, discordant explosion, sliding off on brusque topographic tangents, as fleetingly figurative as cloud forms seen in the sky on a summer's day. There were bold, knife-edged triangles cutting into the mass, and cute little rows of wrinkles, where the paper had been folded and pushed between his arse cheeks.

It was Gina who, as we stood there on that day in October, pointed out another link to Warhol, how the forms' more divergent extremities recalled the way Andy's fright wig stuck out in all kinds of mad directions in the famous 1986 self-portrait. She pulled a monograph off the shelf and found the image.

'That's it,' said Kevin, and he clicked his fingers at the prints on the wall. He looked at Randall. 'They're self-portraits.'

Randall put his head on one side and smiled, nodding almost condescendingly, as if Kevin had only just clocked on to what he'd intended all along.

'Exactly,' he said.

Kevin laughed. That was the thing about Kevin, he never let himself be taken in by Randall. He saw through him every time – or every time until he didn't.

Randall asked me what I thought, and I made some anodyne comment about the colours. He waved me down.

'The colours don't matter,' he said. 'We muck about with the colours until we get it right, or just do them at random.'

Gina, becoming more animated now: 'The more colours, the better. Ten of them in a row, all different. Different tones, different combinations, different shapes.'

Randall shook his head, grinning. 'Even better,' he said, and again there was that pause, as he waited for us to switch our attention fully back to him.

'Kevin's right,' he said. 'It's a self-portrait. Well, that's it, isn't it? Portraits – all of us. Each person's shit on a sheet of loo roll. Wipe it, copy it, print it up.'

And that was it, the critical moment in which the work acquired a genuinely transformative concept and, as such, made the leap from puerile art school prank to the high point of late Twentieth Century Pop Art. They were portraits: repellent, but decorative. A dirty joke, but also a biting satirical jibe at the swaggering mythology of Abstract Expressionism. Above all, they were also a stunning reversal of the art-historical idea of portraiture. Yes, they were deeply intimate – they brought to light an aspect of the subject's life that no one, not even their nearest and dearest, had ever seen; but they were also absolutely universal – everyone wipes their arse, and, of course, you couldn't tell one person's 'portrait' from another's.

Nonetheless Randall insisted that everyone – all the great and good and rich and famous that queued to up to ‘have a Randall done’ – produce their own ‘holograph’, as he called it, in situ, in his studio. You wanted a Randall portrait, you had to *sit* for it. And, even today, I – and, I assume, most people – can’t look at any of those iconic works – his Bowie, his Abramovich, his Moss – without thinking of the sitter emerging from the loo in Randall’s studio, piece of toilet paper in hand.

And so the four of us – me, Gina, Kevin and Aya – dutifully trooped off to the toilet, as the opportunity availed itself, over the remaining hours of that Sunday, and most of the rest of the circle, over the following days, to provide Randall with the raw material he needed for his contribution to the show. Individually, they were titled according to the sitter’s name, as in a traditional portrait, but it wasn’t until I saw the dummies of the catalogue that I saw what Randall had called them as a whole.

‘*Sunshines?*’ I said, and looked at him.

‘*Sunshines,*’ he replied, and spread his arms wide, in a gesture of magnificence. ‘Isn’t it obvious?’

Kevin was on hand to deliver the punch line. ‘Yeah, Vincent. It’s because the sun shines out of his fucking arse.’ You could hear in his voice at once the desire to puncture his friend’s ego, and his resignation to the fact that Randall was already immune from any such damage, protected both by his sense of irony, and the strength of that ego. This was, in a way, his greatest weapon. He was so forthright, so *vocal* with regards to his own absurdity that any external criticism came across, even as it was being said, as pitifully limp and facile, and irrelevant. Any attempt to undermine this – to get him to admit to his strategy – was doomed to failure, because he unhesitatingly agreed with whatever you said to or about him; every attack was effortlessly assimilated into that amorphous, grinning energy field. It drove people mad. Artists and curators, and critics and journalists – I’ve seen them go incandescent with rage in the face of it. For one or

two of them incandescent is barely even a figure of speech. They *hated* him, some of them, and not just for what he stood for, but for *how* he stood for it. In Randall, self-deprecation could become a radical form of arrogance.

I can remember – or can convince myself that I remember – sitting there in the toilet that day, trousers round my ankles and hands on knees, waiting to make my holograph. The heat of embarrassment, of being passive subject to one's own body, and, more than that, the feeling of foolishness, of putting my dignity entirely at the disposal of this man; and, yet again, as so often when I analyse my friendship with Randall, I flip one feeling to find its opposite, equally present: in this case, the desire to make it good, my holograph, make myself worthy of his approbation.

The memory – if that's what it is – is tainted, by a sense of bitterness regarding 'my' *Sunshines* portrait. The fact is, I never owned a copy of my portrait during Randall's lifetime, nor do I now. As the series grew, following that first show, he produced them as multiple editions, with a fiendish pricing scheme partly of my devising, but the original dozen were unique. Some of the others he remade – in some cases, as in Kevin and Tanya, very much against the subject's wishes – but mine he never did. It was something he used to dangle in front of me – 'I'm trying something new with the *Sunshines* idea, using yours actually, you'll be *astounded* when you see it' – sometimes refusing outright to countenance any new version. The original, along with its siblings, is there for all to visit in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, as part of the de Vries bequest, made after his death in 2002.

At the time, though, I took the work to be a very public gesture of acceptance into the circle. Mine was the only portrait of someone who wasn't an artist showing in the exhibition. Even this sense of pride, though, was shadowed by a darker emotion, a background hum of paranoia. I was genuinely afraid, as the show approached, that word

would get back to my friends and colleagues in the City that you could see a sheet of my used toilet paper, done up in puce and yellow and stuck on the wall in an art gallery, plain as day. Would Jan de Vries see it, and tell Barry? Barry, I was sure, wouldn't let pass the opportunity to take some kind of revenge on me for that day at Lord's.

And, beyond that, even up to the day of the opening, there was the great, deep fear, still and silent and never to be broached, that it was all a trap: that I would walk into the gallery and see, not twelve prints in a row, but just mine, side by side, over and over. Look: Vincent Cartwright's shit. He thinks it's art. Everybody turning towards me, Barry and Randall and everyone else from the bank, my mother and father and friends from school, all pointing at me and laughing.

The show opened in November 1989 and was, if not the overnight sensation that posterity seems to want to paint it as, then at least a major and unprecedented explosion of energy, and of attention.

The private view was huge – 'immense' was the word that, for a while, was on everybody's lips. It was the sort of night that seemed to tumble straight into a glorious, self-regulating chaos, to have you permanently in three different places and times: evening, middle-of-the-night and morning. There was the official viewing, with its cheap plastic cups of white wine that set your teeth buzzing, and the bottles of beer – I remember the endless ripping open of new boxes, my arms glowing cold from dunking bottles in and out of the huge bin of ice water.

Then, after that, the club we rigged up in the gallery space, lights and speakers crashing their noise and colour off and between the art, with everyone dancing like it was the last night of their life – even Randall, doing that strange elemental frug he rolled out when absolutely called on to participate. There was a sort of group hug at one point involving all the twelve showing artists; they formed a circle with their arms around each

other's shoulders and bounced up and down around the main space, growling and whooping. I remember seeing Tanya Spence and her boyfriend Griff Dolis, who was exhibiting some paintings of beer bottle labels, wheeling away in a spinning, dancing embrace, careening straight into one of Gina's posed dummies, bent seductively over an old twin tub washing machine.

But – and this is really what gave us the sense, from the start, that it was going to be big – the art never got left behind. The thrill of walking around the room, through this throng of half-known and unknown people, hearing shreds of conversation after conversation about the art *my friends* had made. Art, in one case, that I had helped make. Andrew's dogs gazing lugubriously out at the dancers; Frank's acid clouds pulsing in time with their movements; the antique glass cloches warping their faces as they danced up to them, waving their arms in a kind of idolatrous veneration of the knitted cocks and cunts sat under them; the reflective strips on Aya's cones and barriers sliding through the colour spectrum as the racks of coloured lights looped through their combinations. I remember seeing, among the crowd packed into the dark of the main space, individuals stood stock still in front of the *Sunshines*. No doubt off their heads, but gawping nonetheless like schoolchildren in front of a pornographic window display. They would be knocked and buffeted as they stood, looking, watching, taking it in, but still they stood. 'That's mine,' I wanted to say, standing alongside them and nodding at the canvas. In a world governed by individual success – where our bonuses were awarded in private, and our rank in the hierarchy adjusted only ever tacitly and impersonally – this was an unusual feeling for me, one of communal pride, and belonging.

They made it, and people came. It wasn't just dealers and gallery owners that Randall sent the high-gloss invitations and catalogues and press releases to, it was magazine and newspaper editors, and not just the broadsheets. And not just them, but people on the

hipper fringes of the creative-celebrity circuit, actors and musicians and fashion designers and models. The very first newspaper clipping in my collection is from the diary column of *The Times*: ‘Blur frontman Damon Albarn was seen grooving along with fellow Britpopper Jarvis Cocker and actress Sadie Frost at the private viewing of an art exhibition earlier this week. The show, which would seem to have been as much about exhibitionism as art, is taking place in a disused swimming pool in the East End. It goes under the title “Everywhere I Look I See Death, Death In Everything I See”, which one can scarcely imagine gracing the tracklisting of the next Blur or Pulp album, although some of the art, including some large colourful prints based on used pieces of one artist’s toilet tissue, could at a push be used on the cover.’

But it was a news item in the ever-dependable *Sun* that really did the trick, under the headline ‘Official: Modern art is total cr*p!’ and, more importantly, featuring full colour reproductions of both a *Sunshines* self-portrait and a *Schwert and Scheide* cloche. Once that was out, the others all trooped along, with their entirely predictable variations on the original headline: ‘Modern art finally disappears up its own backside’; ‘Contemporary artists let it all hang out’.

Inevitably somewhere in the copy alongside the pictures would be a quote from Randall. ‘Naturally it’s art. I’ve never seen a skidmark I didn’t find beautiful.’ ‘Painting’s not dead. That’s the glory of it, it just won’t give up. It’s like the Black Knight in Monty Python. Chop off its arms, chop off its legs, and still it wants more. “It’s just a flesh wound!” That’s painting for you. You’ve got to love it.’

By the weekend following the *Sun*’s news piece, the show was everywhere. All of London was talking about us. (By which I mean, of course, that it was all that *we* talked about, and all that everyone we *knew* talked about, at least when they were talking to us.) I was still in work, and enjoyed the strange echoes between my two lives. By day, the boisterous, foot-to-the-floor whirl of LIFFE, with its leaf litter of trading slips, and

the furniture of flickering screens, and our crooked necks from craning at them. By evening, the under-the-radar hum of the gallery, so different from the cavernous murmur of the big galleries most people see art in – the Nationals and Tates, with their toddlers and tourists and drifting Sargasso seas of Italian schoolkids. A contemporary art show, Randall always said, is so much more exciting than a blockbuster exhibition, because of the risk that everything in it might just be the most pointless, vacuous, unforgivable and irredeemable shite. Not that those places don't have their fair share of shite, but here no one else has decided if what you're seeing is any good, so it's up to you.

The trading floor began to look to me like a massive art installation, and one on a far grander scale than anything Randall or the others had ever even considered. The gallery, with its patches of whispered conversation and furtive body language, and the gradual presence of more important, better connected people, leading to the continual second-guessing of every new arrival, felt like a strange, underwater trading floor.

It was like being caught under a magnifying glass, in that it amplified our every word, thought and act to giant size, but also that it concentrated the incoming rays of the outside world's attention exactly upon us. You'd turn up at six, seven o'clock, and there'd be a hundred people in the gallery, dozens of them ranged in front of Randall's images. They'd look at them, then walk away, making some asinine comment, but five minutes later they'd be back.

We decided to hold a second party on the last night of the show. We had originally intended to go to the pub as usual, and go out dancing, but people were suddenly falling over themselves to sponsor us, give us money and coverage, and it somehow seemed incumbent upon us to entertain all these wonderful new people who had deigned to drag themselves across town to attend our show. It seemed like half the people who had come through the doors during its two-week run came back to honour their good taste in making it such a hit, not to mention the people who turned up just

because it was *the* party to be at that night. As such it felt celebratory, but at the same time rather impersonal. It was like we were attending the party incognito: a good proportion of the attendees had no idea who we were. We stuck together in a happy cluster, fielding the wellwishers who made it through the crowds, everyone trying above all to make sure they didn't miss anyone they shouldn't.

As well as more and better drink, there was a proper sound system, and it did get quite loud. So when Tanya came cutting through the scrum looking for Randall and Kevin, with Griff loping along behind her, we had to press in to hear what she had to say.

'You'll never believe it.'

'No. What?'

She paused and put her hand across her mouth, as if she couldn't bring herself to say what she had to say, but more properly to accentuate her twinkling, resolutely elfin eyes. She took the hand down, and flapped it.

'Randall, you're a fucking genius. I love you.'

'Well, I love you too, darling. Tell me what's occurring.'

'I only had a call from Charles Saatchi's *dealer* this afternoon. He wants to buy *Schwert and Scheide*. The whole thing. He wants to buy the lot of it.'

I looked at Randall. He looked at Kevin. There was a smile on Randall's face, but it was cagey, evasive. Kevin put his head back and groaned.

'What?' Tanya's eyes flicked between them. 'What's going on? You could at least *pretend* to be happy for me.'

'Well, Tanya,' Randall began, and he put an arm around her shoulder and turned her into our corner, away from the noise. 'You can't just *sell* them to Saatchi. Not just like that. Or anyone. Jan's got first dibs.'

'First *dibs*. What are you talking about?'

Randall shrugged. 'It's in the contract. He put the money up for the show, he gets first choice of what he wants to buy. Ask Vincent.' And he nodded towards me – as if the whole thing was my idea.

'I suppose that's right,' I said. 'It's like a call option in the futures market.'

'What?' She leaned in towards me, narrowing her eyes to concentrate, but signifying, too, I suppose, her complete lack of any respect for me or what I might have to say. She was petite, Tanya, but a forceful personality, then as now, if you ever come across her in her guise as elegant, ageless principal boy of many an arts committee, prize jury and gallery board, that self-delightedly mischievous face framed between the oversized necklaces below and the neat, tucked grey hair above. Then, she signified her bolshiness by her hokey, farmhand clothes – corduroy trousers, thickly woven men's shirts and Arran sweaters. She didn't have much time for me, I suppose, and the feeling was reciprocated.

I repeated myself: 'A call option. The initial payment, for the catalogue and fliers and so on, is called a premium ...'

But she had already turned back from me to Randall and Kevin.

'That is so much bollocks. You can't stop me selling my own work to who I want to.'

This time Randall made a face and spread his hands, hitching up his shoulders – an apology that was at the same time an apology for that apology. A gag, and entirely the wrong move to have made with Tanya.

'It's right there in the contract,' he said.

'Fuck the contract. *I* didn't sign any contract. Anyway, he's had two fucking weeks to say if he wants to buy anything. Time's up.'

'But he has the option.'

'No he fucking well doesn't.'

Randall laughed. 'I'm sorry, Tanya. But he fucking well does.'

She turned to Kevin.

'Did you know about this?'

Kevin didn't reply.

'But, for fuck sake, he's bought your stuff?' she said, putting a finger on Kevin's shirt front. Looming over her shoulder was the fuzzy-haired figure of Griff, her boyfriend. He was always so gaunt and dour, Griff, but somehow soft, too, like a puppy dog version of the heroin-chic look that was such a feature of the decade. I may not ever have seen eye to eye with Tanya, but I came to become quite fond of Griff, despite his profound, almost congenital class hatred of me. He was true, old Left, Griff. The beer labels he painted were intended as a celebration of traditional English working man's culture, though I very much doubt the people who bought them saw them that way.

'Well,' said Tanya, to Kevin. 'Come on, has he bought your new things?'

'Some of them, yes.'

'And what about you?' Turning to Randall. 'He's bought yours?'

'Well, actually, yes.'

She laughed at him, stood there with her hands on her hips, and gave a sort of derisive whooping jeer. She must have been a foot shorter than him, or more, but she made him, for a moment, look cowed.

'Fuck you, Randall. You really are just out for yourself, aren't you? But you,' jabbing her finger once more at Kevin, 'You should be ashamed of yourself.'

With that, she turned and started to make her way away from us into the busily dancing crowd, all those bare arms lifting, shoulders twirling.

Randall called after them, 'Tanya, don't worry. We'll sort it out.' Getting, for his trouble, a raised finger.

I didn't actually ever see a copy of the contract, if there even was one, so I don't entirely know who was in the right. Nevertheless it's true that the money for the show and the catalogue and the glossy fliers and invitations wasn't coming from de Vries's own pocket, it was coming from the marketing and promotion budget of Vries Heffer Holdings – and it wasn't Vries Heffer that was in the market for buying Tanya's knitted lingams and vaginas (as he predictably said he wanted to, once he heard that Saatchi wanted them), it was de Vries. Compound this legal murkiness with the sense of incipient rivalry between the two collectors – de Vries had largely stuck to continental artists before this, and Saatchi felt he was trespassing on his patch – and you had the beginnings of quite a spat on your hands. Saatchi, of course, held a grudge against Randall for years, although he and Kevin eventually patched things up, once Kevin had distanced himself adequately from Randall.

With Tanya, though, things came to a head almost right away.

It was at about one o'clock, just when the party was finally untethering itself from any remaining sense of occasion, and really starting to take off, that we saw, rather than heard, a commotion at the far end of the main room. Or saw the turning of heads that gave notice of it. Coming through the room, towards the exit, with people stopping dancing to watch, pressing backwards to let it pass, was a procession. Tanya at its front. A line of people, eight or so of them, each carefully carrying before him or herself a glass cloche on its sturdy wooden base and, under it, one of Tanya's knitted genitalia. It was like a Saint's Day parade from some remote Umbrian village, those faces heavy with concentration stepping solemnly through the massed ranks. There was laughing, and cheering. Someone knelt, as if in reverence. Tanya had to stop and sidestep as someone stumbled, or was pushed, and nearly knocked into her, then she moved on again.

Randall started elbowing his way through the crowd at an angle to them, aiming to cut them off before the main door. I followed, picking my way by the patches of coloured light among the dark, finding the gaps in people's movements.

When I caught up with him they were facing each other, a few feet apart, a space cleared in the crowd, like something in a school playground. I took up a position next to Randall, Griff was opposite me, hugging carefully to him an erect blue penis caught in its glass dome. Randall was talking to her, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. She was shaking her head and shouting at him, still holding her own precious load, flinging her chin up with every word.

I looked up as I saw more movement further back in the crowd, where they'd come from. It was a more powerful wave, and a more random one, that seemed to grip and shake the whole room until eventually it reached Tanya and nudged her a step further into our makeshift arena. I could see panicked little currents and whips of movement, heads turning, words passing, someone pressing down on the DJ behind his tables.

I don't know whether I saw them, or heard someone say they were here, but somehow it became clear that the police were on the premises. I grabbed at Randall's elbow, but he and Tanya were caught up in their tussle, shouting at each other more angrily now, so you'd catch the occasional outline or underbelly of a word, he making angry, dismissive gestures, she tightening up her face, her jaw locking, twisting her cloche in her arms as she spat out her words.

Then the music stopped.

'You ridiculous cock-hungry *peasant!*'

The words jumped into the sudden vacuum of the room and hung there, glowing amid the incipient tinnitus thrum. And then there was a policeman, and a second, coming through the room towards us. They knew, I suppose, like people always knew, that

Randall was the person to go to. The lead policeman gave a glance down at Tanya's cloche. If it awoke any thoughts, aesthetic or otherwise, he kept them to himself. He looked at Randall.

'Right, this thing got a license?'

'Absolutely. Yes.'

'No matter. It's too loud. I'm going to have to close you down.'

Randall patted down the air between them. 'I'm sure that won't be necessary. Officer.' (Did he really say 'officer'? I wouldn't put it past him.) 'Bit loud. No problem. No harm done.'

'No harm done? Don't think so, pal. I could hear you from halfway to the station. It's going off and it's staying off.'

The policeman's shoulder radio crackled, and he turned from us, scanning the crowd as he brought it up and listened, then spoke into it. The crowd stood its ground, not ready to retreat or remonstrate, but on edge. Voices and shoving from the back told us there were more police present. There were a few shouts of 'Pig' and the like – some of them even sounding genuinely heartfelt – but there was also a trickle of people edging towards the door. The policeman nodded at them.

'That's right, run along. Let's get this place cleared.' Then, as they began to move more quickly, 'Don't worry. No one needs to turn out their pockets. We just want to let your neighbours get some kip.' He turned back to Randall. 'Right, do I have to take any details, or can we wrap this up nice and quick?'

Tanya and Griff took the opportunity of Randall's indisposition to move past us, and they lost themselves in the exodus. I half followed them, half hanging back for Randall. Once the policeman was done he pitched in past me, elbowing his way through the guests. We followed them along a corridor that ended in an exit on to a side street.

Once out on the pavement, we broke into a run and caught up with the two of them in no time, burdened as they were by their cargo.

Griff turned and tried to block our way, launching into some righteous outburst, but Randall shoved him aside – ‘Excuse *me*’ – and went after Tanya.

‘Tanya, wait up,’ he called. ‘Don’t let’s be silly about this.’ But as he reached her she turned, spitting further invective, then tripped, took a couple of steps backwards, her face caught in the delicious drift of uncertainty, then she went over, twisting back the way she was heading, so that she landed with the cloche part beneath her.

The glass of the thing was so delicate that we didn’t even hear it break, but when she sat up, her hand held in front of her face, the other hand gripping it by the wrist, it was clear that it had. And not like modern, shatterproof glass, as you’d get in a car window or phone booth, but like the old, dangerous Victorian kind it was. ‘Fuck.’

‘Are you alright?’

‘Does she look like she’s alright?’ said Griff, who’d caught up with us. ‘You asshole.’ He gave Randall a shove that had him staggering.

You could see the blood coming from the cut, which was deep and circular, curling under Tanya’s thumb from the heel of her hand to the below her index finger. The blood was coming out in a thin sheet, viscous, like paint poured from a tin.

She held her hand up at him.

‘You stupid *fucker*,’ she said, leaning into the word.

‘Hey,’ Randall replied. ‘How is it my fault?’

‘It might as well be,’ she said, brushing off Griff’s assistance with little flaps of her other hand. And she glared up at Randall, putting her hurt hand to her mouth and sucking at the cut. Then she looked down at the shards of glass – just two shards really, it had split itself apart cleanly, decisively, like some terrible Asian martial arts weapon, as

if to cut the most vicious line possible through the volume of air it had previously enclosed. She put back her head and moaned.

It might as well be his fault, she'd said, and I think that's how Randall saw it. She was angry at him for the way he'd organised the show, and the price he had to pay for that was acceptance of responsibility for her hurt. It was bad enough that she had to have stitches, and it did leave a scar once it had healed, a scimitar smile under her thumb that she liked to display to Randall, incorporating it into the simple gesture of waving hello or goodbye. It was her way of marking the event, alluding to it, fixing and refixing Randall's guilt.

For, despite the anger of that night, and despite the lurid symbolism of Tanya's cut hand, the circle around Randall, or of which Randall was the apex, was not broken. No longer perfect, but not yet dissolved or dispersed. The two of them patched up their differences. Tanya found a replacement cloche from somewhere and sold the whole of *Schwert and Scheide* to Saatchi. De Vries seethed, but Randall won him over with the *Sunshines*, which he loved. He bought them all and put them up straight away in his company's headquarters in Bonn, though there were new ones to be seen in London not long after. And he bought one more of Kevin's pieces, and pieces by Andrew Selden, Don Fievre and Aya, even one by Gina. The catalogues were soon changing hands for thirty pounds each, then a hundred. Today it would be ten times that.

London had taken notice. That we knew, for sure. But it was the fact that, quietly, or unbeknownst to any of us, or perhaps just to Randall and Kevin, or perhaps to all of them, the European art world was taking notice, too. Jan de Vries had anointed our little circle, our little scene, and people outside our ken would look to us, from now on, for what we would do next.

I think what Tanya knew, as much as anyone, sat there on the pavement with her hand weeping red, was that they had to stick together, for the moment, or stick to Randall, just as Randall, for the moment, had to stick with them.

But every time that Tanya waved goodbye to Randall – just to Randall: I never saw her use the gesture to anyone else – she did so by folding her fingers down to her palm and up again, so that her middle finger just touched the scar. It was a childish, overtly little-girlish way of doing it, like a kind of secret handshake. And every time she did it, giving the sense that she was teasing Randall with the power she had over him, that bond formed of blood and art and commerce, I thought: this will end.

Untitled (Justine)

The next morning, Justine lay in bed, feeling herself move out of sleep, as if towards a piece of knowledge that hovered just outside her consciousness. At first she assumed it was to do with Randall, and that contented her for a moment, but then she remembered Vincent. He was there in the next room, or the next but one. She imagined him, in his bed, lying in parallel to her, in hers. She saw the pair of them as if from above: he on his side of the bed, the right side, if he still kept to it, and she on the left. All it would take, from that impossible perspective, would be to lift him up and move him magically through the walls, to place them side by side, overlay them like transparent slides. Was it that easy? Was that what was happening here?

He was up before her, and clearly itching to go. She decided to go with it. They would get breakfast on the way. She showered and dressed and they left.

She took them right and then north on Broadway. Vincent had his phone out, following their route, but she had no need for directions. That first time she'd made the walk, those few days ago, each building, each street lamp and walk sign and waste bin had dropped its pin onto her internal map of the city. She'd been back only once since

then, to prove to herself that she could do it, that it was real, and also to fetch the watercolours to show Vincent.

It was a clear day, the sky remote, flung up high above the planes. The sun skulking behind the buildings. A winter's day, only warmer. She settled easily into the flow of walkers, then checked her pace, waiting for Vincent to draw level. Despite his anguish last night, his mood this morning was buoyant. He seemed permanently on the point of breaking out into a sprightly little dance as he went, even the way he navigated around the oncoming pedestrians involved a series of nimble little skips. Well, he was here, there was no doubt about that.

She pulled them in at Thirl's for breakfast, and texted Joshua while they queued. 'Vincent C arrived last night. Here for a few days. Catch up? All well?' They were waiting at a crossing, a couple of blocks down, when her phone rang in her bag. It was Joshua.

'Hello darling,' she said.

'Hi.'

'You okay? You got my text?'

'Sure. So, Vincent is here.' His voice rose into a camp, airy sing-song for his name. 'I wondered when he'd show up again.'

She pressed the phone tight to her ear and turned to face a shop window, stacked with guidebooks: New York in every language. Her eyes sought out the Japanese kanji.

'Yes, he's here. Just spending a few days.'

'Uh-huh.'

She could see Vincent, reflected in the window, wafting the paper bag with the coffees under his nose. Christ, he was like a child.

'We might go out to Amagansett for the weekend,' she said. 'You could join us.'

‘We co-uld.’ The word spun out like a yo-yo, revolving on its thread of irony, though not entirely without humour. She wondered how much this was play-acting; Vincent wasn’t that much of an asshole, after all, even from Josh’s perspective. Easy to say they resented and distrusted each other. Harder to see how they might one day break out of that cycle, see each other clearly.

She swapped the phone to her other ear.

‘We?’ she said.

‘Oh, Mom. I, we, whatever. Christ knows I’d need moral support if I was going to hang with you and Vincent for the weekend.’

‘Ha ha. But yes. Come out. Come Saturday or Sunday.’

‘Well, Sunday, maybe.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Great. Looking forward to it.’

She ended the call, and turned back to Vincent.

‘Sorry.’

‘Josh?’

‘Yes.’

He seemed not to have anything to say on that, and they fell back in step.

Vincent remarked on the things they passed, as they gradually moved into less well-heeled neighbourhoods, a rolling commentary that, while not mentioning Randall directly, seemed to evoke him at one remove, by naming the very things that he would have seen every time he made this journey. Here was a shop selling antique sewing machines, there a tree with twisting branches painted up the side of an office block, here a tile warehouse, there a costume hire agency with the mannequins in the window display dressed up as a burglar and a housemaid.

She turned off onto Brook and then, twenty yards down it, into the alleyway. She went along it, past the wheelie bins and sodden cardboard and bundled polythene sheets, until she reached the security gate, and fumbled with the keys to unlock it.

‘He knew how to pick them,’ Vincent said, when they were through, looking around them at the small dark courtyard, with its pathetic, rain-damaged chair, its pile of bricks. He pushed the gate closed behind them, and it rattled like a cage in its frame.

She sorted through the bunch of keys again for the one for the metal door. From the corner of her eye she saw him, anxious now, prod at the chair with his foot, to test its weight, its solidity. The split running up its leg, the grey dry wood. He squinted up at the windows, and she guessed at what he was thinking: all those other places, those flats and studios and rooms that housed, each of them, their own part of the story of Randall, of Randall and him.

She wiggled a key in the lock, took it out and tried another one.

The last door, too, at the top of the stairs, took her three tries, before she got the right key. She pushed it open, pressing herself back against the wall, so he could precede her in.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said, on the threshold.

He stepped through, coffee shop bag held out before him.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said again, slower, and more considered.

She watched as he bowed his head, a slow gesture, as if he was about to pray. His free hand came up to hover, quivering in mid-air before him, then his head lifted and came down again, violently, a crashing, magisterial sneeze.

‘Shit.’

‘It’s a bit dusty,’ she said. ‘I should have warned you.’

‘No, don’t worry,’ he said. ‘Excuse me.’ And immediately sneezed again.

Angry Puppets

The three or four years after that first show, ‘Everywhere I Look’, are the ones that I think of, when I think of Randall, and London, and the time we spent there together. They are the years that took us from kebabs on the Mile End Road to rich men’s yachts off Skiathos; from getting high on paint fumes whitewashing Shoreditch basements for jump-up shows to watching the three-hundredth *Sunshines* canvas roll off the LAC-6000 digital screenprinting machine outside Cambridge; from crashing openings to having our openings crashed in turn.

Naturally I look back on that time, the first half of the 1990s, with nostalgia. It is easy to think forgiving thoughts about the hard times when you know they led somewhere. Each individual goal – Randall getting a dealer and moving to the Haggerston studio; the two of us setting up IRT Enterprises, and employing our first assistants, employing a secretary and then an accountant, me taking his share portfolio over the 8% hurdle – each becomes a minor step on a grander ascent. I don’t doubt that, though I saw each one as a real achievement in itself, Randall always had the shape of the larger game in mind.

I had no such notion. My experience was practical, short term, myopic, even. I'd listen, and laugh, and put in my opinion when it seemed appropriate, or called for, happy in my role as mascot, goad, bogeyman. I had found my place. They liked it that I dressed well, and expensively. They liked it when I talked about my and my colleagues' spending sprees and trips, the places we'd flown to and what we'd gone there for – the more frivolous, the better, the easier to splutter into their beers over. They liked it when I bought champagne for everyone, or tequila, or tossed a bag of cocaine on to the table, or put a meal on my card. They appreciated all these things – and the cabs I got us across town, paying for two or three if two or three were needed – as much for the symbolic power of the gesture, as for the money saved.

'My shout,' I'd say, and Randall would wag his finger at me.

'I hope you're keeping a tally, Vincent, of all of this,' he'd say. 'Because, you know, we're going have to pay you back one day.'

And I'd say, 'Don't be silly. My treat.'

'No,' he'd say, and he'd lean in and squeeze my shoulder in his forceful pinch-grip, until he got at the muscle. 'It's a true and unavoidable fact. One day all of this shit that you buy for us will flood back into your life when you least expect it. Every last pint. Every last cab ride. Every last red cent.'

But I didn't care. The things I paid for were baubles; they served as payment for my education at the gutter academy that was Randall and his circle. It was more than him simply taking me under his wing. He seemed to be trying to mould me, and instruct me. Crucially, it wasn't that he was trying to make me more like him. Rather, you could say that what he was trying to do was to turn me into the ideal buyer of his work. And not in the sense that he actually wanted *me* to buy his work. There was an unspoken agreement – or at least I understood there to be one – that our relationship functioned on levels other than that of the artist and patron. What he wanted was to see what a clever, but

essentially ignorant rich young financial whiz-kid would look like if he *got art*, and he used me as his Pygmalion, his plasticine model, to achieve that end.

It's not something I mind, or minded. And, if that's what the plan was, then it worked. By the turn of the millennium, there were plenty of people like me: young, rich opinionated offspring of Thatcher and Blair, lolling around like pigs in shit in the pot of gold at the end of the credit rainbow, yet sufficiently culturally adept to be able to discuss Randall and his work, and, increasingly, to buy it.

It was a consummate education.

We went to the cinema. The deeply mourned independent cinemas of London, where you could see Godard, Hitchcock and Eisenstein, on flickering racketing pre-digital film, any night of the week. The Prince of Wales, the Lumière, the Phoenix.

Never the theatre, mind; never music, of any kind, unless you counted clubbing. Occasionally a lecture – philosophy, artistic or critical theory – but art, and books, yes.

And reading. Lots of reading. He lent me books, gave me lists, took me to Compendium or Foyles or the secondhand bookstores on Charing Cross Road and picked out titles for me, half a dozen at a time: Baudrillard, Sontag, Debord, Artaud, Clement Greenberg, John Berger, Van Gogh's letters, Arthur Danto, David Sylvester's book of interviews with Francis Bacon, Vasari.

Now when I take up my copies of those books I come across underlined passages, and I read them and feel that I am reading something actually written about my friend.

Here, for instance, is Baudelaire, from his essay 'The Painter of Modern Life':

When at last I ran him to ground I saw at once that I was not dealing exactly with an artist but rather with a man of the world. In this context, pray interpret the word 'artist' in a very narrow sense, and the expression 'man of the world' in a very broad one. By 'man of the world', I mean a man of the whole world, a man

who understands the world and the mysterious and legitimate reasons behind all its customs; by 'artist' I mean a specialist, a man tied to his palette like a serf to the soil.

'Tied to his palette like a serf to the soil.' A brilliant line, and absolutely not something you could ever apply to Randall. If ever there was an artist who was an artist by virtue of being a 'man of the world', then it was he.

As for art, he was eclectic, to the point of arbitrariness. We went to everything: small hip shows and middlebrow nonsense shows and critically important shows and blockbuster shows. Sometimes we went on our own, just me and him, first thing on a Sunday or last thing on a Friday, when they started doing late openings.

Weekday evenings, I'd turn up straight from work, with my change of clothes for the weekend stuffed into a rucksack, handing in my suit and shirt at a dry cleaner's on Saturday morning after a late breakfast, picking up last week's to hang on the back of a door.

In the gallery, he'd tell me to close my eyes and guide me through the rooms to a particular work, then stand himself next to it, so that he blocked the information label on the wall, and it would be: 'Open your eyes. Now tell me what you see. And make it good, or those nice American tourists there will think you're a right spanner.' He liked to leave me sat in front of a painting while he went off to the café have a cup of tea, or make a phone call, or chase up someone he knew who worked there.

Once he left me in the Rothko room at the Tate for two and a half hours straight. 'Sit there. Don't move,' he said, and went. I did as he said, and sat, slowly, conscientiously, picking my spot. I allowed myself to acclimatise to the room, to the stutter and flow of the other visitors as they moved around it, in and out of it. I observed how they approached the huge paintings, directly, or sidling up to them, how they

arranged themselves in front of them, accessed and considered them, then how they dropped them, detached themselves and moved on. How they stood, shifting their weight, jutting a hip as if to flag the precise degree or particular quality of their impressionability.

I sat as still as possible, hands on knees, feeling smug and entirely self-contained. I forced myself to focus exclusively on the painting in front of me, letting the others fizz and pulse in my peripheral vision. I defocused my eyes, tried to make them blurrier than they already were, as if there was some fuzzy secret heart to them that could only be accessed through physical distance or some other form of disconnection. I harvested thoughts as they occurred to me, counted them out on my fingers, and then constructed mnemonics around them, so that I would be able to retrieve them when needed.

Was there really a spiritual dimension to these drab red and maroon blooms? They looked so uncomfortable, hanging there on the wall like rugs brought back from some exotic souk, that should by rights have been down on the floor, being honourably walked over. Was the room different for having them in it? If you took them away would it change?

I picked an individual and tracked them from the corner of my eye. Tried to gauge their opinions and intentions regarding the painter and his work, to get at their reasons for being here. Tried to read their readings – and to read how they would read me. Was I just a sad banker in a suit, consoling himself with abstraction? Had I been sacked, or stood up? How did my thoughts measure up to theirs?

The fantasy of the gallery as levelling ground or pick-up joint lives on. Is it the art, or the building? Did it happen in churches, when churches were where we went for this? I felt certain Randall could walk into this room and walk out, ten minutes later, accompanied by whomsoever he chose.

Or was I hoping for a moment of grace, for the room to suddenly slow and cool, for the people in it to dissolve and the maroon curtains to part for something terrible and ineffable to step down from inside them, come towards me and take me up, lift and crush me into an annihilating embrace? Would the other visitors come back to themselves to find me sprawled on the floor, unconscious, or dead, or delirious with enlightenment?

I had, I noticed, been clocked by the gallery attendants. For a while two of them seemed to be in conversation about me, but even after the second one had gone I felt the eyes of the other on me, from there on her stool by the doorway, a middle-aged Eastern European-looking woman. Did she love art, I wondered? Was this a vocation? Perhaps she was as bored as I was, and passed her time making up stories about the gallery visitors. Or was I merely something to rest her eyes on other than the paintings? The finger running down the rota of a morning: Rothko, *fuck*.

Or perhaps I was a potential threat, simply by virtue of having sat in the Rothko room, without moving, for over an hour. Perhaps I had inadvertently triggered some clause in a security protocol, and the other guard had gone to fetch more, bulkier attendants, who were at this very moment waiting in the next room, with a white-jacketed doctor, syringe held discreetly behind his back? Perhaps I was on the point of leaping up to attack the paintings, of hurling myself bodily at their bland tumorous womb-worlds, or stabbing and slashing at them with ... what? My fingernails? My keys? My fountain pen? The thought made me laugh, and the laugh made the possibility more real.

As if in an actors' exercise, I tried to make myself seem more like a psycho. I petrified myself, tensing my neck and shoulder muscles until you could have bounced a coin off them. I set my jaw, and drilled my eyes into the depths of that one picture, felt the red of it pound in my vision like the rising blood-blindness of a madman. I imagined myself as a serial killer in a movie, moved by art to delirious obscenity.

No dice.

No one pounced.

Not the staff, and not me.

Clearly, I was not mad, or no madder than any person who sits in an art gallery for hours on end at the behest of a so-called friend, for no apparent reason beyond their own spurious edification.

Look at me, in the art gallery! Look at me, looking at all the art!

I began to need to pee, and the warm fist of my bladder bolstered me in my resolution. I would sit and look at the Rothkos until Randall came back, or until I pissed myself.

What Randall liked about the Rothkos above all was their back story. He painted them, in his fifties, as part of a commission for the restaurant in the Seagram building in New York – absolutely the most exclusive dining venue in the city – only to withdraw them before they were unveiled, in a fit of self-doubt. Food and art. One of Randall's beloved juxtapositions. For him, the story was a flag to smack into the ground at the far end of the continuum that started with the French *modernes* handing over sketches in lieu of payment at La Rotonde.

As if in deference to this historical association, he occasionally tried to pay for drinks and food with art, too, but with less success. I once saw him, staggeringly drunk in Venice, during the Biennale, trying to repeat the upturned champagne bottle in a bucket trick, to settle a bill at De Pisis. That was a wrench. Other times, it was more controlled, though perhaps never entirely so. 'Times have changed,' he would say, fag wobbling in time with his shaking head, as the barman or waiter stood by, variously amused or pissed-off, then he'd crumple the piece of paper he'd covered with some inane scribble, and throw it over his shoulder. He had the comic timing down, you can't fault him that. A wave of the arm, a foppish raising of a finger. 'Times indeed have changed.'

And he'd reach, with a shake of the head, into his trouser pocket. Or look to me, head on one side, as if I might perchance have a drawing in my pocket that would pass muster.

That trick didn't work, or rarely, but for a year or so, from about 2000, you could eat your seared scallops and milk-fed veal in the Dorchester surrounded by *Sunshines*.

Two years later you'd have been eating at Fugu, Randall's sushi chain, with Malcolm's photos on the walls, the cutlery designed by Kevin.

The other thing he liked about Rothko was the line, I can't remember where he heard it, that Rothko killed himself because he met the people who bought his paintings.

It was a joke that Randall liked to tell to the people who bought *his* work.

Clapping them on the shoulder and shaking them until they, too, laughed.

But there's me, sat in the Rothko room, legs tightly crossed, gently humping myself in the hope of keeping my bladder under the cosh. I passed through boredom, fatigue, frustration and fury, and eventually, I suppose, achieved some kind of distracted serenity. Of course I couldn't leave the room – if he should come back when I was gone! – but I did get up and walk around a bit. I placed myself right in front of each of the six paintings, as close as was permitted, shins brushing the low black cable, to see if they gave up anything more to intimate inspection than they did to formal, detached appraisal. They did not. They were still dull, drab daubs, the pitiful work of the secular spiritualist equally afraid of death and of faith, of nothing and something. Isn't that right, Randall? Wouldn't you say?

I imagined unzipping my fly and actually pissing on them, tried to guess how far up them I could get the arcing stream of my disgust. It made me laugh, at the pity of it, and the laugh jerked out a warning drop of urine into my fabric of my underwear. I really was about to piss myself. I turned from the painting and walked, then jogged out of the gallery, gifting the attendant a dagger look as I passed. She watched me go, unimpressed ... *the Rothko-bladder equation, proven once again.*

I pissed, hurriedly, carelessly, then splashed water on my face and ran back through the galleries, throwing myself clumsily between visitors – ‘Excuse me, sorry, excuse me’ – like I was late for a meeting. I heaved a shoulder against the heavy doors of the Rothko room, pushed it open and went inside.

There he was.

He was stood at the far end of the room, just in front of where he’d left me sitting, gazing at the painting, my painting. With his legs spread, his arms crossed, and his broad back and shoulders, he looked like Nero facing down an arena full of gladiators. I slowed my pace as I crossed the room, regulating my breathing, trying to order my thoughts, retrieve my aperçus.

‘Randall, hi.’

He turned.

‘There you are. I wondered where you were.’

‘I had to go to the toilet.’

‘Fine. Look.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Let’s make tracks. There’s someone I want you to meet.’

I don’t remember where we went, or what it was that was so important, but I do remember spending the rest of the day struggling to suppress my fury that he hadn’t asked me a single question or made a single comment about my deep-immersion Rothko session; didn’t so much as acknowledge the fact that I’d sat there, as instructed, for nearly two and a half hours, thinking deep thoughts, or otherwise inventing them, and getting nothing more for my trouble than a righteously numb backside.

But that was Randall. Always ready to push people to extremes, to stretch their patience and their tolerance to breaking point. But he was always ready, too, to go to those extremes himself, to force himself down meaningless avenues just to see how his response altered the further he travelled from any rational purpose.

‘Failure is a species of achievement,’ he said.

And, ‘Success is largely a case of knowing when to stop. And I’m glad to say I’ve never known when to stop.’

Which is something of a gag. For most of his creative life, Randall’s biggest problem was working out where to start.

During the rest of the winter after ‘Everywhere I Look’ he returned to his studio, and to his television sets, sometimes removing the screens to construct little theatre sets inside them, complete with dolls, sometimes going so far as to actually show moving images on them, mostly video loops of an undistinguished banality.

Meanwhile, behind his back, the *Sunshines* series was acquiring a life of its own. It was getting seen. The thirteen that de Vries owned were now split between his company’s offices in Bonn, Paris and Amsterdam. Which is how, one evening, I found myself collared by a fund manager by the name of Jed Cousins at a charity event at the Guildhall.

It was towards the end of the evening, after we had weathered the various speeches and presentations, and bid, some of us, for signed guitars and weeks in villas in Zermat and on Mustique, when a man manoeuvred himself into the seat next to me.

‘You’re Vincent Cartwright, right?’

‘That’s right,’ I said.

‘Jed Cousins.’ And he held out his hand, and we shook, both of us trying to gauge how drunk we both were. ‘I’m with Merrill.’

‘Of course.’

‘So, you’re a pal of this Randall, then.’

Amused and disoriented by my friend’s intrusion into this most un-Randall-like environment, I pushed myself up in my chair.

‘Randall. Yes. Yes, I am.’

‘*Sunshines* Randall.’

‘*Sunshines* Randall. Yes.’

‘Good.’ He nodded, and waved at a passing waitress. He ordered us drinks, then went back to his previous posture, chin on chest. ‘I’m quite the admirer, you know,’ he said.

It turned out Cousins was, or held himself to be, something of a collector – ‘in a minor sort of way, you understand’ – and had indeed seen the *Sunshines* pictures at Vries Heffer in Paris. Jan was here; we had shaken hands briefly and exchanged pleasantries, but in this situation, and without Randall, I had no business associating with him; and it was he who’d pointed me out to Cousins.

‘I was very taken with them,’ he said. ‘They are stunning pieces, don’t you think?’

‘I do. They are.’ I nodded, then frowned.

He was right, after all. I didn’t want him to think I thought he wasn’t right.

‘Now, Jan tells me Randall doesn’t have a dealer as such, and that you’re my best chance of getting in touch with him. So I wanted to ask. Do you know if he’s still making them?’

‘The *Sunshines*?’

‘Yes, the *Sunshines*.’

‘Well, I don’t know. It’s not something I feel able to speak for him on. But I can certainly make enquiries.’

‘Splendid. I’m very interested.’

‘Of course,’ I said.

He sat a moment longer in his chair, looking at me in that blank drunk way that people fall into at the end of such evenings. It was as if he couldn’t get over his disappointment that I wasn’t Randall, or couldn’t produce him then and there, from my

hat or my sleeve. He stood up and faced out into the room, holding himself abruptly still, like someone suppressing a belch.

‘I had a Matisse once, you know,’ he said. ‘Not a big one, but a good one.’

The ornate ceiling of the Guildhall jellyfished in place behind him.

‘Did you,’ I said.

‘Yes.’ He removed a hand from his trouser pocket and affected a gesture of indifference. ‘The Peter Blake I’ve still got, and one or two Bridget Rileys, but the Matisse I had to give up, I’m afraid. You know how these things are.’

I tried to give the impression I did.

He patted his jacket pockets, found a card and gave it to me, suddenly bored of me, bored of Randall, and of the picture he hadn’t even bought yet, that hadn’t even been made. ‘I wouldn’t have wanted it anyway, by that point,’ he went on. ‘It felt tainted. But still. *Woman With Blue Flower*. A characteristic work. There was a man who really *got* women, wouldn’t you say?’

The news, when I passed it on, with precisely the flourish I had failed to provide at the Guildhall, that Jed Cousins, senior fund manager at Merrill Lynch and one-time owner of a small but characteristic Matisse, wanted to buy a *Sunshines* painting, was greeted in the Randall camp with a predictable display of hilarity and exuberance.

That evening turned into a sort of war council, as Randall canvassed opinions as to how he should proceed. He knew exactly what he was going to do, of course; he just wanted the talk, wanted to coax out any and all opposing arguments, warm them in his hands, take one of them and turn it like an expert turns a vase on a television antiques show, or, it occurs to me, like Ai Weiwei with one of his Han Dynasty vases, then look up, into the camera – oops! – and let it drop.

The two main options seemed to be, either to turn down the commission, and let the baker's dozen *Sunshines* portraits stand as a complete, finished project; or to really go for it. Randall would set himself up as a portrait painter, a contemporary Sargent, holding up a mirror of intellectual flattery to London's great and good, even as he moved breezily amongst it. He would be a society painter. A Randall in the hallway of every house; in Randall's hallway an invitation to every house.

The goofiness and excitability with which the debate was conducted didn't entirely mask a certain amount of unease. Kevin, in particular, was beginning not to find the joke as funny as he once had. Was it simply because he was on the verge of success – acclaim, sales, a measure of financial and artistic security, *being taken seriously* was the phrase everyone used, not without irony, like they later said *major work* and *international reach* – and he felt that he had got where he was purely on the merits of his art, rather than the performance that went along with it? There was that, but I think he was worried for Randall, sincerely so. He thought that his friend's act would, sooner or later, backfire on him.

'Just be aware of how far you are going to them, and how far they are coming to meet you,' he said. 'What you don't want to do is take up a position that, if they suddenly retreat, if they stop finding the joke quite so funny, you find yourself exposed.'

Taking up a position, exposure, how far you are going. He wouldn't have thanked me for saying it, but Kevin was so nearly talking City-speak.

'I respect money, Vincent,' he said to me once, 'and I respect people who handle it with respect. But I don't love it, and I have absolutely no respect for people who do.' This was more recently, after Randall's death, certainly, and after 2008, when it was easier to talk in such terms, but then that was Kevin's take on things all along. He never became caught up in the idiocy of those years when art and money were booming

upwards, alongside each other, bouncing off each other and gaining energy and velocity with each collision, racing up the screen towards unsustainability.

If Randall had worries about going back to *Sunshines*, and ‘rolling it out’, as they said (*floating* it, would have been my phrase), then it wasn’t along these lines, but rather that he wanted to be absolutely sure that it was the right work, and the right time, for him to put himself out there.

‘The way it works is that you’re only going to be remembered for four things.’ We’re still in the pub, the Devonshire – where we went when we wanted to reassure ourselves of our authenticity.

He held up four fingers, and moved his hand to show them to the others around the table, like someone playing charades. ‘Four things. Or pieces, phases, whatever. Four. Any more than that doesn’t fit into people’s narratives of creativity, of the artist’s life and work. Three is too pat, five too complicated. Posterity may have a long memory, but it has a fuck of a short attention span. No, really. Look.’ He counted on his fingers. ‘Warhol: Brillo Boxes, Marilyn, the films ... I don’t know – *Electric Chair*, maybe. Duchamp: *Nude Descending A Staircase* for the early stuff, *Fountain*, for the readymades, *Large Glass*, for the end game. Four, or three.’

‘What about Picasso,’ someone said, perhaps a hanger-on, a clinger-on. Someone, at any rate, unaware of the protocol. Someone surprised at the sudden drop in the temperature in the room, the icy hush. ‘What?’ they said, looking around themselves for explanations, for the punch line.

It would have been Kevin or myself, or Tanya, who leaned across to stage-whisper the warning: ‘Best not talk about Picasso.’ And then, when they tried to smile, to earn the laugh, ‘Honestly. Don’t go there.’

Randall went on. ‘Three. That’s it, three. So, Vincent, *Sunshines* could be huge, if I go for it. It would be, no question. I just need to be absolutely sure that that’s the one I

want as that first piece. It's not enough for *Sunshines* to bring me fame and money and adulation and a queue of beautiful, willing women leading out of my bedroom door and down the street. It's got to stand for me when I'm dead.'

And he moved his head, just a touch, towards me, fixing his eyes more firmly on mine, or mine on his, and bringing all the pressure of his available seriousness to bear, and the air between us seemed to slow and vibrate, his hand held there, the three fingers, upright, vibrating, them too, just a touch. It was a performance all right.

Not that it made any difference to his thinking, but I encouraged him to go ahead and take the commission, perhaps for no better reason than it kept me in the loop, as the contact man, the go-between. And it seemed like the fun thing to do: fun being, for me, if not synonymous with art, then a fair approximation of it. It was me, after all, who got to phone Jed Cousins and arrange the sitting, who got to not only negotiate the price, but also explain to Jed, as delicately as possible, what a sitting would entail.

In the end the first *Sunshines* commission was produced in March 1990, a marker of sorts for the new decade. Cousins was followed by Harvey St. John Hall, and then Robert Emery and Guy Byng. We soon had the routine down pat: the commission of a *Sunshines* portrait bought you breakfast at Randall's studio. Breakfast was cooked, when we could persuade him to come, by Ken Maltese, who at that time was sous-chef at Marco Pierre-White's Mayfair restaurant, to a menu of your choosing, in consultation with Randall's personal dietician (sometimes me, sometimes Aya), who could even offer suggestions of what to eat the night before. We usually recommended the full bacon, eggs and beans, on wholemeal bread, with perhaps muesli or Weetabix or Shredded Wheat beforehand. There was always plenty of coffee and fresh fruit to hand. A half of Guinness, if allowed, worked wonders.

Anthony Burridge and Elton John – though this was later, when we were more firmly established – brought their own personal chefs. David Bowie had this yoga

position which he said did it for him. One now ennobled business leader, whose name I won't mention, turned up unannounced and in something of a rush, and bolted along the corridor, while his car waited outside and Randall stood holding the door, doing a slow, dazed double-take, like the straight man in a sitcom.

Then there was Alexei Leonov, the Georgian aluminium oligarch, who brought along the ingredients for his breakfast and had one of his two drivers (he came in two cars) stand over Ken as he prepared it. The drivers were huge and hugely frightening men who looked like they'd had their suits welded on to them. The other one spent the entirety of the time he was there stood by the front door with his hands held crossed in front of his crotch.

Once Leonov had eaten his breakfast – smoked salmon and scrambled egg with chives on very thin slices of incredibly heavy bread, with together with several cups of milky coffee – he sat and talked art prices with Randall for ten minutes, quite knowledgeably. Then he excused himself and nodded to the other driver, who was waiting by the window, with a Gucci hold-all at his feet. He opened it and took out a roll of no doubt very special toilet paper and followed his boss out of the room.

'He's actually going to wipe his arse for him,' I said to Randall, eyes boggling.

Randall tried to get me to go and tell them they couldn't use their own toilet paper.

'Tell him it's got to be ours. Say it's something to do with the absorbency.'

'Fuck off. You tell him. He's probably armed.'

'Get away.'

It was Ken who told us, after they'd gone, that he almost certainly was carrying. 'Leonov has got his fat fingers in all kinds of dodgy pies,' he said. 'He's been trying to get a British passport for years, but we won't have him.'

'Should we even be selling to him, then?'

Ken looked at us like we were mad. ‘Fuck, yeah. Get his money while you can.’

Leonov, of course, was eventually convicted in the Russian courts in 1995, for tax evasion, and killed in prison, presumably in revenge for renegeing on some deal. I have no idea where his portrait is now. I don’t doubt but that it will reappear, along some marvellous or dubious route. For the moment, however, it presumably hangs on a wall in some dacha or secure Moscow apartment, like a scalp, the shrunken head of a vanquished rival.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. We had made maybe a dozen bespoke *Sunshines* when Tom Nasmith called and invited Randall to visit him at his office.

He had first approached Randall after the group show, and they had talked, but he hadn’t pushed himself forward. ‘Honestly,’ he’d told him, coming on like some benevolent uncle, ‘the last thing you need right now is a gallery. You need to work out what you want to do.’ He’d given him his card, and said, ‘Just promise me this, don’t sign with anyone else until you’ve heard my pitch.’

I went along with Randall to Nasmith’s gallery near Hoxton Square, in my semi-official role as his ‘financial advisor’.

The gallery rooms themselves were par for the minimalist course, scrubbed and whitewashed to give the work on show that sterile ‘serious art’ vibe, though the high ceilings had been left untouched, blackened concrete slabs showing through the confusion of ventilation ducts and lengths of bundled cable.

The back rooms buzzed with a giggly, caffeinated energy, like a fashion show an hour from curtain up. People strode about with important-looking pieces of paper in their hands, greeting each other in Mockney patois, the yowling fairground ride vowels of the age. There were cardboard boxes piled everywhere, and whiteboards scrawled with lists and flow charts in coloured pen.

Nasmith waved us into a pair of chairs and sat himself at his desk, while we accepted cups of coffee from an attractive young gallery assistant. He lifted a pile of correspondence and magazines placed in front of him and dumped them unceremoniously off to one side. Then he leaned his arms in front of him and fixed us, one after the other, with his gaze. I got the impression he was sizing me up, in particular, as if he'd *got* Randall, already, but he didn't know quite where I fitted in, or to what extent he would have to accommodate or displace me in order to operate on Randall as he wanted to.

'Right, guys,' he said, eventually, still leaning on his desk. 'The *Sunshines* are good. They're great. You've done well.' And he proceeded to reel off, rather to our surprise, a list of the people we had sold them too. 'Now most of those are acceptable, but there are a few there that you really don't want. You don't want to spread yourselves too thin'

And then he counted off on his hands another half dozen people who, he said, were in the market for a *Sunshines* portrait. Names that were, without exception, of a significantly higher calibre than those we'd sold to.

'Look,' he went on, focusing now on Randall alone. 'I'm not saying I can make you rich. Any fool could do that.'

Randall barked out a gruff laugh of pleasure.

'No really, let's not kid ourselves.' Nasmith looked at me. 'He's going to be rich, right? Right. But, Randall, I can make you rich in the most fun, and stylish, and' – he leaned further over the desk, his fingers spread out before him – 'basically *fuckable* way.'

'How so?' Randall said. 'How fuckable, Tom?'

Nasmith pushed himself back in his chair and braced his arms on the desk. He was masterful. His body language seemed to be saying this was a done deal. Not just that we would sign up, but that everything he said would come to pass.

‘Well,’ said Nasmith. ‘By selling your work to the very best people. The people who, if *they* were artists and *you* were rich, you’d want *their* work on *your* walls. Honestly, guys, you’ve got to be way, way more picky about who you give your work to.’

‘It’s not like we’re *giving* them anything,’ Randall said.

‘You are, though, the prices you’re charging. Remember, it’s not just your picture you’re selling them, to hang on their wall. It’s the *ownership* of that picture. You’re selling them the right to profit from your art in the future, and potentially far more than you’ve been making from them. If you come on board with me,’ he said, ‘we will sell only to the very classiest of buyer. And, if we are, on occasion, forced to sell to some fucking rich cunt, then I guarantee that I’ll be right there alongside you, having a good old fucking laugh.’

Fucking rich cunts.

I’ve no idea if it’s a phrase that Nasmith made up on the spot – I’ve never heard him say it to anyone else – but it became the catchphrase, the catechism, the central tenet of his relationship with Randall.

Certainly, you could say it sealed the deal then and there.

‘That sounds like a plan to me,’ Randall said, and stood up. He held out his hand across the desk and Nasmith took it, then mine, a tiny hint of a bow in his posture, a neat enough signal that he intended to defer to me in precisely nothing.

He called for champagne and the assistant came straight in with it, in its bucket, as if she’d waiting right outside the door for her cue.

Nasmith popped the cork and poured out three glasses, humming a little tune to himself as he did so. We raised our glasses, and Randall said it.

‘To the fucking rich cunts,’ he said.

Nasmith’s smile stretched, for a moment, as he let himself enjoy hearing his phrase bounced back at him, then he doused it and frowned, puckering his eyebrows and letting his fringe bob menacingly over his eyes.

‘The fucking rich cunts,’ he said, sober as you like.

‘Fucking rich cunts,’ I said, too.

Nasmith lifted his glass, then drank, downing the champagne with professional ease. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘I’d say this calls for a proper celebration. What would you say to lunch?’ Lunch turned into an afternoon at the Groucho Club, with mine and Nasmith’s cards behind the bar, and a gradual accretion, hour by hour, of additional celebrants. There is documentary evidence available suggesting how the day ended, but I’m not in a position to personally corroborate very much of it.

Fucking rich cunts. Even when we were all indisputably rich, ourselves, and richer even on occasion than the people we – he – sold work too, we went on saying it.

Another thing that Nasmith said, that stayed with me, this whispered across a restaurant table to Randall, six months or a year later, when he had successfully increased the price of a *Sunshines* portrait by a factor of five, and lined up a couple of absolutely top-notch collectors for sittings: ‘I’m going to make you rich enough that one day you’ll even be able to afford one of your own paintings.’

The way he went about turning Randall from a *succès de scandale* into a stable, saleable name, was an object lesson in the workings of the market. What Randall loved about Nasmith, at this point in their relationship, was precisely what I loved about Randall: the sense he gave of being his ticket into a secret world.

Nasmith used *Sunshines* portraits as bait to lure in art ingénues, whom he then worked hard, to build them into serious spenders on his other, more established artists. For some buyers, a *Sunshines* portrait was no more than the equivalent of a bumper sticker. ‘I was in London in the ’90s, and I made a killing.’ They weren’t all overpaid, Flaming Ferrari numbskulls, however. More and more people were coming to London from Russia and the Middle and Far East to make money, and to spend it. London wasn’t just a market, it was a bazaar. First they bought the paintings, then they bought the galleries. Eventually they bought the auction houses, and the banks.

Of course, Nasmith had to hide from the serious collectors quite how many *Sunshines* Randall was making (and the price he was selling them at). They were understandably suspicious, partly because of Randall’s overt, perhaps temporary fashionability – this was the time in which he began to start making an appearance in the diary pages of the tabloids – but more importantly because Randall was untested on the secondary market.

The problem with the *Sunshines*, for Nasmith, was that they were individual commissions. Which was good for him, as a dealer, in the short term – if someone wanted a *Sunshines*, they had to come through him – but the paintings had a distinct, though as yet untested lack of viability on the secondary market (who wanted a picture of someone else’s shit on their wall?) and that meant Randall had only limited potential as a longterm client. What Nasmith wanted was a show for the gallery, a collection to take Randall up a step in his career, and that he could place with his top-flight collectors.

Which is where Randall didn’t deliver for quite a while.

Perhaps he was just having too much fun being profiled and photographed, going to and throwing parties, and being flown around the world at the invitation of his various collectors, for some of whom having an artist at their yacht party was almost as important as having the work of art. Some of them, Randall said, wanted him pretty

much to stand next to portrait, there where it was hung, to be pointed out as they passed by, giving a tour to some other, more important guests. It was, he said, like racehorse owners: the horse gets the love, and the adulation; the jockey gets a pat on the head.

Of course, the parties were fun. It was fun, certainly, to feel that strange butterfly feeling you get in your stomach in a going-up lift, as the parties we went to started to move up into the next-level-up of parties. At some of these, Randall was the only person there from the circle, but not always. As intended, the group was moving up, not in concert as such, but in increments, as if giving each other the sly, occasional leg-up. You would look around the room at an opening to see who was there, and you'd see Tanya or Kevin, Gina, Andrew.

I went along when I could. An entourage, of a certain size, was often expected. Turning up alone was somehow an insult. An invite to a weekend house party might come with a request scrawled across the bottom or dropped in at the end of the conversation to 'just let us know how many you will be'. The air tickets might be taken care of, or a car sent. The etiquette was fluid, and intuitive, and it presented, for Randall at least, a steep learning curve. I think it reassured him to have me there beside him. I was more at ease in this kind of life, even if I didn't quite yet take it for granted.

Put Randall in a Cork Street vernissage, on a hot London night, and he's in his element. Put him on a yacht off the Côte d'Azur, caught between the white of the limestone cliffs and the whiter August sun, ply him with cocktails and surround him with a crowd that contained, say, a smattering of catwalk models, some fabulous and not-so-fabulous movie types, plus businessmen and their wives and girlfriends, and you would see a less assured figure.

An early example was a long weekend with television comedy producer Dominic Baxter, in his villa in the hills above Marseilles, with his yacht on hand in the harbour to

drift east along the coast to the *calanques*, the steep-cliffed bays that loop towards Cassis.

It was easy to see how bewildering he found it. He just didn't get the idea that the same rich people who were quite happy to listen to him pontificate about Koons and Deleuze back in London, didn't necessarily choose, when relaxing on their boats, to think of such things, and while they were happy to have him along and include them in their bubble of luxury, when he started to talk about art, they tended to blink their eyes and look a little startled, and seemed, as he soldiered on, not to be paying quite the same level of attention as they had at Richard Hamilton at the Serpentine only a month or so ago. Small talk didn't always come easily to Randall, who depended so often on saying the opposite of what people expected him to say.

Another stumbling point was dress. Knackered black jeans and a faded Nirvana t-shirt under a donkey jacket was fine in London, fine even, at a push, at a Mayfair opening, but people looked rather shocked to see you coming up on deck in them on the Côte. I think they assumed they were an outfit, when in fact they were a uniform. In packing to go to Baxter's villa I had to force Randall to bring along his one pair of shorts, a pair of these terrible below-the-knee black skate shorts. When I saw him in them, the cups of his knees glowing with ominous pallor in the Mediterranean sun, surrounded by stunningly beautiful women in up-to-the-minutely revealing swimwear, I rather wished I hadn't.

I wasn't the only one to be dismayed by his wardrobe. I caught a couple of young actresses, or actor's girlfriends, I don't recall, giggling over him. 'Who *is* that? Why is he dressed like that?' But the high point of the visit, for me, was Yana, Dominic's gorgeous, though rather imperious Russian wife – no mean collector in her own right – commandeering Randall and taking him shopping in town. They returned, three hours later, she gaily triumphant, he sheepish, and between them some thousand or more

pounds poorer, with an impressive collection of bags and what he explained to me was ‘a whole new look.’

Not all the circle adapted so badly. I remember one party, at a pair of villas on Ibiza owned by Irish record label head Mike Buck, to which Gina, Tanya and Kevin were also invited. Three days spent largely in and out of the pool, the evening piling into taxis to head down to the quayside restaurants. To see Gina, and even Tanya, swan around in bikini tops and ripped denim hot pants, for all the world as if this was their usual get-up, was dazzlingly strange and, I think for Randall, unnerving. (Kevin, by contrast, had a decent physique, and was happy to show it.) The worst thing was – and I’m not saying this simply to denigrate Gina and Tanya – they did come back from weekends such as this with their artistic reputations enhanced. As if lounging by a pool in a two-piece swimsuit, sipping a mojito, could make you a better artist. They were tan, they were beautiful – even Tanya, who seemed to step out of her fusty mannish London clothes into an entirely new persona. In fact, it was amusing to see Griff and Randall almost corralled together under the parasols, in their bad clothes, while the women prostrated themselves in the sun, and swam lazy lengths of the pool, and flirted with (or flirted with flirting with) the money and money men that surrounded them.

There is success, and there is success. To have your art displayed, and bought, and collected, and written about and appreciated by the critics and tastemakers around you is a form of success to which every artist must aspire, but once achieved, it begins to pall. Success, like the profits of a limited company, must increase; shareholders don’t want the same profits next year as they had this year. It can be easier, however, for a company to expand, than for an artist to improve, and where the comparison breaks down is that, for an artist, the shareholders – those you must appease – are people who, actually, have no vested interest in you at all. They are external, and indifferent.

The *risk* of success is that you fail to grow as an artist in proportion to it. You must get better, as you get bigger. While you're alive, you've got to keep the primary and secondary markets in some kind of alignment, the secondary, resell market for your old work and the primary market for your new. There's nothing worse than seeing an artist going for astronomical figures in the auction houses, while his new works sit in the gallery unsold. By 1993 the *Sunshines* series had given Randall a platform from which to mount his next project. They were part of the landscape, and there certainly was no apparent let-up in the numbers of people willing to sit for them. What Nasmith and Randall came up with, as a first full solo UK show at Nasmith's gallery late that year, was a brilliant extension of the *Sunshines* work, entitled *Sunshines and Nightskies*. This was a series of portraits of anonymous sitters, titled according to their professions – 'Unknown Soldier', 'Unknown Banker', 'Unknown Pop Star', 'Unknown Doctor' and so on. And they were diptychs: on the left you had a standard *Sunshine* picture, and on the right, a *Nightsky*, based on a CAT scan image of the sitter's brain.

The metaphysical connotations of the pairing were obvious, but the critical thing about the *Nightsky* pictures was the jaw-dropping cost of producing them. A brain imaging machine cost well over a million pounds, in the mid-1990s, and we had to pay a private hospital nearly ten thousand pounds for the use of their machine. This meant that Nasmith was able to price the diptychs far higher than the individual commissioned single portraits, and was also able to offer diptych portraits as commission – again, at greatly increased price.

Sunshines and Nightskies needed to be a success, and it was. The papers jumped at the chance to re-engage with Randall's work, now that he was properly famous in his own right. The critical response was mixed, but others warmed to the deeply compelling concept at the heart of the show. Randall, whose cousin was a demolition expert in the Royal Engineers, was particularly proud that 'Unknown Soldier' – modelled in fact by

an infantryman from the Black Watch regiment wounded in the first Iraq war – was bought by the Ministry of Defence, and was for a long time displayed at one of their rehabilitation centres in East Sussex. All the works sold, and Nasmith was gratified with their spread – including the Kunsthaus in Stuttgart and the Getty Foundation. He duplicated the show in Miami and Hamburg and again in London over the next four years.

It was a natural consequence of Randall's success that I began to see him less during these years. He travelled widely, and as much for business as for pleasure. If he and Nasmith flew to Miami to organise a show, they might stay a week, and I might fly out for a day or two, for the opening. I wasn't there for the preparation, with the attendant gaps in the schedule, the precious downtime, the hanging out. I missed it, but I was busy myself, working hard in my role as Randall's wealth manager, and I did have a social life of my own, too. I was dating Justine Giovanni, the woman who would later marry Randall, though at this point I was carefully, some might say paranoiacally, keeping the two sections of my life apart.

In 1994 Randall re-organised his working and living arrangements, so that he had a small studio and office in Haggerston, East London, not far from his Stoke Newington house, and a larger studio outside Great Shelford, to the south of Cambridge, where most of his work for the market was produced. I ran my private wealth management business from an office in One Canada Square, the Canary Wharf tower, so it was easy for me to take the DLR to see him in East London, either at home or at work.

We tended to meet once every couple of weeks at his office, supposedly to talk about financial matters, though largely he left that in my hands. Usually he took me down to his studio, a much smaller set-up than that in Cambridge. This was where he did his experimental work – the work that would become *Angry Puppets* – and as such it was

much closer to how I remember the space he had shared with Aya, though now he had assistants, usually ten or so in attendance here, with the same again at Great Shelford.

There were two huge workbenches running down the length of the room, usually strewn with various tools: saws and drills, paint spray guns, steel rules and soldering irons. One wall was covered in warehouse-style shelving, in which were stored his raw materials – television sets in various states of dismantlement and, now, mannequins, again complete and incomplete. One compartment full of legs, another of arms. It meant a lot to me that Randall still wanted to share his works-in-progress with me; that I still had a use for him beyond the financial. When I gave a hint of this, he characteristically twisted it around the other way:

‘I only asked you to look after my money so that I could be sure I had you close by, surely you know that, Vincent?’ And, with a hand on my shoulder, his friendly-aggressive-ironical shake, ‘I *need* you near me, Vincent. I never know what I think about anything till I’ve heard you ask me what it’s supposed to mean.’

This was clearly a statement that struck him as particularly good. He grinned and said, ‘Go on, then. Write it down.’

And I got out my notebook and pen, and he repeated the words, leaning over me.

‘I never know what I think about anything till I’ve heard you ask me what it’s supposed to mean.’

The notebook that I wrote this, and everything else, down in was a black Moleskine, embossed on the cover with my initials. It had been a birthday present from Randall in tribute to my habit of writing down things that he said, just as I clipped news articles and reviews from the papers and magazines about him. For him, it was a double treat – he got to have me write down what he said, and he got to rib me for doing it. The whole thing wavered magically between the ironical and the genuine. It was like one of those holograms you get, or used to get, in cereal packets: tip it one way and you see one

image, tip it the other and you see another. Both are *there*, printed on the little card, but it's impossible to hold them both in your perception at the same time. They are mutually exclusive, yet mutually indicative: each image seems to logically imply the other in a viciously compressed vicious circle.

At the risk of repeating myself – though this, I think, gets to the core of it – the irony seems like irony until you treat it as irony, at which point it starts to seem genuine. Then it seems genuine until you begin to treat it as such, at which point it becomes clear that it could only be ironical.

The way it worked was this. He would say something – I particularly loved the way he did this when we were in company – and then give me a particular nod, on the quiet, or sort of on the quiet, sometimes no more than a pursing of the lips, or a concentration of the brow, and I would take out my book and write it down. Sometimes I would ask him to repeat it, and sometimes he would hold out his hand for the book, snapping his fingers, to check that I had got it down correctly. My books of Randallisms run to some two or three hundred entries. Ed Hitchcock begged me for them, when he talked to me for his biography. He *begged*. But I refused. I think I knew, even then, that I'd want to try to write something about Randall, myself.

It was in Randall's Haggerston studio, then, that he worked on his telly-head people, the *Angry Puppets* that were shown first in Tokyo and then, in different configurations, in London, Germany and America. They were shop mannequins (reinforced with steel) dressed in gender- and age-appropriate clothes, and their heads replaced with 14-inch colour televisions, though now he could afford plasma screens, rather than the bulkier cathode rays he'd previously relied on. These were linked by cables running down through their bodies to video recorders (this was, remarkably, before DVD) which played on them images of people's faces.

The power of the pieces settled chiefly on two things: firstly the arrangement of the mannequins, most famously a family of four sat slouched on a sofa, as if themselves watching television; and most infamously, two positioned as if having sex, the first, rather androgynous one, leaning half-bent over a table, trousers pooled around its ankles, the other as if entering him or her from behind, the whole organised so that, as far as possible, you couldn't actually tell if the things had genitalia or not.

The second factor was the images shown on the face-screens (none of the telly-heads ever had soundtracks). He ended up settling on a cast of four actors – who played a mum and dad and a son and daughter of roughly eight and twelve years. He filmed each of them at length, sat on chairs with their faces held gently between cushioned pads to keep them absolutely still, while they affected various emotions and attitudes – from the dully placid to the extreme, as if they were being tortured or (for the two adults) having sex. The footage was then edited and looped for each screen, the idea being that the mannequins started off with the correct faces for their size and clothing, but that they eventually started swapping around, and duplicating, so that (for the sofa family, for instance) dad's face appeared on daughter's body, and daughter's on mother's, and so on, or that dad or daughter appeared on two, three or all four of the screens. This was fine for the sofa family, of course, but caused untold – and quite predictable – controversy with regards to the fucking couple, which started off with mum and dad's faces on the correct bodies, but soon seemed to show dad fucking daughter, or mother fucking son, and eventually every conceivable combination of the four of them. No matter – or all the more matter – that the daughter's face, whether fucking or being fucked, never showed any expression appropriate to that situation, but instead yawned, frowned, beamed, laughed, chattered away or simply stared blankly at the camera.

Is it any wonder the show went down so well in Japan, land of such a chronically disturbed relationship to sex and the sexuality of youth? Japan, of course, would come to

influence Randall in a far more decisive manner, in part through the guidance of Justine, but that will come later.

Or the invention of Randall Yellow.

This work, like those in the very early days, began in the pub – although the pub was now London's ubiquitous Groucho Club, or else the Colony, the setting for so many grim and grotesque anecdotes. Others have covered enough of these, with regards to Randall and those around him, that I feel able to pass in silence over most of it.

What I would say, though, is that most of the bad behaviour must be understood with reference to the creative tenor of the place and the time. The rudeness to staff and other guests; the crowing and jeering and intellectual breast-beating and sing-songs; the nightly or near-nightly crescendo of drinking and drug-taking, almost as if everyone wanted to race to the end of the evening as quickly as humanly possible; the importuning of other, unfortunate celebrities.

By the creative tenor I mean that while they were doing all these crazy things – Randall, and Andrew, and Tanya, and the others that crossed them or congregated around them, Tracey Emin and Keith Allen and Alex James and Ewan McGregor being only the most obvious ones – they were also conducting the closest thing the capital had at the time to an intellectual salon. They let their hair down, and more than their hair, but even as they were doing it, or perhaps right up until just before they began doing it, they were talking art, and talking film and theatre, and talking philosophy. Slurred philosophy is philosophy nonetheless. The same goes for hungover philosophy.

Among all this, the moment when Randall decided he needed to invent a colour does stick in the memory. It was in January of 1996. Kevin had just had his hugely successful debut exhibition with Larry Gagosian in New York, featuring his

Transatlantic Memory pieces. Perhaps it was simple rivalry that made Randall sit up and say he was thinking of inventing a colour.

‘No one’s done it for ages,’ he said. ‘It’s time someone came up with a new one.’

‘And why do you think anyone would be interested in a new colour?’ said Tanya.

Kevin was sitting back in his armchair, glowing with his American success.

Randall might have been looking at him, or *not* looking at him, as he spoke, and though Kevin’s response was no more airily dismissive than usual, it carried an accustomed weight.

‘Whether anyone’s interested or not isn’t the point,’ he said. ‘There are simply no dark, undiscovered corners of the spectrum, Randall, left for you to colonise. The palette is not exhausted, it’s saturated.’

I spoke up then, perhaps speaking a little too obviously out of a need to support Randall. ‘All things being equal, though, what colour would you go for?’

Randall clasped his hands and stared at the ceiling, humming. This wasn’t meant to show that he was thinking, but rather the opposite, that the thinking had already been done, and he was merely waiting to give us the fruits of it. Then, when he had done as much pretend thinking as he thought he needed to, he brought his head down and picked up his glass and, just before he drank, said, ‘Yellow.’

He drank, and we waited, then he wiped his mouth and said, ‘Randall Yellow. That’s got a good ring to it, don’t you think? There’s something shocking about it. Fluorescent vests and police tape. Wasps.’

‘Hazardous chemical cylinders.’

‘Sharps boxes in hospitals.’

‘Precisely. The world holds yellow in reserve, for emergencies.’

‘And this is an emergency, is it?’ said Kevin. ‘That you need a colour to attach your name to?’

‘No, but I think I can get what I want out of yellow without doing any damage to its more practical applications. I’m talking about yellow in the art gallery.’

‘So, you’re, what – going to dip some naked models in yellow paint, and roll them along the wall?’

‘I don’t know *what* I’m going to do, to be fair. The first thing to do is to get the colour right. Once I’ve done that then hopefully it should become fairly clear what to use it for.’

At first there were no entirely yellow works. Randall just started incorporating the colour somewhere in everything he did. *Sunshines* had it as one of their two colours, sometimes background, sometimes the smear. The *Angry Puppets* mannequins had some of their clothes made in it, a jacket or a pair of trousers.

‘I think it’s useful for people, when they’re in a gallery, to be able to orient themselves. The yellow is intended to help them in this,’ he wrote in the catalogue for ‘Randall Yellow’, his second show at Nasmith. ‘It’s like a flag, or a sign. It attracts attention and it identifies what it flags, all at the same time.’

‘How very helpful of Randall to “flag up” his works in this way,’ responded Brian Sewell in his review in the *Evening Standard*. ‘It will save busy gallery-goers the bother of walking the length of a room to see if the vapid collection of mannequins with television screens for heads really is by him. Yes, they are. And no, it’s not worth the walk.’

Yellow letterheads for our stationery. A yellow paint job for Jan de Vries’s Bentley. A yellow suit at the Turner Prize dinner that year, the year that Douglas Gordon won. Whether or not Randall Yellow was good art, it was certainly of the zeitgeist. Hot on its heels came the launch of low-budget airline EasyJet, with its ubiquitous orange styling.

There have been suggestions that Randall actually tried to copyright the colour, but that's absolutely not the case. (It's five parts Pantone 108C to three parts 3965C to one part industrial phosphorescent yellow, in case you're interested.) He *wanted* other people to use it. It's just that he wanted to stamp his mark on it, or stamp its mark on him, so whenever someone else used it, people would think of him first. So when Alexander McQueen used the colour as the backdrop to his 1997 Dior show, and when the *Independent* printed its masthead and page furniture in it to mark Randall's Turner Prize win, and when the phone operator T-Mobile used it as the background to a series of adverts, Randall was delighted.

Nasmith was less so. The fact was, though, the yellow work didn't sell particularly well. The show sold out, but it wasn't exactly followed by a flood of people clamouring for their own Randall Yellow work. In fact, *Sunshines* commissions started coming in with the request for any colour *except* yellow. It's not hard to see why. It was just too successful as a branding exercise – it concentrated everybody's ideas about him as an artist to a single element, but it simplified him, too. It turned him from a showman, a circus ringmaster, into a clown, a one-trick pony. Did Randall have in mind the events of The Great Day of Art, in the spring of 1998, even back then? I don't know, I would doubt it very much, but that's where Randall Yellow had its greatest moment, its apotheosis. That's when it – and, in a way, he – went big, and left the rest of us behind.

Untitled (The Artist's Studio)

Vincent blew his nose hard on the paper napkin from the coffee shop, enjoying the way the particles of dirt and dust from the air in the room were forced out, along with his snot, into its rough ply.

He folded the napkin and looked around for somewhere to throw it. Finding nowhere, he put it in his pocket and applied himself once more to the room. It looked, undeniably, like a room that had lain untouched for years, a decade, whatever.

The air was stale, lacquered with the reek of paint, and heavy with dust. It speckled the air; it silted the floor, bunched in damp corners, scuffed where shoes had disturbed it; it hung on the cobwebs that strung between the strip lights. Somewhere there was the smell of something quietly desiccating, giving itself up mote by mote to the general atmosphere of the place.

He ran his eyes across the bare, whitewashed walls, the thin single-glazed windows, the sheets of newspaper yellowing on the floor. On them, and on the work benches and trestle tables by the windows, the tins and jars and tubes, all of them rammed with brushes, a confusion of angles. And everything – the handles of the

brushes, the sides of the tins, the lids lying next to them – caked and scabbed with spills and drips of colour, darkened with age.

The tables and windows were to the right of him; to his left was a set of storage racks sticking out from the wall; and, in front of him, taking centre stage, the two easels, each with an unfinished work set up on it. They'd been left like that, it seemed, ready to be continued at any moment. The metal trolley holding the paints and brushes that he'd been using was right there beside them, the floor around it scattered with tissues and rags gone stiff as parchment.

'Christ,' he said, again. He was repeating himself.

Justine had gone over to the north-facing windows, with their view of the blank wall of some warehouse. She was leaning, arms crossed, with her backside against a work bench. Behind her he could see a mess of books, magazines, paper.

He looked at her and, in response, she gave him a sort of nod, or shrug: that this time the permission was not hers to give.

He stepped towards the paintings, but slowly, deliberately, scanning them as he approached, trying to make himself *see* them, in real time. Now he was here, in the studio itself, he had the certain feeling that he must grab every atom and quark of data in the room and fix it in his mind. That this was his job, to collect and store and process it.

The canvases were both laid out on the horizontal, maybe five foot along by four down. The one on the right was barely started, with nothing more than pencil marks showing the beginnings of what would have gone on to be bodies. The other, still only half-finished, was a close-up of someone, their head and hands, and what looked like another person's buttocks, there in outline only.

The face was half-familiar, but it wasn't until he stepped close enough to see the photo, thumb-tacked in the top corner of the canvas, that he recognised the subject. It was Terence Burgess, from Phaidon, the publishers. In the photo, clipped out from a

magazine, he was beaming inanely away in black tie at some function, caught just at the moment of leaning forward to drink from his champagne. He must have just had time to twist his pre-sip physiognomy into this approximation of a camera-ready smile, but it was a silly pose all the same, and he must have hated it when he saw it, a month later in *Harpers*, or wherever.

And there he was in the painting ('Fucking hell,' said Vincent, quietly), the same foolish expression blown up to twenty, thirty times the size, the half-open mouth looming now not towards a flute of champagne, but towards a huge pair of raised buttocks, these taken from the image fixed to the opposite top corner of the canvas, this one cut out from some hardcore magazine.

Burgess had his tongue out, disgracefully lolling where it wasn't in the photo, and he had his index finger stuck into what would presumably have gone on to be somebody's anus or vagina, Vincent didn't care to think too closely about which. The finger, fully painted in, stopped abruptly, cut off, at the point where it disappeared from sight. The other hand clutched an invisible buttock, as if to pull it to one side. This other hand, too, was painted in. It surprised him to think of Randall working like this, taking one part of the picture nearly to completion before he started on the rest. It went against all his ideas, never particularly well developed if truth be told, of how you even worked in oils. But it spoke, he supposed, of extreme technical confidence, of working – if he understood it right – in something like *impasto* the way other people produced photorealist paintings. The way one colour was pressed into another, yellow into white, or white into brown, and then forced to combine, against their will, right there on the canvas. He leaned in, examining the landscape of the paint, its contours and accumulations, its little peaks and smeared glaciers. There was action enough on the surface.

‘Fuck,’ he said, again, and he turned to Justine, who’d come to stand by him. She had a coffee in each hand, and she passed one to Vincent. ‘Is this really him? Really, truly? I mean, we can’t show this, can we?’

He took a sip of his coffee, and wiped his upper lip with the back of his hand. Justine drank from her cup, in turn, but didn’t answer. Vincent let her go for a moment, a half minute, as he switched his gaze back to the picture.

‘Well,’ he said at last. ‘*Can* we? Or can we?’

‘Well, I guess we’re saved the need of making a decision on this one, because it’s not finished.’ It was as if she knew her answer wasn’t good enough. A pinched flicker of expression passed across her face, gone as quick as a camera’s shutter, then she went on. ‘Come,’ she said, passing behind him, brushing a hand briefly down the back of his jacket as she went.

He followed her to the wood-framed racks that ran along the side wall of the studio, sticking out into the room. She counted in from the left: one, two, three, then tugged at the fourth rack and brought it out a little way, sending specks of dust reeling in the air.

‘No, not this one.’

She pushed it back and checked the next one before sliding it out to its fullest extension, its little metal wheel squealing and clapping as it ran over the floorboards.

There, hung on the wire frame of the rack, was a painting of a similar size to those on the easels. It was a reworked version of the one with Ed Ruscha and Larry, from the portfolio, but this time starring Ruscha, Chizuko Itou and Richard Ovitz, with two more people in attendance, one of them a man in a nurse’s uniform, the other, at a guess, Cindy Sherman. The background was fully finished, down to the pattern of the flock wallpaper and the clumsy folds of the curtains.

Next to it was another painting. On it – clearly, cutely – was Jeff Koons, twice, giving himself what looked like the fuck of his life. One of him sat on what looked like a desk or dressing table, the other one of him leaning off the first one’s cock, one leg on the floor, the other lifted up on the desk. Behind them, a window looking onto an apocalyptic sky, lava red.

‘Well, that’s what it is.’

‘Isn’t it just.’

‘He, at least, you’d think, wouldn’t sue. If these got shown. He wouldn’t be able to, would he?’

‘Am I supposed to say something here about not being able to make it stand up in court?’

‘Ha.’

He walked around to the other side of the rack. Here there was a slightly bigger painting, with Brett Gorvy and Louise Bourgeois busying themselves at each end of a befuddled-looking middle-aged man with close-cropped grey-black hair. The man was gripping a pair of David Hockney-style glasses in one hand, reaching behind himself with the other hand to palm Bourgeois’ breast through her blouse. He pointed at him, and looked at Justine: a question.

‘It’s James Cuno. President of the Getty Trust in LA.’

‘Ri-ight.’

He hunkered down and looked at it.

‘Justine, these paintings are fucking dynamite.’

He looked up at her, but she held her face still. He went on.

‘No, they’re not. They’re not dynamite. They’re plutonium. They’re radioactive. They’d kill anyone who came near them. And, look, just to be an idiot. They’re definitely his? Absolutely, definitely?’

‘Absolutely. Definitely.’

‘And how do we know?’

‘Because he signed them?’

She unhooked the canvas from the rack and turned it.

There it was, a small black scar of paint collected in the bottom corner of the canvas.

‘Christ,’ he said.

He ran a finger over it.

‘I still don’t believe it,’ he said. ‘I mean, he never signed anything.’

‘Well, he signed these.’

He did, though, he thought. He did believe it. He believed it, completely, utterly, intimately. He believed another thing, too. He believed that this was what he was here for, however he and these paintings had come together, whether brought by Justine, or Randall, or chance. The fact was, Randall wanted him here. He had left this here for him. It was a test, though what it signified, what the test consisted of, and how he’d know when it was over, was not something he should presume to know.

Justine left him looking at the paintings and went to sit at the long table under the windows. She sipped at her coffee and sifted through the whole and semi-eviscerated magazines, and the images cut out from them, spread across it. *Harpers & Queen, Tatler, ArtForum, Penthouse, Private*. Jesus, he must have been the last man in New York actually buying printed pornography.

Behind her she heard the rattle of the racks coming in and out, the muted exclamations and expletives of Vincent’s discoveries, the affectless roll call of names.

‘That’s Alex Milokovic. Fucking hell. He would *not* like that painting. Sorry. I should stop swearing.’

It'll be days before that wears off, she thought, flipping pages of an eleven-year-old *Vanity Fair*, leaning in every so often to read a caption. Days, before you tire enough of your own astonishment to catch it before it runs over.

At first it had been easy enough to convince herself that it wasn't him. Why would it be? This was everything that he had built his whole career in opposition to. Painting. She could hear him say it: *Painting*. The disgust in his voice, the contempt.

The studio was sub-let, or loaned, had been her assumption, her reflex, on walking into the room and standing there, in the middle of it all.

The studio was in his name but someone else used it.

He was helping another artist, a protégée, giving them space to work.

It was his project, but someone else did the actual painting.

But then it was so clearly abandoned. The congealed dust. The state of the sinks. The brushes dried in their jars, the tubes baked solid. Then the fact that – when she started scrabbling around among them, looking for proof, desperate for it – there was not one of the newspaper or magazines heaped around the place dated after his death. If there was more than one person involved, why this disorder and dereliction? A water glass, laced with algae, that she had carried straight to the bin, and now wished she hadn't. Unless they were scared to come back. Or didn't have a key. Too scared to come to her and say, Look, Mrs Randall, I've got something to show you.

The mug with its spongy crust on top of what was once tea or coffee. The mug, one of theirs.

Books she recognised, the cracked spines, the scuffed and folded corners.

An old Yankees t-shirt, tossed on the sofa, that looked like it had been used for wiping down a canvas: that she had bought him.

She'd tried imagining him sitting there, on the half-collapsed sofa, with its tasselled throw, wearing the shirt, watching someone, some other person, work. A young

woman artist, one of his army of ferociously gorgeous assistants, New York through and through, sharply bobbed hair and freckles of paint. Her at the easel, brush in hand. Him, slurping at his drink, giving directions, telling her who to put where, and doing what to whom. Then the shower, the sofa, the viewless windows.

A siren went past outside, followed by a clatter of wings.

‘Have you seen this?’ Vincent said from behind her.

She turned, and looked at him, ran a hand over her eyes. ‘Almost certainly not,’ she said, aware of how tired and annoyed she sounded. He had in his arms a pile of oversized books with, on top of it, a laptop, open.

‘And these,’ hefting the books to show her the spines. *Oil Painting Techniques. Oil Painting For Beginners. An Acrylics Primer.* ‘The laptop’s got all its bookmarks, all its browsing history. Have you looked at it?’

‘I have.’

‘There’s all these YouTube videos. How to prep the canvas, how to mix pigments, how to glaze. Justine, he taught himself how to paint.’

She nodded.

‘I mean, it’s incredible. I can’t get over it.’

‘No. I know. Yes,’ she said.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I guess I’m going at things a bit fast.’

He put down the pile on the bench, and scraped over a chair.

‘Not at all,’ she said.

‘No. I am. I can’t imagine what it must be like. It’s been, what, a week?’

‘Something like that. Five days.’

‘It’s a mind fuck, basically.’

He was sitting facing her, they reflected each other, each with an arm resting on the table, their knees nearly touching.

‘Basically, yes.’

‘And you’ve not told Larry, or Tom.’

‘I’ve told nobody.’

‘Or Josh?’

‘Nu-huh.’

For some time they sat without speaking, actually looking at each other, quite openly. She followed the movement of his eyes, matching and tracking him. The desire to reach out and touch. And the desire to be done with it.

The way the pigment spots on his face, that had once seemed like bitter freckles, had darkened and intensified, pinching in the skin around them. The eyebrows and the eyes. It was a good face. Time had strolled through it, run a gentle hand over it, like over the tops of grass in a meadow, not grabbed it and shaken it, like it had hers.

He was the first to speak.

‘So there we are. What are we going to do?’

‘Indeed.’

‘No, it’s a question, Justine. Straight out. What do you think we should do?’

‘I don’t know.’

Three words, she dealt them out like cards.

‘But what are your, what *were* your first thoughts? Your gut instinct.’

‘Haven’t got any,’ she said. ‘No first thoughts. No gut instinct.’

He tried again. ‘But when you think, just as a thought experiment, when you think of those paintings on show, they’d be on Madison, or 21st – one, two, three along a wall.’ He blocked it out with a sideways swipe of his hand, Randall’s gesture, allocating real space to imaginary things. ‘Or sold, they’re sold, they’re up in someone’s house. Next to a Prince, or a, I don’t know, John Currin. If I put it like that, what are your thoughts?’

She shook her head. A sad smile and a lift of the shoulders, and a hope that that would do.

‘Right. Well, I’m glad to be such a help.’

And he clapped his hands on his knees, and they laughed, both of them, thank God. She got up from the chair and removed herself to the middle of the room.

‘Vincent,’ she said. ‘Look... when’s your flight back?’

‘Tomorrow. Late tomorrow.’

‘And is there urgent anything you have to get back for?’

‘Nothing at all.’

‘So stay a few more days. Come out to the house. We can think it through there. Talk. You can come back here tomorrow. Hell, tomorrow I might know the answers to your questions. Or perhaps I know the answers already, but I want to know that you’re ready to hear them.’

‘*That* makes sense.’

‘Well, that’s as far as I’ve got.’

‘It’s a good plan.’

She nodded her head.

‘And also. As you’re here. I wasn’t going to go, but there’s a fundraising thing at Moma this evening. I know they can be deadly dull, and all...’

He laughed, and she looked round to see him gesticulating at his clothes, pulling out the sides of his jacket. ‘I’m not sure I’ve got the clothes with me for posh dos at Moma.’

She smiled.

‘Well, let’s go and kit you out then,’ she said.

She saw how he averted his face, how much he didn’t want her to see how much he liked the idea.

‘Indulge me. Josh doesn’t let me buy his clothes anymore. It would be a treat.’

She went over to the table by the door and dropped her empty coffee cup into the Thirl’s bag, held it out for him to follow suit. He pulled out a crumpled paper napkin from his trouser pocket and dropped that in too.

‘And we can come back here tomorrow?’ he said.

‘Of course. I’m not trying to stop you seeing anything. I just think we need to process it all, rather than just sit stewing in the middle of it.’

She opened the door and held it.

He said, ‘You realise, of course, that we’ll probably run into half this lot? At Moma, I mean.’ A nod of the head, to indicate the paintings, snug in their racks.

‘Well, there is that. You think you can keep schtum?’

‘I think it’s more a case of keeping a straight face.’

They went out and she locked up, letting her thoughts run ahead of her, to the high-ceilinged rooms of the museum, and the people there, and she and Vincent, walking among them, keepers of a secret. And then she thought of how, if they succeeded in keeping the secret this one time, it might make it harder to let go of in the future. Decisions have a dangerous way of making themselves, she thought, and only advising you of it after the fact.

The Great Day of Art

It's fair to say that Randall was not a political animal. When Tony Blair swept to victory in the 1997 general election on a tide of anti-Conservative and basically pro-shaking-things-up sentiment, he was as happy, or as energised, as anybody. He liked the (relative) youth, the (relative) modernity and the (unqualified) pragmatism of the New Labour movement. So when Randall got an invitation to a drinks reception at the offices of the Culture Secretary, and then later that year, to Downing Street itself, he accepted happily. Kevin went along to the first, but turned down the second. Griff made it clear he wouldn't have gone to either. Which was, obviously, hilarious.

In terms of the Great Day of Art itself, that national jamboree that, along with the Great Day of Sport that followed it, served as a dry run for the disaster of the Millennium Dome, just eighteen months later, the big question was, for Randall and the others, whether to get involved. The risk, as laid out by Griff and various other people, was the simple one of selling out.

Tanya boiled down the 'against' position to the line: 'I just don't want anyone thinking I've had anyone's cock in my mouth, least of all Tony fucking Blair's.'

The words coming in her gruff squeak of a voice, squinting through the wisps of smoke from her roll-up cigarettes. Let's have her in dark blue jeans, with thick turn-ups, and walking boots, one foot up and resting on the other knee, leg out an angle. Griff at her side, doggedly considering the floor.

We're in the Devonshire, perhaps out of some sense of propriety, as if the issue is too important to be discussed at the Groucho or Soho House. As if somehow it concerns the collective soul of the group, and as such needs to be worked through somewhere with meaning, somewhere south of the river. There are twelve or thirteen of us, leaning in around a few of their rickety tables shoved together. I've got my notebook on my lap, safely out of the way of spilled beer.

'Tanya,' said Randall. 'Whatever you do, please don't worry about the ramifications for your career, or your soul or integrity or whatever, of having had Tony's cock in your mouth.'

Kevin nodded. 'Cock-in-mouth, I'm afraid, is pretty much a condition of existence.'

Randall continued. 'No, for the people who really hate you – the people whose hatred is *important* – Tony's cock is of no consequence whatsoever. It might even add something. And this show is an unmissable opportunity, possibly our last, best opportunity, to get ourselves despised by the *people that count*.'

Kevin summed up. 'Basically, it's a no-brainer. We've got to do it, because of all the people out there who *assume* we wouldn't touch it with a barge pole.'

Someone, probably Andrew Selden, made another joke – that he was still talking about Tony Blair's cock – and Kevin raised an eyebrow and lifted his pint glass with an exaggerated suavity, at once avoiding responsibility for the joke and accepting credit for it. He grinned over at Randall, Randall laughed, and we all joined in. He drummed on the

table with the flats of his hands, to punctuate his hilarity, until the glasses and bottles clinked, until one of them tipped and spilt.

The fact is, this is the period, in the middle years of the decade, when Randall was finding it harder and harder to keep it together. Actually, he was making no attempt to do so. It was if as he thrived on the splintering of his centres of control, using the cushion of alcohol to protect himself from the violence of his actions, hurtling after every random thought to its illogical conclusion. It felt like we, the people around him, were being used as agents or catalysts, like bumpers on a pinball machine, that he could use to propel him in any direction but where he was heading beforehand.

‘It’s like he wants to grab everyone he meets by the lapels and shake them,’ is how Kevin put it. ‘It gets tiring, but I think it’s the only way he keeps his energy levels up.’

‘By being frantic?’

‘By being obnoxious.’

He got himself into fights. He got himself thrown out of numerous places. The Royal Academy (twice), the Groucho (more than twice), Brown’s, Chez Gerard, Selfridge’s, Bexhill Pavilion, a B&B in Hay-on-Wye. Pubs, people’s houses. Kevin threw him out once that I can think of.

At first, the drinking and drugs were merely an annoyance, in that he relied on the people around him to help him maintain his rate of dissipation. ‘Come on, keep up’ was the terrible refrain of this time. Gradually he stopped trying to carry us along with him. We were no fun anymore, or the effort of pretending it was fun was too wearying to keep up.

Ninety-five was the year his antics started to make him a regular feature in the tabloids. His squabble with Guy Ritchie. The continued pissing in plant pots, now regularly photographed, and turned, occasionally, into eye-catching photo-spreads, and,

on one occasion, into a night in the cells. His stumbling out of the kinds of nightclubs we had always assumed we would always consider entirely anathema. The papers' ludicrous attempts to link him 'romantically' with various models, and society hangers-on, and his even more ludicrous belief that he could play them at their own game. It's hard enough to outfox celebrity photographers and gossip page editors at the best of times, but when you're completely pissed it's fatal. Who knows what would have happened if Justine hadn't taken things in hand by marrying him.

Which is presumably the point at which I've got to admit that this memoir, if that's what it is, has been running, for some time now, if not from the beginning, on deceit. I've been soldiering on, turning in page after page, on the assumption – yours and mine – that what I was writing was a sober and objective account of Randall during those years, and the world that flared and coalesced around him. A book in which I, the author, would be positioned on the margins, like the sad kid at the disco: observing, but never taking part.

Yet in one major aspect, I was there, caught right up in the dance.

That part was Justine. The woman I was in a relationship with for three years, and who, when that relationship had ended, moved in with and then married Randall, and lived with him for another twelve years, until his death.

Which makes this part of the story painful for me to tell, and painful in part because of the assumptions that people might make about what happened. How did we manage this switcheroo, such that we went from being three friends, with me and Justine in a relationship, to three friends, with Randall and Justine? Was it me that did the managing – by accepting my role as the chump, the cuckold that hangs around to suck up his own humiliation? At the risk of making this account more self-centred than I ever intended, I suppose the question had better be addressed.

And so.

Randall did not steal Justine from me.

Justine did not abandon me for Randall.

In the timeline of Justine's romantic life, for the avoidance of doubt, there is a clear gap of not less than six months between the end of our relationship, and the start of hers and Randall's.

The fact is that one thing ended, for various sad reasons that do not pertain directly to the narrative in hand, and, happily for all concerned, something else began. Which is not to say it was done without heartache, but that, at a certain point, I decided that it was up to me to choose how much heartache I wanted there to be.

I met Justine at the wedding of a work colleague, in the spring of 1992. She was a schoolfriend of the bride, and we were sat together on a table together at the wedding breakfast. It was a country house do in Hampshire, with maybe 300 guests, croquet on the lawn, boat rides on the lake, dancing in a tent. There were plenty of City types among the guests, which gives a certain flavour to any event. People not only ready to enjoy themselves, but fully intent on doing so.

If there was braying and boasting, I managed to avoid participating in it, if only because I had decided, very soon after shaking the hand of my neighbour at the table, and dipping my eyes to compliment her on her outfit, that I wanted very much to impress her. Justine Giovanni. Nearly as tall as me, three years older (it turned out), just as single, and clearly far outstripping me in intelligence and attractiveness.

Her very first words to me were an invitation to set myself apart from the rest.

'Don't tell me you're some kind of investment banker, too.'

I replied that I was afraid I was.

'At least you don't *look* like one,' she said.

I made a little routine out of pretending to be offended, considering my suit, my shirt and tie, my face and hair, to work out what was wrong. That made her laugh. When Justine laughed, her hair danced too, bouncing around her face as if it was saying, Look, look at those eyes. Every part of her was an invitation to consider, or reconsider, a different part of her. I was hooked.

I asked her what she did.

She said she was a trend consultant, employed by companies that wanted to move from Japan to the West, or vice versa. Her specialism was Japanese contemporary culture. Manga and anime and the like, but specifically *kawaii*, from the Japanese for 'cute'. As she put it: 'Hello Kitty, Pokemon, sad-eyed puppies with droopy ears, and cartoon schoolgirls wearing tartan skirts that show off their knickers.'

After the wedding breakfast I took her out in one of the dozen rowboats on hand, that crawled lazily across the lake. I rowed out and we sat, drifting, and talked, enjoying this first moment of genuine privacy that was anything but private, being in full view of the guests on the shore. I have a photo of us, taken from land as we came back in. The green of the boat's hull, with its planks and cushions. Justine sat, in a pose caught halfway between gentility and sanctioned abandon, leaning back and propped on one arm to show off her dress, its oversized white-on-black polka dots shimmering like heat over the water, her other arm up to fix her hat, her chin raised to aim her dark glasses at the sun. Me, with my terrible haircut, sat crouched opposite her, gripping the oars, which rose at odd, kinked angles.

We exchanged phone numbers and, over that summer, began to spend a lot of time together. My decision to keep the two parts of my life separate was made easier by the fact that Justine spent a lot of time in both Japan and the US. She knew that I had friends, but I led her to believe they were dull City types, whose company it was no

hardship for her to pass up on. To Randall I said I had to concentrate on work. He shrugged, but accepted it.

Eventually, though, as my and Justine's relationship solidified to that of boyfriend and girlfriend, with all the duties and responsibilities that entails, I had to come clean.

'You know *Randall*, the artist? What, you were at school together, or something?'

'Not at all, we met a few years ago. We hang out, you know, at shows, and so on.'

'So, you've been hanging out with Randall, those times?'

'Pretty much.'

'Not hanging out in pole-dancing clubs with Barry?'

'No.'

'God, Vince. I don't know if I should be angry at you. Why have you been hiding him? Are you sure there's not some young woman artist there, in "his group"?''

I said there wasn't, and that it wasn't him I'd been hiding from her, it was her I'd been hiding from him.

Her laugh, its lift of the chin, the long pale throat.

'It's not like that,' I said.

I think that's true. It wasn't because I foresaw them going off together, or him taking her away from me, that I kept them apart. I was just jealous of them both (in the proper definition of the word). I enjoyed them each on their own too much to risk diluting those pleasures by bringing them together.

And I honestly don't think Randall would have thought of stealing her away from me. That's not what happened, after all, when I did introduce them.

Romantically, Randall was a bit of a puzzle. He did have a couple of girlfriends during the first years I knew him – Evelyn Betts and another girl, called, I think, Judith – but these were low-key things. Out in the pub, for instance, you would have been hard-pushed to work out that Evelyn was attached to him, even if they were sitting right next to each other. If anything, he was less physically demonstrative towards her than he was to me, or Kevin, or even Tanya. He was a big toucher: not just hugs hello and goodbye, but arm around the shoulder, pinching your cheeks, slapping your bum, ruffling your hair, things like that. Really it was just an extension of his all-round physicality. While he talked, or you talked, he'd be rubbing his arms, scratching at his face, or his beard, putting his hands through his hair. He'd drum out a rhythm on his knees while sitting, roll his shoulders, clean his ears, pick his nose. He liked that playground thing of getting you in an arm lock and grinding his knuckles across your scalp.

I remember Judith principally for her efforts to steal Randall away from us entirely. She kept trying to take him away for weekends in the country, or on a cheap flight to Paris or Barcelona. He went along, once. To the rest of us she presented a facade of glittering animosity, a lipsticked smile of adamant hatred. We hated her right back. In the end Randall finished it.

‘It was brilliant. She completely went off on one. Screeching at me like I'd done something unspeakable to her pony. I'd used her. I was shallow and unthinking and emotionally retarded. My art was a joke. I was like, Right you are love. Off you trot. She'd lost her voice, she was shouting that much. I had to go and get her a glass of water. Totally brilliant.’

It wasn't that Randall was totally sexless. It's just that he was a public person. He played out his intimate, emotional life in the world. He defined himself by who he was when he was with others. In my experience, what people want from sex, or perhaps from the intimacy that surrounds it, is a retreat from the world, a chance to be ridiculous, and

to be indulged. Well, Randall was ridiculous all day, every day. And he was indulged. What went on behind closed doors just wasn't a part of who he was.

He wanted, above all, to disassociate art and sex.

A Randallism: 'Perhaps the greatest achievement of conceptual art has been to render the idea of the artist and his muse/model/lover entirely obsolete.'

He went on (this from a 1999 interview in Frieze Magazine): 'Abstract expressionism tried to do it, but you've only got to look at all that paint jizzing about the place, all that quivering, just-on-the-point-of-losing-control messiness. The canvas was the female body as much as any figurative nude, no question. Poor Jackson, you can just see him, on all fours, trying desperately to make it up to Number 14 or whichever, telling it he does respect it, honestly, he just can't help himself.'

I know that he did have a relationship with Aya Inouye that, though vaguely defined, did stray into the physical. They slept together, from time to time, as far as I'm able to tell, and especially during the time when they shared a studio, but it existed on a pragmatic, rather than a romantic basis. Perhaps it was just easier to fall into bed together at the end of a long hard day than to go out and get drunk. Perhaps they were just keeping warm.

You might say that Aya needed little from him, and that suited him fine. She was very self-sufficient in general, didn't talk much about her work, wasn't always angling for reassurance, like Gina, but also wasn't as massively self-confident about it, like Randall or Kevin. Her strange, cumbersome installations, those arrangements of everyday items, almost always in fours, never looked like they were going to set the world alight, yet now they sit in some of the most important collections.

In fact Aya wrote a very moving piece about Randall in the papers after his death. She wrote that 'Randall pulled art out of the very air. It sprouted where he walked. When

he was near, and it happened to rain, it rained art. His art cleared the air, it gave things back their smell. And when it rained, it poured down.’

She went on, ‘Think of all the Randall canvases and sculptures around the world, the thousands of them, the pride of place they hold in galleries and museums and homes. They would mean nothing to him, I truly believe, unless they made people think, seeded a new rainfall of thought in them and around them.’

The months leading up to the end of my and Justine’s relationship, and those that ran on until she took up with Randall, were among the most wretched I can remember experiencing. I retreated into myself and applied myself to work. I didn’t see Randall much, socially, but then I didn’t feel particularly sociable; in any case he was going through a phase of intense practical application, and this without the help of Aya, for so many years his unpaid assistant, who had gone to take up an artistic residency in Buenos Aires. That, and Kevin’s continued success – including a shortlisting for the Turner Prize – drove Randall to apply himself more seriously than ever to his *Angry Puppets*.

I had encouraged Justine not to think that she had to end her friendships among the group just because we were no longer going out, and so when Randall said that he had an opportunity to show the *Puppets*, along with a selection of *Sunshines*, at the Shijobo Gallery in Nagoya, I said that he should see if she wanted to go along as a kind of cultural chaperone, as well as interpreter.

Perhaps the idea of approaching Justine had already occurred to him. Perhaps he had already acted on it. In any case, it turned out that Justine would be in Japan at that time anyway, and it was easy for her to hop across from Tokyo for a few days to help ease him through the preparations for the show.

It was the first time they spent together alone, or without me, the first time too that Justine had been able to fully exercise her own skills and knowledge in Randall’s

orbit, rather than responding to him. Randall, who had been so fearfully ignorant – so fearful – of Japanese culture, was bowled over by it, by the clashing influences, the way that it seemed to be all surface, all affectless, connectless *now*, but yet which honoured a sense of tradition that made ‘Old Europe’ seem positively jejune.

‘Europeans write endlessly about postmodernism, and the Americans like to think they embody it,’ Randall wrote later, ‘but you haven’t experienced postmodernity until you’ve been to Harajuku District in Tokyo.’

And also, ‘Punk was the last great disappointment of British culture – the revolutionary uprising that tripped over its own principles the moment it struggled to its feet. But punk lives on in Japan. They honour it for what it truly was – a style, disassociated from any radical principle, and in doing so they honour the very principle that the original punks so wretchedly betrayed.’

And also, ‘I love Japan for introducing me to Yukio Mishima, and to Takashi Murakami, and to Elvis Presley.’

The Shijobo show was a success, in local and immediate terms, but in a way it laid the foundation for much of the rest of Randall’s career. ‘The biggest surprise of all?’ he wrote in the catalogue to accompany 2002’s SuperHeroes show, ‘That I’ve been making Japanese art all along.’

And, of course, the trip laid the foundations for Justine and Randall’s own relationship. It was obvious, even from Randall’s phone calls to me, and her emails, while he was out there, that they were getting on well, but I’ve no reason to doubt Justine when she told me, as she did when she came to me, later, to tell me that she was moving in with Randall, that nothing happened when they were out there.

Justine and Randall married in September 1996 and moved into a bigger house in Stoke Newington. He still had the Haggerston studio, but now he was spending more and more

time in Cambridge, churning out the now very professional-looking *Sunshines and Nightskies*. I visited him occasionally down there, but it wasn't the same. He had twenty or thirty people working there, and naturally they had formed a close-knit group that, to a certain extent, replicated the original circle. The difference was in their lack of autonomy. Not that they were yes-men, and some of the key players were talented artists – Juan Bertrando and Sally Coute worked for him for a time – but in terms of their relationship to Randall, they were subservient in the way that we never had been.

What did drag Randall back to London, and what remained of the circle, however, was the Great Day of Art, and for that at least he was fully committed, if coming at things on a rather unhinged slant. The specific hope that was passed down from the Arts Council-backed organisers was that we would mount another group show like the now celebrated 'Everywhere I Look', seven years previously. A show that, although coming under the official umbrella, would showcase the independence and ambition of the rejuvenated British art scene, a vivid counterblast to stand between the new crop of student shows and the exhibitions lauding Hockney, Vettriano and Lowry. We were to be the official, anointed, internalised opposition.

So it was back to the pub, and back to our good old arguing ways. The difference this time was that nobody truly had the interests of the group at heart, though of course nobody acknowledged this. Almost everybody had a reputation to maintain, or protect. On the other hand they all agreed that the show was only worth doing if they could come up with something more than a standard group show, that had a spirit of its own. It had to have a point to it. And so it went, round and round in circles.

It was Randall who suggested having a show on a boat – 'a *party* boat!' – that could be docked for the duration of the show on the river, as a floating but fully-functioning gallery, but which would cast off as and when needed, for the opening and closing parties, to cruise us up and down the Thames. Randall was so fearsomely excited

about his idea that in the end everyone just went along with it. Its sheer tackiness would protect them from accusations of selling out.

As for the work itself, Randall seemed to want to give out the idea that, as with the first group show, he was having trouble coming up with something good enough. On his curator's plan you could see space allocated for him, at the far end of the main gallery room, on the lower deck, which would have its windows blacked out, the upstairs room being left open to the view.

I suppose I must have pestered him to tell me, no doubt because I was jealous of his new *friends*, the Cambridge assistants. I asked Kevin, and Tom Nasmith, if they knew, but they both said they didn't.

'He just told me it was going to be memorable,' Nasmith told me afterwards. 'At that point, to be honest, I had rather given up on him developing as an artist at all. I thought shock-horror headlines and reasonably steady income were the best we were going to get.'

Eventually, Randall caved in, and invited me over to Haggerston.

'You're like a fucking child, Vincent,' he said. 'But this is tip-top secret. Not a word to anyone. Not Tom, not Kevin, not Justine.'

'Fine.'

'Seriously. You're either on the boat,' he said, 'or you're not on the boat.'

'Come on, Randall. Of course I'm on the boat. Everybody's on the boat.'

'Not that boat. The other boat.'

He went across the room to get a foolscap folder, which he emptied on to the table. He repeated the phrase as he sorted through the papers, enjoying the sound of the words – 'Not *that* boat, *this* boat' – until he found what he was looking for.

It was a printout from a website showing a picture and details of a motor launch, a rigid inflatable with outboard motors and a steering console, the sort that coastguards used, and Greenpeace.

‘So you’re, what, going to arrive at the opening in a speedboat?’

‘We’re going to *board* the opening.’

‘And do what?’

‘Ha-hah!’

He ran over to a cupboard and produced from it a huge gun, a machine gun like an AK-47, but lighter, it seemed, more plastic. He turned and struck a pose.

‘That’s a paintball gun, right?’

‘Uh-huh.’

He strode into the middle of the room where he took up another stance, gun at his hip, and sweeping it a juddering motion from side to side. ‘Der-der-der-der-der,’ he went, a child’s imitation of gunfire.

‘You’re going to paintball your pictures?’

‘That’s more or less it, Vincent.’ He cocked his head. ‘You like?’

‘It seems a little ...’

‘Shit?’

‘Not that. It’s just, have you ever done paintballing? They shoot tiny amounts of paint.’

‘Oh, we’ll think of something,’ he said, pulling a further pose, gun cocked on his hip, with its barrel reaching skyward.

In fact, Randall had tracked down a set of paintball enthusiasts in deepest Kent who helped him out with specially adapted ‘markers’, as they called the guns, that were able to provide maximum coverage in the minimum time, using specifications that went way beyond what was allowed on paintball courses. They were just the kind of maniacs

Randall loved. He fed off their obsessions, and yet was perfectly able to convince them that his attentions, as a genuine – and maverick – artist somehow helped validate those same obsessions.

He took me along to meet them in their HQ, a bunker in a stretch of woodland outside Canterbury. They lounged around in their paint-spattered fatigues, these overgrown army cadets, sprawled on duffed-up sofas, talking over each other with competing advice on compressed gas, Nerf rockets, reload rates and ball-jam avoidance, while Randall sat, as if on tenterhooks, hanging on their every word.

They invited us to take part in one of their idiotic play-battles, and Randall, naturally, accepted. I sat out in a chair on the flat roof, watching them skulk through the undergrowth, ducking theatrically behind concrete walls and jogging unathletically across open ground, rattling off little pellets of paint in limp imitation of every war film they'd ever seen.

In the end, I wasn't on the boat, or not on *that* boat. I was the inside man, on the *Marlow Duchess*, the rather squat three-floor boat we found for our venue. I was officially in charge of lights and music, though with my own set of instructions from Randall. On the day itself, after all the rigmarole of official opening of 'A Bigger Splash', as the show was called, after the Hockney painting, and the various interviews and press meets and line-ups at sanctioned gatherings, we congregated at Chelsea Harbour. It was a warm late May evening. The day was judged to have been a success, there it was on the news, there was Trafalgar Square full of people, there were shots of schoolkids painting murals on their playground walls.

At 7pm we embarked. There was a certain amount of whispering about Randall – most people had worked out, or heard, that he was going to be doing some kind of performance – but equally there was a feeling about that, finally, the group had proved

that it was bigger than him alone, that the quality of work in the show brought out exactly how marginal he was as an artist, as opposed to a figurehead.

If there was a star, it was Kevin, whose *Scalpeen III* was fitted to the front of the boat as a kind of figurehead. Then there were Aya's delicate barbed-wire balls, Tanya's fabric Giacomettis in lacework bridal and funeral veils that spilled off their display heads and across the floor: these were the things that people were talking about. It helped that the entire show was a sell-out, to a single buyer, no less, each work carrying its little red dot next to its information card. Tom Nasmith said that he knew the purchaser, but that he was under oath not to divulge their identity at the present time.

While we circulated, drank and gossiped, Randall and his team of five, all assistants from his Cambridge studio, were boarding their launch at Greenwich. They were wearing protective overalls and gloves in Randall Yellow, together with full-face masks under their hoods. Each of them had a paintball gun modified to fire large pellets, and a second, standard gun 'in case of problems'. Randall's main gun was a huge thing adapted by his Kentish military suppliers that he called 'The Randallator', and he also had a paint grenade-launcher.

We had got just past Tower Bridge when the launch, coming upriver, turned mid-river and drew up alongside. The guests on the deck of the *Marlow* identified them easily – those yellow overalls – and word came downstairs that Randall was here. Some people went upstairs to watch them arrive, while others came down to get a good spot to watch whatever was going to happen. Corridors and stairways were a sudden jam of competing trajectories, colouring the heady atmosphere with a touch of latent chaos.

Randall and team boarded without trouble, the boat's crew having been forewarned that there would be a late arrival. With their bodies and faces completely covered – the masks had goggles for the eyes, sinister vents over the mouth and chin – they looked ridiculous and ominous at the same time. But the guns looked real enough,

and the total silence with which the boarders responded to the greetings, cheers and catcalls of their welcoming committee must have carried its own weight.

They walked in formation to the rear of the boat, where I was waiting to let them in through a crew-only entrance. They did look weird and scary. The strangest kind of scary, when you don't know exactly how scared to be.

I remember I said, 'Alright,' as I held open the door for them, but got no reply, not even a nod. Randall was identifiable only by the fact that he went first, that he was the one the others deferred to. I left them regrouping in the kitchens, just behind the main exhibition room, and went to man my controls. They came quietly through the swing doors, one of them remaining behind to lock and guard it. On Randall's nod I doused the lights – leaving a set of spots focused on Randall's three blank canvasses, at the far end of the room – set a variable strobe going and pressed play on Randall's chosen soundtrack, a very loud and dissonant drone backing he had found somewhere, which he had mixed over a track by the American indie rock band Pixies. 'Bone Machine' the song was called. Its ominous opening instrumental section gave them roughly a minute to make their way through the crowd which, half-deafened and disorientated, easily and warily parted to let the five of them through. Then, just as the guitars in the song blared out, scratching their angry claws across the drums and bass, they took up their guns and opened fire on the canvases at the end of the room.

Paint ball guns are not noisy, but people put their hands to their ears, perhaps as a reflex. They bunched back, spreading themselves against the walls, as people do at these events. (I stood on a chair to get a better view. I remember waving across the room to Gina, who was filming events on a camcorder.) What was impressive was the high-velocity impact of the pellets on the canvases, the way they sprang immediately to life, the paint thudding into the material, a lovely pattern of splatters springing up as if by magic, overlapping, spreading, moving some of them in dotted arcs, some of them

horizontal lines from one canvas to the next, the collateral splats on the gaps between seeming to nail them as a piece to the wall. The barrels smoked with escaped gas. There might have been smell, of the paint, but nothing reached me.

Now that the ‘performance’ had started, had defined itself, people pressed forward, looking not at the act itself, but for the detail, the angle they could use to tell the anecdote afterwards. They were leaning in to each other, shaking their heads with glee, trying out their put-downs and dismissals and qualified appreciations.

The actual ‘painting’ took less than a minute. It was messy, inaccurate, random. What actually ended up on the canvases, Randall had made clear, was unimportant. This was just the entrée, the feint. The canvases were maybe two thirds covered in paint when he unslung his first gun, dropped it to the floor and kicked it away from him towards the paintings. He shouted an order to the team and swung around his second gun to his front. That’s when the song kicked into its louder sequence, my cue as well as his. I made my last adjustment to the lighting – dousing the spots on the canvases and increasing the frequency of the strobe – and closed and locked the cupboard housing the controls. I mixed myself in with the crowd just as the two gunmen at either end of the line peeled off and went to place themselves in front of the twin exits, on either side of the canvases. The remaining three, Randall at their centre, turned and, yelling inaudibly under the music, opened fire on the crowd.

As opposed to the first, larger guns, these were standard paintball kit. They fired small pellets, but at over 20 rounds per second they caused instant mayhem. The crowd was trapped and disorientated and, above all, it was a crowd. Bodies pressed and stumbled about me, the desire to get away from the assault overriding any sense of whether it was fear or anger that was driving it. Nobody likes being fired at from close range. Nobody likes getting paint all over their fancy clothes. The loud music and flashing lights and low ceiling didn’t help. Anybody who tried to move towards the

gunmen, or towards the doors, would have found that getting hit by paintballs does hurt. Having seen the impact of the powerful guns on the canvases, people wouldn't necessarily have worked out that these were feeble by comparison. Not that getting hit in the face, or worse, in the eyes, wouldn't have caused significant injuries, and of course none of them were wearing the protective gear you have to put on before anyone will let you anywhere near a paintball gun.

They were able to keep the barrage up unopposed for more than a minute, largely because of the quite natural panic of the crowd. The people most likely to do something about it – the people who knew Randall, and didn't give a shit about him, or had a positive animus against him – were at the back; those at the front were the well-dressed dilettantes, keen to get a good vantage point for this bit of art fun. I saw Griff, caught in the flashing of the strobe, pushing his way through yellow-spattered and -speckled society types, who were themselves pushing against him, to try to get out of range. Kevin, too, was making his way against the press of the crowd. They made it to the ragged front of the audience and together with three others started walking slowly towards the perpetrators. They moved as if into a gale, arms up to protect their faces. People were slipping on the paint now, and I helped up a woman who had gone to ground. She had paint on her dress and in her hair, the yellow glooped into the strands like some vicious alien ectoplasm.

Somebody had found the switches for the main lights, and they blinked on to show people, still pushing helplessly away from the assault. The eye was drawn to each fresh burst of yellow – who was hit? who was hit? was I hit? People were yelling for Randall for stop, or for others to stop him. A man's voice, plummy and shrill, was repeating 'It's just paint! It's just paint!' over and over. Other people were sobbing, cowering, hands over heads.

The counterattack – Griff and two others – had covered half the distance between Randall and the crowd when Randall pulled round his third and final weapon, the short-barrelled grenade launcher. This gave the heroic vanguard pause, as well it might. Randall waved it in their direction, not firing, just to keep them back, then, as all four of his wing men provided covering fire, he turned to his left, took a step forward, and started taking carefully aimed shots at the other art works on display.

One grenade at a time – splam splat, splam splat – into each painting visible and in range, each photograph, each sculpture. Backing away as he fired, adjusting his aim. He'd been training. The canvases jumped as they were hit. Sculptures toppled and fell. The glass of a framed photograph cracked. This was hardcore ammunition. The impact circles were massive, maybe a foot in diameter. The yells of personal outrage took on a new, more urgent tenor, the movement towards Randall accelerated, but he was at one of the doors now, and gone.

With his departure, the sense of chaos in the room broke its bounds. People rushed, pushed, for the doors, to pursue, to escape. The retreating attackers had dumped their unused paintballs down the stairs from the top, creating more slippage, more swearing, more mayhem. Watching Gina's recording of the event, you can see how in these instances it's the panic and crush that do for people, not the disaster itself. The video, frankly, looks like one of those edits of amateur footage you get on the net that show the wedding disco the moment after the roof falls in.

Others, though, made for the artworks, their own, or others'. There was someone wiping at a canvas with their sleeve, only managing to smear the thick paint further across it. Most just moved apart, breathed, inspected themselves, their level of damage and of those around them. Gave laughs of disbelief, and relief, the sharp barbed bark that convinces yourself you're alright after all.

I didn't follow the crowd up on deck. Partly, I think, because I was worried about what might happen up there – the fleeing boarders didn't have much of a start on their pursuers, and if they caught them there was a chance of a real set-to. In fact, the first of the pursuers did get there, just as the last of the attackers were reboarding their boat, and the casting off was something of a botched bundle, as you can see on the videos that exist of this moment, too. The yellow-suited clowns, hoods back and masks peeled off, pitching to the floor of their boat as it turns and accelerates away, laughing and hooting and firing off last pellets of paint into the air.

Below-decks, the scene was one of, if not outright devastation, then continued, undiminished confusion and dismay. The strobe, still pulsing behind the main ceiling lights, gave the room a fluttering echo of panic. I was the one with the key to open up the controls and switch it off, but I hesitated to do so, partly because I was under instructions to let the moment continue, but also because I realised that doing so would identify myself as a collaborator, as part of the prank.

The pursuers having returned, deflated, the room turned into a running debate and deconstruction of Randall's prank, the discussion escalating, or regressing, pretty quickly, into bunched arguments around anyone who stood up for him. A knot of the particularly offended formed itself around Tom Nasmith, who, to give him his due, was fully prepared to defend Randall. He shook his head, frowned, laughed, pursed his lips, folded his face moment by moment into an eloquent sequence of expressions: irony, deep seriousness, incredulity, mocking attentiveness, alert pedantry, devilish authority.

If I dwell on this scene, the aftermath of the debacle, then I do so in part for Randall's sake. For him this, rather than the works themselves, or their creation, was the crux of the work. 'Conceptual art is a rhetorical art,' he said, afterwards. 'Its fruits are in the reaction it engenders. As a conceptual artwork, a tree falling unheard in a forest does indeed make no noise.'

He liked to compare what he did to the art of Japanese calligraphy – something he discovered through Justine. In it the artist empties their mind and creates in a simple, expressive gesture, without the possibility of editing or amendment. The mark of the ink on the paper is not valued in or for itself, but only as a trace of the pure, momentary gesture. For Randall, conceptual art flipped this, so that the critical gesture came not before, or at the moment of the work, but after it – and was not the artist's, but the viewer's. 'It's Hitzusendo in reverse,' he said. 'It's not that it comes from the empty mind, and the expression of the artist's self, but that it puts the viewer in touch with their own deepest essence. As art goes, it's as Zen as it gets. It's not about the artist at all.'

The paradox of this, of course, was that the artist would never know the true, felt, unmediated reaction of the viewer. Particularly so in this case, because the artist had fled.

A Randallism of my own invention: 'What we want, and can never have: the room after we have left it.'

I pan through the lower deck room, then, of the *Marlow Duchess*, as across the battlefield the morning after the battle, and it is for him that I pick out the florid cheeks of the public gallery trustee, dabbing with a handkerchief at the lapel of his dinner jacket, as at a toxic seam of seagull shit; the people with their phones to their ears, calling either the papers, their friends, or their lawyers; the others standing in a daze, trying to smile their way out of their shock; the gallery assistants picking up the few paint pellets left about the floor, shying them mischievously at each other.

I saw a crew member kneeling at the lighting cupboard, clearly unable to get inside, and began making my way towards him, only to have Tanya cut me off. I'd seen her during the onslaught, laughing manically, twisting and turning under the fusillade, almost dancing, as if she was enjoying the hits as much as avoiding them.

‘Good God, Vincent,’ she said, leaning and yelling. ‘Look at you, you’re completely untouched.’ She made as if to smear me with her hands, and I backed away. ‘Funny that,’ she said.

‘How do you mean?’ I said. ‘I had no idea he was going to pull something like that.’

I knelt and unlocked the cupboard. Killed the strobe, turned down the music, to immediate sighs and shouts of relief, From the cupboard I retrieved the cardboard box with the printed sheets I was supposed to hand out and lifted it on to the flat top. Tanya took a sheet, and then Kevin was there, and suddenly the control desk was the centre of a scrum of attention, with people angrily reacting to the sheet before I had had a chance to read it myself. I took a copy and moved away.

‘A Bigger Splash, Remixed’ it said.

Some of it I recognised: ‘Art can be a messy business.’ There was a neat little twisted disquisition on the action painters of the 50s. And, at the bottom: ‘Please forward any dry cleaning bills to Tom Nasmith Gallery.’

The remixed works, it said, would remain on show for the remainder of the two-week run. Randall, together with some of the remixed artists, would take part in a live debate, as advertised, in the gallery, on Thursday 17 May. ‘Good Art/Better Art: a discussion around themes of value in contemporary art.’ Also as advertised would be the closing night party on Friday 18 May, a cruise this time upriver from Chelsea Harbour. Live music. No live art.

The ‘remix’ was Randall’s grand idea, his attempt to sever himself once and for all from the scene he had grown up in and alongside, that had nurtured him and he had nurtured. The remix, the cover version, the mash-up, the doctored video: the development of so many art forms towards the synthetic, the radical irresponsible attitude to appropriated material – all of this Randall had either assimilated, or foreseen.

The difference being, of course, that this was art. And art, for Randall, was all about ownership.

Contra Walter Benjamin, Randall was hung up on the idea of the aura of the artwork, the last, lost, forsaken shred of unique quintessence of individuality twinkling in the void.

The work from the show, the work by his friends, that he ‘remixed’, or, if you want, trashed, or defiled, he already owned. The mystery purchaser was him. It was his to do with what he would.

The scrum around Tom Nasmith calmed itself, though there was still talk of further reparation, and even litigation. Nasmith responded by getting hold of a camera from someone and taking photos of anyone haranguing him about the ruination of their clothes. He did this matter-of-factly, almost apologetically, pointing out that on-the-spot documentary evidence was the most sensible way of facilitating and organising claims, and soon enough there was an orderly queue of outraged punters, waiting patiently for their opportunity to pose, stoically upright with arms held out away from their sides, or turning demurely from the camera to show where they had taken their damage on the back or rump.

Randall laughed longer and harder at those photographs than at anything else I can recall from that time.

And he laughed at the people who wanted the entire cost of their outfit reimbursed, which Nasmith agreed to, paying out on receipt of the outfit in question, outfits that themselves went on show in due course, each encased in its own vitrine. Randall even laughed when people started putting their ruined clothes on eBay, stopping only to call his lawyers if anyone suggested it was actually a Randall. And two days later Justine went into labour with Joshua.

It was a difficult labour, as it had been a difficult pregnancy, with constant monitoring and medical support, because of Justine's age, and blood pressure, and multiple hospital admissions. The responsibility of it, I think, scared her. She had always known that pregnancy was going to be hard for her, and indeed it was that, as much as anything, that ground our relationship down: the repeated failures, through various IVF cycles, for the magic to take hold – and the spectre of that failure repeating itself, over and over, into our shared future, on to the crack of doom.

A family was, I presume, not part of the deal in her relationship to Randall. Perhaps he was responsibility enough. But then a family appeared, or announced itself. I remember that evening at the Stoke Newington house when they – or she – gave me the news. It pains me now to think of the look on Randall's face as I stood on the doorstep, offering him the bottle of wine wrapped in tissue paper. It was as if he was blaming me for turning his life into a middle-class cliché. The way he stood aside, welcoming me in with a wave of the hand. The aroma, in that long narrow hallway, of good food cooking, corroborated by the sound of something sizzling in the pan, the running of water. My footfalls on the boards. The hallway opening out into the kitchen, with its chrome surfaces and tilted skylight, and Justine drying her hands on a tea towel as she turned, seeing me, clutching the big bunch of flowers before me.

I stopped, and held myself still, just long enough for the moment to expand, for me to see her eyes blink wet, and her mouth crack, and to see that the tears she was holding, there, as if in abeyance, were a response to the tears already in mine, and I knew I had to let her say it, that it wouldn't do to take even that away from her.

I felt like heaving the flowers into the air, like an idiot in an advert for who knows what, raining them down over us all, but I let them hang in front of me, and let her nod her head at me, and bite her lip, and she kept nodding her head, and I was probably nodding my head right back at her, then she opened her mouth to speak, and

perhaps but I don't know if she even got half the sentence out before we had closed the space between us, and we were both in each other's arms and wailing away like babushkas. I had her in my arms, lifted up and spinning, both of us wringing out more and more of those ugly, throat-flaying sobs of happiness that seem to hurt so much for the face's muscles being pulled in too many different directions at once.

And then I let her down, and let her go, and there was Randall, leaning with what might have been intended to look like insouciance by the doorway.

'I say, chaps. Steady on,' he said.

And I said, as best I could, 'Fuck *you*, Randall,' and, in a moment of inspiration I added, 'You ridiculous cock-hungry peasant!' And I walked right over to him, and I hugged him too. I lifted him off the floor and shook him, perhaps to see if I could squeeze some tears out of him. And I grunted my congratulations. 'Congratulations, you beautiful, lucky, glorious bastard.'

During the meal, and in fact for much of the pregnancy, Randall manifested a deliberate lack of interest, and even disdain, towards the idea of fatherhood. It must have upset Justine. God knows it appalled me. No matter, I was happy enough for the three of us. Justine too, though, as I said, she was also scared. Scared, perhaps, a little of how fatherhood might affect Randall, but scared above all of having the thing dangled in front of her that she above all else wanted.

As it turned out, she was right to be scared. The crisis came some six weeks before the due date. Justine woke in the night complaining of severe chest pains, and was taken to hospital by ambulance. The labour was long and traumatic, and the baby came out blue, meaning it was oxygen-deprived, and soon after had a seizure. It was immediately taken to intensive care and Justine, who had suffered some internal bleeding, was sedated. The next day they were taken to another hospital, either because of a shortage of beds, or because of better specialist equipment at the other hospital, the

exact reason was disputed, but whatever it was the transfer itself caused more aggravation to both patients.

All of this I found out only later. Randall rang me the morning after the nightmare night, but he just told me that it had happened, and that both were 'fine', the boy was called Joshua, everyone was really tired and he'd call me again soon. Of all the accusations that can be levied against my friend, this is the one that strikes hardest, and deepest, as far as I myself am concerned. He didn't just reject compassion, he went out of his way to avoid it. And he did so when the compassion was directed not just at him alone, but at those close to him. He deprived Justine of my compassion, and Kevin's, and Gina's. It was nearly a week before I got to see them, a brief visit at the hospital. I sat with her for twenty minutes, then we went together, walking slowly to the lifts, to see Joshua, a floor down in the special care unit, lying in his incubator. We were there only ten minutes. There were other babies there so much sicker than he.

All of this coming out, in dribs and drabs, during the aftermath of the launch.

The exasperation of the anti-Randall brigade, that he had been saved from the pasting they had in store for him at the debate, and by the kind of personal tragedy that defused or deflected any antagonism.

Griff and Tanya, splitting up soon after. Over Randall at the launch, or Randall and the debate that never was, or Randall and the sick baby, it wasn't clear what.

People came in their thousands to see the boat, walking, most of the time, through pickets denouncing Randall even to get to the gangplank, Griff being foremost among them. They came to see the splashes of paint still on the floor, the ruined artworks with their big yellow splotches and little red dots. This time Nasmith had moved sharpish to make sure neither Tanya nor anyone else could repeat her trick of 'Everywhere I Look'. There was security on the boat, the full suit-and-earpiece model, standing by the doors to make sure no one walked off with the disputed works.

Once mother and son had been discharged, the family relocated to their house in Cambridge, partly so that they could be closer to Justine's parents, partly to escape the press and grind of London – the simply huge number of people with an interest in them, of whatever kind: monetary, journalistic, gossipy, friendly, caring. It was simpler just to cut them – us – all out, than to try and choose between them.

The family retreated to the fens, and Randall retreated to his studio there. Nothing more was heard from him, artistically, for well over a year. I went down to visit a couple of times, practically forcing myself on them, it felt like, and though Justine was glad to see me, and to show off adorable Joshua, there was a sense of isolation that I just couldn't cut through. She had been able to share her joy at becoming pregnant with me, because this was a joy we had rehearsed over and over, ourselves, but she was not able to share her joy at being a mother. The gift was too precious, and too dangerous. If not for science, she and he both would have died. 'I love him,' she said, 'but he's not mine, not entirely. He belongs to science, too.' Can I write this? Can I put this in?

Randall, on my visits, seemed to have shrugged himself further into a parody of masculine distance and diffidence. Obnoxiousness, really. He wore a Barbour jacket and strode about the grounds of his house with an old walking stick with little metal badges running up its length. I don't know if it was his father's, or it came with the house, or he picked it up in a local charity shop.

It wasn't 'Vincent' any more, but 'Old man' and 'Old chap', the tags delivered with a twist of nastiness. Likewise, Justine was 'the missus', and Joshua 'the little 'un'. He was no fun to be around. One time we got in his Land Rover, the two of us, to collect a curry from the Indian in the nearest town. We placed our order and went to wait in the pub on the corner and I watched as he downed his first pint in about five seconds, his non-drinking hand braced on the bar.

'Fuck me, that's better,' he said, and gestured for another.

Even sadder, in a way, than visiting Randall and Justine was going to Peploe that New Year, with them absent. Andrew Selden was ill, too, that year, and Hem had died the year before, and those incidents and the birth of Joshua served as a kind of wake-up call for us all.

Peploe. Peploe is really what I want to write about. That's the place, more than London, that I associate with Randall, and with us all. To a certain extent, ever since the first time I went there, I have navigated by it.

Things that happen there have a stronger, fuller, deeper resonance than if they had happened elsewhere. Or perhaps it's that big things, important things, are more likely to happen there, because of the sort of place it is, or simply because of the importance we chose to place on it. So much of what happened in the circle happened there, or found its meaning there. It's where we were most ourselves, individually and as a group.

Peploe Hall is a seven-bedroom manor house, dating in parts back to the sixteenth century, sitting in a wooded valley near Porth Navas in Cornwall, high above its own inlet of the Helford River. It has a boathouse, a tennis court, and woods enough to lose yourself, and fifty other people in. You come at it down a long gravel road through oak and beech wood, jagged lightning bolts of silver birch thrust here and there in the ground. When the weather is fine, the foliage acts on the sunlight like a kaleidoscope, spinning a hundred different shades of green, light and dark, on to your car bonnet.

Your first view of the house is sideways on, its façade laid at a slant. It's the gaping openings of the converted stable garages that meet your gaze across the wide gravel forecourt. There is no sense of your height above sea level, or the precipitousness of the descent to it. It is only once you go through the house, or around it, that you see

how quickly the ground drops away, the terraced formal gardens giving way quickly to a strip of rhododendrons and, below them, untrammelled nature.

You can't see the river from the house, it's tucked in too tight below you, but its presence is betrayed by the gap from the trees here to those on its far side: so close that you'd think you could throw a stone across to them, but to get there by car would take forty minutes.

It is a warm, wet place, the climate benefiting from the gulf stream, and the shelter offered by the woods. Palm trees grow happily alongside the red-beamed Scots pines in the upper gardens, while the woods below are close and dense. Bark comes away from the trunks in your hands, as you descend. Tread on a twig and there will be not a loud dry snap, but a muted complaint. The ground is slippery with leaf litter, and ferns grow from under every rock, moss flocks in every crevice. Eventually – it's a ten minute walk, a reckless five-minute career down the quickest, steepest way, grabbing at whip-springy branches to guide and steady you as you go – you come to the river.

The beach is just a scattering of shingle across grey, silty sand, or sandy silt, but it is the house's own. There is just enough flat ground above the high tide mark, and in the lee of the first trees, to accommodate the fire circle, half a dozen felled trunks, grey and barkless with age and laid in an irregular hexagon around the blackened centre, permanently decorated with the charred remnants of the last offering. It is here we congregated, summer and winter alike, not every evening, but always at least once, properly, every visit, to drink and talk and gaze with childish awe into the fire.

The first time I visited, as I think I said, was in the summer of 1991. There were maybe ten people invited, all of us the London circle, and not counting Gina. Gina's parents, Matthew and Hem (for Wilhelmina), were there, that time, for the duration of our stay. In later years, as Hem's and then Matthew's health deteriorated, they were there less often, though the house remained thick with their personalities.

There was some art in Peplow, but not much, and certainly nothing to hold the attention. The entrance hall actually had portraits of various Holland ancestors glowering down at you from its walls, and a bronze bust or two, but most of the other paintings were of dogs or boats, upstaged by their heavy gilt frames. The house was fitted out for entertaining, but entertaining of a particular, rather dated kind. The central room of the ground floor was the dining room, dominated by a great long banquet table in forbiddingly dark wood, with glass-doored cabinets standing sentry around the walls. I never saw it used as intended, to feast twenty people on peacock and suckling pig, though occasionally you'd look in and catch someone perched at the corner of the table, quietly scoffing a bowl of cereal. The kitchen table sat twenty, too, at a pinch, and that's where we ate. Likewise, there was a casual sitting room and a formal drawing room, where Matthew Holland liked to have us gather at cocktail hour – for sherry, by preference, though he also mixed a mean Tom Collins.

While we spent the evenings there together, as a group, days tended to be more loosely organised. Dinner apart, there were no fixed meal times, and people split off into small groups, or couples, or on their own, out on day trips, or to go with Gina in the house's motor launch to explore the coast down towards the Lizard, if the weather was good, or take walks or bike rides, or just hide somewhere with a book. Or sleep in. Randall read a lot at Peplow. The Hollands had a well-stocked library – and you'd often find Randall there, pushed deep in one of the red leather armchairs, socked feet up on a side table, an invisible 'do not disturb' sign swinging above his head.

Justine, as I think I said, slotted straight into the scheme of things at Peplow right from the start. Her first visit was over a long weekend in the summer of 1993. She joined in the traditional activities of helping Hem in the garden, weeding and dead-heading, and of sitting captive in the drawing room while Matthew expounded on local history. She bonded with Kevin in the kitchen, which he liked to commandeer to produce a series of

splendid dinners, prevailing on me to drive us round half the county in search of essential ingredients from far-flung delis and specialist retailers.

The nearest shop of any description was in a village by the name of Little-in-Sight. We loved that.

Justine had none of the awkwardness that I felt, even then, regarding my place in the group, no sense that she had to justify her presence. What the ease of her acceptance into the group showed me was how miraculous was the amalgamation of intellectual and artistic aims and straightforward *friendship* in Randall's circle. Perhaps it's the same for any scene, or salon, or movement in the history of the world. It's impossible to pick the two strands apart – whether everyone has the same values and aims with regards to the work, and the work in the world outside the group, because they're *all such good friends*, or whether they're friends precisely *because* they share those aims.

'I like your friends,' she whispered in my ear, her arm around my back, a fleece jacket draped across our shoulders as we all sat around the fire, watching each other flicker in and out of sight. Andrew Selden warbling away at his harmonica, his hand fluttering in spasms like a bird's wing. Kevin and Griff having a poetry recital competition, to see who could come out with the longest ream of remembered verse. Griff was Wordsworth and Blake, Kevin was Shakespeare: 'My dog Crab' I remember, and 'I did dislike the cut of a certain courtier's beard' – stamping around the outside of the fire circle, crunching shingle under his boots in time to the trochees. And there's Randall, not talking just now, but leaning in, pre-occupied with a branch he'd left stuck half into the flames. He brings it out, watching to see how long it will keep aflame before the night air hushes it back down, then thrusts it back in the furnace. He looks up, glances across the void of the fire, and smiles, a quizzical, somehow reassuring smile.

Then, two years later, we were all back again, for a week at Easter, gathered just the same around the same fire, drinking and talking, only this time I was sat here, on this

log, and Justine was sat over there, with Randall. Now it was his fleece that was around her shoulders, his ear that her mouth was nuzzling up against, imparting tiny secret whispered things. And when he looked across at me, there was that same smile, quizzical and hopeful and reassuring, but this time it was on my face.

When I embraced Justine, at my arrival, or my leaving, or just at the end of the day, when they or I decided to call it a night, there was no less warmth, no less love in that than there had been before, when we were lovers. Similarly, when I hugged Randall, it was a hug that carried so much more meaning than before; it had trust, now, and acceptance, mixed with the love that was there before. That is what I gave to it, and took from it, at any rate.

That's what I mean about Peploe being a lodestone, or perhaps a touchstone. A place you return to year on year becomes a means of measuring your movement through life. The place remains the same (although of course it doesn't) while you change (although of course you don't).

So when I think of Peploe, I don't just think of Matthew and Hem, of their hospitality, and the willingness of Gina (and Clive, her brother) to open up her own private place of memories to us all. I don't think necessarily of the great feasts we had, of the trips – to the beach at Maenporth, the Lizard or, playing grockels at Tate St Ives – or of the parties – Hem's seventieth birthday, her last, or the glorious fanfare of Millennium Eve, with the two bonfires, our secret one down by the river, and the bigger, official one up near the house, on a piece of land cleared by us all of rhododendrons that autumn, and the marquees, and the fireworks, and the sacrificial bonfire.

What I think of above all is the way we came together, with Cornwall's great and good, to celebrate something finally that none of us had made, and that pertained to none of us in particular, and that would never come again. I think of Peploe as a place where

we measured ourselves, and each other, from our places in the circle around the fire, the fire by the water.

Untitled (Moma)

She arranged to pick him up from the studio the next day at noon, giving him a good couple of hours in there by himself. Please let him be thinking straight in there, she thought, let him *see* straight. Not turn the place upside down for clues as to Randall's intentions, but just sit and work through the possibilities, and the implications of those possibilities.

When he came down he said 'Hi', and slung his bag through the gap to the back seat, but then strapped himself in without a word. Fixed his gaze out of the passenger-side window.

She pulled out and headed north, then said, 'Everything okay?'

He nodded.

Fair enough. It was what she had felt like, most of the last week. That's what car journeys were for: to give you space to think, and a sense of motion to help the thought on its way.

And it felt good to drive, especially once she got on the Expressway, and had put some distance between themselves and the city. It felt good to delegate some dull part of

your brain to the operation of the wheel, pedals and gearstick, and to push the rest of the planet firmly behind the windows and windscreen.

Vincent watched her sing, adding to the backing vocals on the song on the radio. She moved her head in a sort of bobbing, looping shake, girlish and evocative, and he thought how much he still loved her. Which was hardly new news, but what he felt, here in the car, was that he still had love to offer her. It was a *viable* offer. He'd felt the same last night, at the museum, watching her move among the guests in the atrium, all posing and preening – or not preening, holding themselves aloof from such behaviour – like players in a masquerade, or pieces in some exquisite chess set.

There were some people he knew or had met before, just as there were some who remembered him, or pretended to; who acknowledged at any rate his relationship with Randall. So it was only fair that he nod and tilt his head to listen when they said what they felt they had to say about his friend, dead all these years, as if their well-chosen, carefully-delivered words might fix Randall more securely in the firmament.

It had felt good, though, to have Larry come through the crowd and cuff him on the shoulder, pull him in for an almost Randall-like hug.

‘So, Vincent,’ Larry had said, ‘Good to see you. But, hey. What brings you to New York?’

Never less than sharp, Larry. The tanned grin, the polar bear crop, the twist in the eye like an eagle on its perch.

He'd spun some line about coming over to see an old work friend, and just dropping by to see Justine before heading back. Larry had seemed to buy this.

‘Still,’ he'd said, gesturing to Justine. ‘We should get together, the three of us. Have lunch, keep each other up to date on the gossip.’

‘Is there much?’ he'd said. ‘Much gossip?’

It was the closest he'd come to giving it away.

'With Randall, there's always gossip, Vincent,' Larry had replied. 'You know that. It's what he was made of.'

After the performance he'd left Justine hobnobbing with her fellow philanthropists and taken himself upstairs to the galleries. Strolling the rooms, he'd felt the old thrill of gallery-going: of choosing where to bestow your attention, on this acknowledged masterpiece, or that. He strolled and looked, but really he was kidding himself. All along he was heading towards Moma's sole Randall, the strange late triple *Sunshines* that was the last thing he'd done, more or less. It hung opposite the museum's famous Matisse, the *Danse*, with its five pale pink humans dancing in a ring on a green hill. This as per Randall's instructions; he'd gifted the painting on the sole condition that they be hung together.

The two paintings had their own half-room, up on the fifth floor, separated off from the last of the Post-Impressionists by a wall coming out halfway across the gallery. The *Sunshines* was a triple portrait, uniquely, so far as he knew, made up of three shit stains arranged side by side, the canvas near enough matching the Matisse in size. None of the previous *Sunshines* came close. For his colours Randall had taken the three colours from the Matisse: its luminous blue, the foresty green and the icky, flesh-stocking pink; the ground a deep harsh red. Up close, it had the look of the one in the apartment, the original: worked over, by hand, with none of the glossy, machine-produced perfectionism that later ones had.

He stepped back and thought about the new paintings, wondered how they'd sit on the wall alongside this, or his other works, in home and museums around the world. And he thought, too, about Randall in Dubai, railing against just this thing: art in the museums; the nullifying, castrating effect of the white cube; the way it sapped the power of the work. The millions of pairs of eyes a year, untutored, uncaring, *unseeing*, that

passed their gazes over the artwork in the museum, the three seconds it took them to suck the soul out of the work, as surely as a camera sucked out the soul of an Aborigine.

The radio turned to adverts and he reached over to retune it.

‘What about that *Sunshines*, though?’ he said to Justine.

‘Last night? You saw it?’

‘Yeah, it’s a weird one, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t know, Vincent. It was just that he was particularly keen on that Matisse, I guess. Or not even that one, really. What he really loved was the other one, the version he painted for his Russian patron, I don’t know his name, and the one that went with it, *Music*, this slightly eerie one of five people sat on a hillside, playing musical instruments and singing.’

‘Art is for making or owning. Everything else is a subset of those, or is irrelevant.’

‘Exactly. Anyway, this Russian guy had these two paintings hung opposite each other at the top of the stairs, in his Moscow palace or wherever. There they were, every day, when he walked downstairs at its start, and there they were, when he walked up them at its end.’

‘Like his little triptych. Bacon and the others.’

‘If you like. They offered, I don’t know, a daily encounter in which the looker sets his or her interpretation, as they form it on that particular day, against the painting, which of course does not change.’

Vincent kept his gaze fixed out of the window. ‘Which is the only way to truly test the work of art. The look, contingent, impermanent, against the work, unchanging, intractable. You get it right one day, but that victory will be as nothing tomorrow.’

‘There you go, you’re better at this than me.’

‘Huh.’

They made good time and it was half past two when she pulled up to the gates. She dibbed them open and moved the car the track. Vincent reached for the strap hanging above his window and held it as the car bounced this way and that on the dirt road.

‘You’ve know I’ve never been here before?’ he said.

‘You weren’t invited. No one was, really. This was where we came to get away from people like you.’

The low shrubs stretching off at each side, the desiccated trees. It levelled out, and she pulled up on the stretch of sandy gravel by the side of the house, its bleached white boards, steps winding around to a terrace. Ahead of them, a dune climbing towards the sea, spitting out thin blades of grass.

Justine put the car in neutral and it settled on its chassis, she turned off the ignition and it choked and died. She lent down, squeezing her head sideways against the steering wheel to unlace her shoes, smiling up at him, at his amusement at her contortions. She eased the shoes off and opened her door.

‘Come on, then,’ she said, and she got out. He watched her go around to the front of the car and started the slow, slippy ascent of the dune, to where the sea, just audible now through the open door, behind the gusting wind, was waiting.

Anti-Cute

The news, then, that Randall had been selected to represent Britain at the 1999 Venice Biennale felt like a punch to the collective gut. It was the worst possible joke at the worst possible time. So many of the circle had been picked for the Best of British group show in 1995 – including an *Angry Puppets* tableau by Randall – but the show after that had been Rachel Whiteread, solo, and that had seemed eminently reasonable. It seemed like a step forward, a shaking off of a scene that already felt like it belonged to a historical moment. The artists from it, while still friends, most of them, and still retaining a practical and emotional comradeship, were fed up with being pigeonholed, and wanted their work to stand alone, on its own merits.

The quiet satisfaction, or relief, felt by so many people, even those who liked Randall personally, that he hadn't won the Turner Prize the year he'd been shortlisted (he lost to Mark Wallinger), evaporated. The fact of his selection seemed above all to be a sign of approval from on high for Randall's stunt on the Great Day of Art, which meant that it was equally a dismissal and rejection of everyone else, of those whose work had been attacked and appropriated.

‘If he shows a single piece from the boat,’ Griff told me, pushing me up against the wall at the White Cube gallery one night, ‘I will kill him, I swear I will kill him. I’ll drown him in a vat of his yellow fucking paint.’

Others were less aggressive. The general sense you got, from talking to them, was one of concern for the health of British art as a whole: if people out there thought that Randall was the best we had to offer, what would they think that say about everybody else?

I rang him to offer my congratulations, then asked him what he would be showing.

‘Oh, but Vincent,’ he said. Hadn’t you heard? It’s a big surprise. Nobody’s allowed to see.’

‘Fine. It’s a secret,’ I said.

‘Not to you, Vincent. *You’re* allowed to see it, of course you are. Good god, you of all people. You only need to ask.’

So it was tetchily, and with a measure of apprehension, that I drove, the next day, to Cambridge. Come to the studio, he said, and he would meet me there. In fact, though I had been to the facility before, it had been three years previously, when really it was just used for churning out *Sunshines* and *Angry Puppets*. It had expanded since then, and tightened up: there were electric gates at the bottom of the drive, and security cameras running along its length.

There were thirty or so people there on the day I visited, including the office staff that worked in the converted farm house, but apparently that figure doubled as the deadline for the Biennale approached.

I sat in the entrance hall of the farm house, with its cold tiles and large, draughty doors, while a receptionist called Randall on a walkie-talkie. Then he strode in, his legs making a swishing sound from the plastic overall he wore, the top half of it unzipped and

tied by the arms around his waist. He had a beard coming, and his hair was longer, too, swept back in dirty grey-brown waves over his head. He grinned to see me, giving a low rumbling groan that rose in welcome until it became, as we embraced, a guttural roar that he coiled around my name, swallowing it whole and spitting it back out.

‘Vince-ent! So glad you could come.’

It was like being in the presence, all of a sudden, of the Randall of old, immediate, uncomplicated and energised, with his cracked face, and fatty lips, and staring eyes, piercing you from behind their web of filigree veins. Is this it, I thought: has he regressed completely, sloughed off the skin of the brand-artist, the ‘artpreneur’ behind the Fugu sushi chain?

If he had, it was temporary. By Venice, that summer, there he was again, shaven and shorn and slimmed down enough to slip into a shapely D&G suit, standing one hand in trouser pocket on the carpet, for all the world like a film star on the Croisette at Cannes.

In Cambridge, though, we embraced, then he stood back and put both hands on my shoulders, holding himself at arm’s length.

‘You’ve signed the official secrets act, I take it?’

I said I hadn’t, that no one had given me anything to sign.

‘I joke. But seriously, we’ve had fucking journalists trying to get in. One woman from the Sunday Times tried to pass herself off as a collector. Yeah, right. Like I’m going to fall for that.’

He gave a backwards jerk of the head, inviting me to follow him.

We went through the house to the back yard, which gave on to the converted and extended barn that housed the main studio. Dozens of cars and trucks parked along its outside wall. A security guard buzzed open the door for us and in we went.

We passed through a recreational area, then a set of doors, and the corridor opened out to the hangar-like main room, frosty with artificial light. Gantries, grills and lighting tracks obscured the ceiling. The floor, down a set of steps, was divided up into stalls running down either side, with a wide space left in the centre where there was parked the odd hydraulic lift, trolleys carrying sheets of Perspex. The radio was playing, mixing with the sound of conversation, laughter and back-chat, the steeply rising whine of a drill or saw. The palate-coating hum of heated plastic. Randall walked quickly down the middle of all this, looking neither left nor right; nobody looking up to see him pass. I had time, going after him, to take in, in the stalls, work tables, men and women bending to their tasks, most dressed in overalls, a mixture of blue and white and Randall Yellow, as if that pointed to some kind of hierarchy. The objects of their attention were small, barely identifiable shapes, like toys being mended or dismembered. I thought of doctors bending to their work of surgery. A woman in goggles held the flame of an oxy-acetylene torch to what looked like a stretched, kneaded rugby ball, though with stubby protuberances of some kind, like vestigial limbs.

I caught up with him at the far door.

‘Ready?’ he said, then he punched in a code and we went through.

I waited in the dark as the lights snapped on, tripping in sequence down the ceiling of a windowless, concreted space. The door behind us closed and made the air swirl with cold dust. What I saw, I first took for fish tanks, dozens of them shoved together in a row along the wall, four or five of them left out in the centre of the room, each on its individual stand. Then I recognised them for what they were: hospital incubators, for babies in intensive care, the twin circular holes cut in the long sides for access. In them were, not babies, but baby-sized objects. Scanning them, as I approached, I got a sense of colours, shapes. The first one, I can’t remember what that one was, I was already past it, walking to the second one, positioned such that it had two

museum-style spots trained on it, and the outline of the Perspex, laid itself out in parallelograms on the ground on either side of it.

In it was a yellow baby, of a bright, not quite Randall Yellow yellow. It was certainly humanoid, but the limbs and face were instantly recognisable as being those of Pikachu, the main character of the Pokémon cartoon series. It was Pikachu, and it wasn't. Not so close as to be actionable, you'd have to say, but close enough to make the connection unavoidable.

It was lying on its back on a powder-blue blanket, fin-like arms and legs held in mid-pedal, like a dog at play, its face averted, the features caught halfway between cartoon opacity and human expression. Its normally rotund belly was shrunken, its ribs showing through, its mouth open. The paws remained paws, the feet toeless, the ears weakly trailing like empty socks – and here was the lightning bolt tail, twisting out sideways from underneath, but otherwise it had the physique of a new-born. It was Joshua. It was Joshua in the hospital.

I crouched and put my face to the Perspex, positioning myself right in the creature's line of sight. The eyes, painted on, like the mouth, told me nothing. It was the posture, the concavity of the stomach that told you it was breathing in, that gave it its sense of despair, of horror even. I put a hand on the glass, almost as if I expected it to react to my gesture.

In the end I did stand. I did do that gallery thing of walking around the box, the piece, the work, as if seeing it from another angle would help.

A Randallism, one of my favourites: 'The second glance, in great art, is always redundant.'

Randall observing me, arms folded. I refused to look at him, to give him the satisfaction.

I turned my attention to the other boxes, surveying them what I hoped was close to dispassionately. The hare was one of them, the stuffed hare laid out in its side – so much longer, disconcertingly, than Pikachu-Joshua – dead or asleep, with the two extra pairs of legs protruding from its belly, arranged as if in flight, or a dream of flight. Another had one of the family of tumours, another the dead goldfishes lying in their inch of filtered water. Perhaps those were all the ones that were finished, at that stage. The other incubators lined up by the side were prepped but empty, ready for their occupiers.

It's true that some of the most disturbing pieces weren't there yet, for instance the delicately arranged circles of foetuses, or that squashed naked human body, folded to fit the tank like some piece of monstrous origami, the way the flesh pressed the glass, pale and flattened, the blood squeezed from it, the black hairs held to the pane by a slick of moisture, as if the thing was alive and breathing, or actively decomposing; the way you had to get down on the floor and peer up to see if you could make out anything of the face, crammed between the knees. Those may have been the horror-show exhibits that made the headlines, and inspired the placards waved outside the British Pavilion, but none of them had the shock, for me, of that first one, the half-human crossbreed, crossed with, what is it, a mouse? a hamster?

I ended up back with Joshua-Pikachu, stood with him and his box between me and Randall, my hands flat on the top of it. We remained like that for a minute, maybe two minutes. Eventually, perhaps rightly guessing that I wasn't going to give in, he spoke.

'Well, then, Vincent. Don't keep me in suspense.'

'It's horrible,' I said.

He nodded, his face down, as if chastened.

'It's fucking disgusting,' I said, 'is what it is.'

He moved, finally, coming up to the box and looking down at it.

‘But it’s good, though, right, Vincent? I mean, fucking disgusting is fine. But do you mean good fucking disgusting, or bad fucking disgusting?’

I waved my hand at the other incubators, trying to separate them off from the first one. I was holding myself back, hoping that I would somehow be able to register my disgust without having to speak it.

‘Come on, Vincent.’ He said. ‘This isn’t any old thing. This is fucking Venice. If it’s no good, I want to hear it.’

If it’s no good?

It made me want to laugh, with rage, to have him ask me that. It made me want to push him against the door frame and hit him, really punish him. What was he doing asking me if what he was doing was any good? If I make myself ridiculous, hemming and hawing over the ‘goodness’ of *Anti-Cute*, which went on to win the Golden Lion at Venice that year, and was bought by the Getty Foundation for a cool \$1,000,000 shortly afterwards, then so be it.

Of course it’s good, of course it’s great, a masterpiece, of course it’s shocking and stunning and visceral and cerebral and demanding and revelatory and devastating and gob-smacking and mind-fucking and all and any other adjectives you care to throw at it – they’ll stick, they always do – but back then, in a cold strip-lit room in a barn cum warehouse in Cambridgeshire, before the world saw it and acclaimed it, and it was just him and me and them in that room, all I wanted was for him to admit that he’d taken the twisted, cramped and suckered body of his baby boy and put him up there for the world to gawp at.

It’s true that when you saw the installation as a whole, as it was seen in Venice, or as you can see it, today, in LA, this one incubator, with its occupant, became just one of many, of thirty-two to be exact, arranged in rows of eight by four. And it wasn’t this one, this Joshua-Pikachu, that grabbed people’s attention, nor its near cousins, the mutant

versions of Miffy and Hello Kitty and other anime characters, and all twisted in equal fashion towards the apocalyptically human. It was the tumours, and the foetuses, animal and human, arranged like candied fruit in a Parisian patisserie, and the squashed body that repelled people; and it was the stuffed animals that amazed them, that were worked on by Trevor Dutton, the young British cinema prop maker, the blue tits and sparrows and bullfinches, some pierced with arrows, some with mobile phones protruding from their bodies, as if they themselves were nothing more than little feathered carrying pouches, some of them intact but massively overgrown, as big as small dogs.

And it's not like there wasn't some talk, among all the huge amount of critical coverage of the show, both in Venice and back in London, where it was shown for a month before it was flown to LA, that did touch on issues of parenthood, and Lynchian body horror. Parallels were made to the work of Jake and Dinos Chapman, and the German anatomist Gunther von Hagens, and Hieronymus Bosch. And it's not like nobody knew the sad facts of Joshua's birth, and the damage and danger done to him and to his mother, but of course they didn't mention it. And all of that – that wall of silence – I foresaw, that day, in Great Shelford, when I stood across from Randall and challenged him to admit that he was putting his own life up on show.

‘All I can say is, if I were you, I'd let Justine see this before the whole fucking world troops in take a look.’

‘I'm not stopping her. She's got an open invitation, any time at all. But, d'you know what, Vincent, she's not that interested.’

‘She would be, if she saw this.’ And I jabbed my finger down on the glass.

‘Oh, fuck off, Vincent,’ he said back to me, and the way that he spoke to me, loudly, absolutely directly, across the travestied body of his son, was not a way he had ever spoken to me before. ‘This is art. This is what I do.’

‘This is your son, Randall. It’s Joshua. No, don’t shake your head at me’ – for, finally, he was laughing at me, triumphant, his hands flung dismissively in the air, a true, noble, honest gesture; but the laugh, he couldn’t restrain himself, was for the fact that he’d got me to say what he wanted me to say, for now that I’d said it, it was a piece of child’s play to deny it – ‘don’t *do* that, Randall.’

‘Do what? Vincent, this is not my son. It is an art work.’

‘But, Randall, just imagine, for the fun of it, what it would be like if people had feelings? What then? How would they feel about being used like this? About their loved ones being used?’

‘Nobody’s using anyone. There’s nothing there, Vincent. Calm down.’

And he came towards me, warm and magnanimous now that I had tipped myself into the ludicrous position of taking something seriously.

And he told me not to worry, that he had no intention of upsetting anybody, and he knew how much I cared for Justine, and he said how it was admirable that I stood up for what I thought was right and proper, and that I did so eloquently and passionately, and that passion was absent from so much talk of art, and that above all he respected my opinion, and my judgment, and he would think hard on what I had said, and all the time he was getting an arm around my shoulder, and moving me towards the door, and I didn’t look back, the lights went off, and I didn’t see any of those things again – I looked neither left nor right as we passed back through the workshop – until I saw them in Venice.

Perhaps that’s what distressed me about Venice. That nobody noticed him. They were too busy yelling slogans about the foetuses. I never talked to Justine about it, either, to my shame. That day, in Cambridge, I turned down the offer of lunch and got back in my car and drove back to London. Justine wasn’t in Venice, and I didn’t see her for a year or so afterwards, when she came up for the opening night of *Hedda Gabler* at the

Royal Opera House, with its Randall-designed set, and even then we didn't have the chance to so much as exchange pleasantries.

The year or so after Venice was the most difficult in the long years of our relationship. I hated seeing *Anti-Cute* being rolled out internationally from the Shelford studio, in various versions. Single tanks, pairs, and larger configurations, twelve, fifteen, twenty. All manner of freaks and sideshow monstrosities, dreamt up by Randall and Trevor Dutton – though as far as I know, and I was able to watch the production line closely, thanks to my role on the board of Nasmith's gallery, nothing resembling that original Joshua-Pikachu was ever made again.

It was the work that cemented Randall's reputation, that put him firmly on the international stage, that brought him fully to the attention of the New York market and induced Larry Gagosian to fly over to sign him up.

I watched as he stepped out from the gallery environment to, among other things, design the sets for *Hedda Gabler* and collaborate with Vivienne Westwood on a clothing line splattered with Randall Yellow paint, even appearing as a catwalk model in London Fashion Week, and then on in adverts for Gap. You could now buy a Randall Yellow Alfa Romeo, and a do-it-yourself *Sunshines* kit in the Tate Gallery shop. You could eat at Fugu now at two London venues, plus Leeds, Edinburgh, Berlin, Barcelona and New York.

Above all, it was clear that America was calling to Randall. It had always been, in a way. They spoke to each other. The country that had produced Warhol and Koons and Richard Prince was always going to find room for a talent like his, and a sensibility. He knew it, too.

No matter that he and London grew together, in a seemingly exponential but always proportionate relationship; no matter that the buyers grew with him, too; new, bigger (more 'serious') collectors coming into his orbit, swinging in from the further

reaches of the money universe, as the smaller ones fell away. London was London, but for every Roman Abramovich who stuck around, there were a dozen Chinese or Middle Eastern buyers who simply turned up for the auctions – or not even that – and spirited their goodies away.

The fact that, one day, London would be too small for Randall, meant that it was too small now. And so, as advertised, they moved.

They went in fits and starts, beginning in early 2000, finding first the new studio in Dumbo, then the loft apartment in Tribeca, the house on Long Island. I attended the big farewell party held at the Ivy in the Autumn of 2000, and flew over for their New Year's bash. But they were, for me, sad affairs. I had got over the worst of my anger over *Anti-Cute*, but still I felt irrevocably distant from the both of them. They were moving faster away from me now, both in terms of Randall's career, and in terms of their relationship.

For a while, in terms of Randall's career, it was business as usual. Gagosian held a show in his West 24th Street gallery, with *Anti-Cute* tanks and *Sunshines and Nightskies*, then there was a second, bigger show in Japan, and one in Moscow. He shifted his production of *Sunshines and Nightskies* to New York, and they flew off the printers 'faster than I could point people the way to the john'.

Then came 9/11, which affected Randall far more than I would have expected – or, indeed, for quite a while, believed. 'I've always loved America,' he said in an interview, little more than a week after the events. 'But wounded America speaks to me in a way I can't ignore.'

'You feel you have something to offer America?' the journalist asked. 'You feel you can offer it something – help, or healing?'

'God, no,' came the reply. 'Or not exactly. Maybe. Maybe, I do think that, naively enough. Or maybe I just feel privileged to be near the hurt, you know. That thing

about being part of one those generations that have never experienced war. And now never will. This is our war, if you know what I mean. And every war needs its war artist.’

The interview caused little stir, coming as it did in the maelstrom of liberal handwringing and symbol-wrangling that followed, but Randall’s following statement, announcing his decision to embark on an international series of public sculptures in the name of world peace, most certainly did.

He was attacked, in the UK, for being reactionary, for being politically naïve, for mocking and demeaning the dead, for trampling them and using their tragedy, a country’s tragedy, as a springboard for personal advancement. A letter to Frieze lambasting him was signed by at least five people who had shown in the original group show of 1989, including both Gina and Tanya.

America, by contrast, welcomed the *Superheroes* sculptures with relief, greedily even. By now it was now comprehensively caught up in the second Gulf War, and finding itself more and more isolated on the global political stage. Again, there was something in the response to the works that was, if not desperate, then at least embattled; that you could compare to Bush’s response to Blair’s ‘standing shoulder to shoulder’ rhetoric. It soon became highly *patriotic* to own a Randall. He started turning up at gala dinners at Carnegie Hall, auctioning off works to raise funds for the Army Benevolent Fund, and pressed the flesh at the National Endowment for the Arts.

For the first time, Randall actually had a vision of the art he wanted to create. It may seem incredible, but as this account has hopefully made clear most of his most celebrated works were created on the fly, a crazy idea that got trapped – as much by accident as by design – and fixed down, before it could escape. The *Superheroes* series, on the other hand, was meticulously planned, reverse-engineered to produce a particular emotional response. And it was important to him to do them soon, for what use is solace

if it comes too late? Most art that responded to 9/11 did so in a particular and rather limited way: firstly, apologetically, as if insisting above all on its uncertainty as to whether it even had the right to do so, so soon; and, secondly, as a commemoration of the dead or, more circumspectly, referring to the symbolism of the planes and the towers. What Randall was doing was different.

In the end, the difficulty of placing the sculptures, sight unseen, together with Gagosian's obvious commercial considerations, meant that Randall did do a show of gallery-sized *Superhero* pieces, in March 2003. It was, nevertheless, an unprecedented statement, a deliberate pushing of Randall's conceptual aesthetic onto the wider stage. The pieces were massive, among the biggest Gagosian had ever exhibited, and so big that he had to split the show across both of his Chelsea properties. The great fibreglass figures didn't so much emerge as *protrude* from the walls as if entering the room by supernatural rather than physical force. They looked far heavier than they were, and the distance they projected into the room, cantilevered above the humble viewer, put you quite literally in their shade.

Randall on the *Superheroes*: 'I want it to feel like when you're near an airport, and a plane passes right over you, so low and so noisy you duck. That massive curved belly, like the belly of a whale, but longer, sleeker, gliding violently above you, and you feel as if you could reach up and touch it.'

Of the figures, those first half dozen, the most famous and immediately iconic was *Mental Mickey*, the yellow and green mouse that, all things considered, had as much of the 1980s cartoon character Mighty Mouse in it as it did Disney's Mickey. The closed fist at the end of an extended arm, the opposed leg raised at the knee, the face set in a determination that you would have to label as both grim and benign. The rescued baby wrapped in swaddling clothes clasped to its side spoke to America's sense of its own damaged humanity, the fact that the character was something as humble and harmless as

a mouse, spoke to its sense of grievance, no matter how the country might be seen abroad. The more overtly aggressive and brutish figures – the *All American Bison*, the *Chrome Bionic Duck* – never achieved the same kind of exemplary power, although it is the duck, in its larger, fully chrome version, pushing out over the Chicago River below the Franklin Street Bridge, that has achieved the greatest public visibility.

So, his heroes were classical heroes, at a time when the wider culture seemed to want its heroes human, all too human: all those doomy, gloomy Batman and Spiderman comics and films with their tortured, morally suspect heroes. Randall bundled up these references with, on the one hand, religious elements and, on the other, more deliberately infantile ones: Disney obviously, and not just the cheesy, chubby-cheeked look of its anthropomorphised menagerie, but the sleek-slabbed humans, too. And then there was the superflat look of Japanese manga characters, that Takashi Murakami, too, was putting into sculptural form just then.

This last, obviously, was the product of Justine's influence on Randall. She was still running her East-West consultancy, now with its headquarters in New York, though her management was somewhat semi-detached, and it was others who did most of the flying to and from Japan. I like to think of them, the young Nipponophiles she recruited, as her scouts, messengers returning from perilous missions who stepped nervously into her chamber to lay out before the latest dolls and charms, manga and DVDs, while Justine sat cross-legged behind her low persimmon-wood table, tea tray laid out before her, toddler Joshua on a cushion beside her; he stern and silent as a pasha, she noble and serene and indicating, with a soft, curt nod or shake of the head, her approval or disapproval of each offering.

Discussions over the first large-scale versions of the pieces were under way before the show opened, and production began soon after. There was First Bank America's version of the *Bison*, which you can still see in the atrium of their New York

building; the *Salt Lake City Elk*; the Abu Dhabi *Leaping Horse*, now in the UAE
Guggenheim.

The last time I saw Randall was at the Burj al Arab in Dubai, at the grand unveiling of the Horse, which was at that point the largest *Superheroes* sculpture, reaching – or descending – to 30 feet in height. It wasn't until the posthumous installation of *Iron-Clad Rectitude* in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall that it was outstripped.

It was already there when I arrived, hanging together with the Koons pink metal Cheshire Cat and the huge Murakami Mantango over the massive cascading water feature in the hotel's famously gargantuan atrium. The event was the official unveiling of Frank Gehry's design for the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim, for which the Horse, Koons and Murakami, were the first, founding and emblematic purchases.

It was my first time at the Burj and my feelings about it, and about Randall and the *Superheroes* were confused and conflated, to say the least. In short, I didn't like any of them.

I sat myself on the supremely hideous and supremely comfy bed in my suite, and tried to goad myself into going straight to the airport to catch the first flight home. I was angry with myself for coming, angry with Randall for making me come, angry that he

could persuade me to do something I didn't want to, while I couldn't persuade myself not to.

'You'll love it,' he'd said, when he'd called to invite me to join him there. 'By which of course I mean you'll hate it.'

Above all I was angry with Randall for the way that, when he could tell that I wasn't convinced, he let on that Justine and Joshua would be there too.

I was angry at being so easily played.

The unveiling of the design was preceded by a formal dinner in the hotel's ballroom. I was sat on a table between Gillian Wearing and Kurt Liebkind's cranky model girlfriend, with a jovially gossipy Liebkind – long a supporter of Randall – on the other side of her. Justine was directly across from me, Randall being on the top table, and Joshua up in their suite with his nanny.

Justine, who didn't usually go in for finery on such occasions – she who proudly wore H&M to the Turner Prize dinner – was wearing a heavy gold necklace and a flowing, floor length indigo-black velvet dress that she said had been given her by Stella McCartney. We shared a grimace as we kissed each other in greeting. It was the kind of event we both despised.

Randall was there, with Murakami and Koons, the artists spaced out among the suited Westerners, including Krens and Gehry, and the various white-robed and head-dressed sheikhs. These last were – to my mind – charlatans, plain and simple, who were buying their way into the art world, and the tourism world and the financial world, essentially by shoving the last of their oil and gas money into the middle of the poker table, knowing that no one, at that precise moment, had the wherewithal to call them on it.

Or perhaps they weren't charlatans. After all, they weren't pretending to be anything they weren't. Perhaps we were the charlatans: we were the ones pretending that

they were charlatans. Gagosian was there, and Nicholas Serota, and Francois Pinault, and Amanda and Matthew from Frieze, and the Glimchers. Hell, if there were any people there among the 150 or so guests that I didn't recognise, or that you, dear reader, wouldn't have heard of, then frankly it's because they were simply too high up in the angelic orders for us to merit any knowledge of them, rather than the reverse.

Those on the top table did at least put on a show of respectability, talking soberly and seriously as they ate the exquisite food that was put out before us all, that we were all too overexcited or self-obsessed to enjoy, beyond gushing to our neighbours how exquisite it was. Randall seemed to be joining in with the general conversation, to be dipping his ear to listen to a comment from some sheikh or other, to lean forward to answer a question sent along the table from Krens, nodding vigorously in reply, giving delicate stabs and twirls of his fork to make a point.

After the meal, people rose and pushed through to the reception suite to see the scale models of Gehry's museum in their display cases, and the CGI views and tours of it playing on various wall-hung screens. When I found him he was at the centre of a group of the great and good, Serota and Gagosian included, holding forth on the aptness of opening a mega-gallery here, and lauding the Emirates as the new 'epicentre of the postmodern – its ground zero.'

Not wanting to have to try to catch his eye, I went instead to look at the models, in which the museum was shown both on its own and in the context of the emirate's 'Saadiyat Island Cultural District', to which it was a strange, dangly appendage. Certainly, it was radical and eye-catching and like nothing on earth (apart from Gehry's various other radical, eye-catching, like nothing on earth buildings scattered across it), and it did what it so clearly needed to do – which was be distinctive enough to make people actually want to climb into a plane and fly all the way from wherever they

happened to be to this straight-from-the-box, just-add-water city thrown up on the edge of a thousand-mile desert.

A tap on the shoulder, and there he was. He eased in next to me, squeezed up against the side of a Perspex case. No embrace, no word of greeting. Somehow it seemed neither the time nor the place for an emotional reunion. We stood there, side by side, and in silence, while various people tried and failed to engage him in conversation, asking questions that were not answered, offering congratulations that were shrugged off, and judiciously witty comments that went unappreciated.

‘So, Vincent,’ he said, at last. ‘A penny for your thoughts.’

I paused, not wanting the spell to be broken, then spun out some line about it probably being one of those buildings that worked better as maquette than as real built thing.

‘Isn’t it just,’ he said, bending his knees to see in past the reflections on the Perspex. He pointed, and I ducked, tight in the press of bodies, to follow his finger. ‘If you look carefully you can see the figure of an artist, there, at the back of that triangular space, under that leaning cone thing, rotating ever so slowly on the end of a rope.’

He spoke quietly, but no so quietly that people didn’t hear, and laugh.

He stood back up.

‘I’m joking, of course. It’s all been specially designed to prevent just such an occurrence. Anti-suicide paint. Artist-proof windows. Invisible futility fields all around the top of it to make you think it’s just not worth throwing yourself off of it.’

More laughter. He puffed out his cheeks and boggled his eyes at me. ‘You want to get some air?’ he said. A jerk of the head, up and out. Then, raising his voice, emphasising the facetiousness of his words, ‘It’s specially imported from Switzerland, you know. This gorgeous little valley nestled under the eastern flank of the Matterhorn.’

Then, as the titters expanded, moving out across the crowd, ‘Oh why don’t we all just fuck off?’

It took us an age just to get out of the room, slowed as were at every step by more people wanting their own piece of his time. The hands extended, the cheeks offered and lips puckered, the friends and colleagues introduced. The idiots who just wanted to stand there and chat, shoot the breeze, as if they’d chanced to meet in the checkout queue at Tesco’s. Eventually we made it out, and up to the atrium, and Randall led me over to the gallery rail at the edge of the upper lobby, where it looked down, past the ziggurat of cascading fountains, flanked by the up and down escalators, to the hotel entrance.

Above our heads, the artworks. The horse, heaving itself down from under the first row of balconies, blue of skin and cataclysmic of hoof. Across the way, forming the other two points of a triangle, the Cheshire Cat and the Mantango.

Tourists milled, camcording. Taking in the art, if they took it in at all, as part of the greater spectacle.

So, what do you think?’ he said, with a jerk of the head up at the sculpture. It grimaced back, baring its mule teeth. ‘At least Koons’ cat has got the right idea. Or Takashi’s flowers. Look at them. They’re completely monged.’

I laughed. The expression on the metallic balloon cat’s face did in fact seem entirely appropriate, at once oppressive and spaced-out, with a halfway psychotic shit-eating grin that seemed to say it fully accepted its position in this madhouse, seeing as it was stuck there with no possibility of escape. Randall’s horse, by contrast, so proud and determined in countenance, channelling the history of its Persian ancestors into its Guernica-strength muscle and vicious manga curves, looked positively risible and out place. And the Mantango? You would have to say it seemed blissfully unaware of anything at all, each flower beaming away from inside its own personal psychedelic oblivion.

‘I’ve tried to get Koons to admit he hates it, but he won’t give in,’ Randall said. ‘He’s *got to*. Jeff, who wouldn’t blink if you let off an irony bomb under his fucking bath tub. Surely he must bow before this great... phantasmagoria.’ He turned, leaning on the railing, and looked around the atrium. ‘Because it’s him, isn’t it, but bigger. Talk about ushering in banality,’ he said. You can’t *usher* banality into this place, any more than you can usher a drop of water into the fucking Persian Gulf. I’ll tell you what the problem with this place is.’ And he swung his arm out over the ziggurat of colour-coded waterfalls. ‘We’ve been subsumed.’

He stopped and took a drink from the glass of wine that I hadn’t even seen he’d brought with him.

Also, we were no longer alone. People had apparently followed us up from downstairs, or perhaps they were already here, and were beginning again to move in, to congregate. It annoyed me, but he made no effort to dissuade them.

He said the word again, splitting it into its two halves. ‘Sub. Sumed. We’re all just baubles on the glitziest, flashiest Christmas tree ever constructed. And constructed by people for whom Christmas means precisely fuck-all. Christ, the whole place looks like it was designed by whoever designs those sofas you get advertised at Christmas. Remember those?’

He was babbling, pretty much, by this point, and, I could tell, well on the way to being drunk. You could drink in the Burj, but not like this, and he was soon approached by a member of staff asking him politely for his glass, which he gave him, politely, after having politely drained it.

We moved on around the gallery, taking our gaggle of hangers-on along with us, past the sofas and a shamefaced grand piano, polished to a sheen to make a fetishist swoon. We watched the fountains again, pissing their time-coded hoops of water onto their squares of marble, and he continued to talk.

Being ‘a bauble’ was very much at the heart of his complaint. His point was that the three artists’ work – his, Koons’ and Murakami’s – all to a greater or lesser extent played off received notions of high and low culture, of the place of kitsch in the academy. They worked by taking the glitz and glibness and shallowness of so much of contemporary life and setting it in the austere and hallowed halls of the museums they were exhibited in, where such things had no right to be. But put that same piece of kitsch somewhere like this, which was already kitsch embodied and multiplied and folded in on itself until it became a totalisation of humanity’s desire for luxury, made visible, at the expense of taste – put it here and the art straight away lost its effect, its resonance, entirely

It was a strange and yet deeply familiar spectacle. He was in a state that was almost beyond drunkenness. His voice increasing in volume, his gestures in grandiloquence. Half the time he responded to any comment or direct approach by grabbing whoever it was by the arm and telling them it was a disaster, a catastrophe, an arse-fuck. The rest of the time he was saying he was over the moon, it was his ‘apotheosis’, brilliant, superb, ‘a genius move’.

‘But what about the museum?’ someone asked. ‘Surely you don’t think the museum’s going to look like this place, the exhibition space? Frank *Gehry*. I mean, come on?’

We were sat, now, on a pair of monstrous sofas. The gathering around us now numbered fifteen or twenty: dealers, gallerists, other people I didn’t know. Maybe the odd artist or collector. Westerners, mostly. People had their phones out and were filming him.

‘Now then, the museum,’ he said, and he steepled his fingers. ‘Let me see. Well, the museum clearly isn’t going to look like this. How could it? It will be, above all else, Guggenheimlich’ – he put on a cod-German accent. ‘Guggenheimlich, closely related to

unheimlich. Antonym: Guggenmütlich. Lots of white, lots of walls, lots of space between those walls, lots of Swiss air specially imported and chilled to the ideal temperature for a perfect lack of interest in anything there. It will be the apogee of the white cube: the white cube cubed, the cube quadrupled.’

And the irony of this is that, compared to anything else I have written, and that I can’t quite bring myself to read, I know that these quotes are verifiably correct, because all I have to do is Google him and there it is: the video of our strange, improvised television chat show. Me as a befuddled Michael Parkinson, Randall as a sort of art world Peter Cook, leaning towards Oliver Reed.

‘The thing about this Guggenheim, Vincent, like the other Guggenheims, like any Guggenheim, is that it is a monster, like *The Blob* – you’ve seen the film? And do you know what it does? It *eats* art. It absorbs. It takes into itself any art work which you place within its field of influence. Put my sculpture in there, or anything, Koons’ cat, a *Mont Saint Victoire*, a Leonardo, anything, and it disappears – pff!

‘Or, it doesn’t disappear, but it becomes invisible. It’s on display, but you can’t *see* it. Look at it, sensitively hung in this meticulously designed and controlled environment, and it’s just not there. It’s irradiated, wiped of meaning, like a videotape left next to an electromagnet. That’s where we were wrong, Jeff and Andy and me. I can’t speak for Takeshi. But the rest of us, we thought our art is bigger than the gallery it’s in. Or not bigger, but stronger. It stands outside whatever room you put it in. It is, literally, outstanding. But we were wrong. No art can survive that kind of megalomania. What’s it going to be, this fucking place, if it ever gets built? Three hundred thousand square feet? A hundred and thirty thousand exhibition space? That’s no way to look at art.’

He sat back, a hand lying limply on the sofa cushion next to him.

‘So what are you going to do, then?’

I wasn't me who asked it, but it was still to me that he looked.

'Well, that's the interesting question, isn't it? What I want to do... what I *want* to do' – he waved at the horse – 'is climb up there and get down that bloody great thing and walk out of here with it under my arm.'

General laughter. No one but me got the reference, no one but me understood what it was he was saying. He looked at me and I nodded, I was thinking of Tanya and her cocks and cunts, under their cloches.

How does an artist take back control of his work, once it's been given over to the market? You sell it, it's gone. That's the truth, as he saw it: that there's no such thing as a work of art as an autonomous entity, a Ding-an-Sich. When it's in the studio, it's still part of the artist. When it's in the gallery, it's a commodity, a boiling morass of hypothetical, as yet unfixed, undifferentiated values. But once it's bought, once it's hung on someone's wall, or in someone's museum, it becomes part of their collection, and takes its identity from theirs.

This is where it began. His grand plan to withdraw his works from public collections. Two things you can do to art – make it and own it. Everything else. Public collections as tyranny of democracy. The revenge of the meek. Not bomb the museums (Futurists) but liquidate them. Liberate the animals from the zoo. Moma. Funeral. Kevin. Justine. Obits. Letters pages. Aya. Frieze. Serota. Turbine Hall. Amsterdam. Write something about the funeral. What F said. Crock of shit blah blah gfucking blahhhhh

I'm sat at the big round pedestal table in the library at Peplow. It's early March and although it's only 11 o'clock in the morning it seems like it's getting dark already. I'm facing the French windows, which look on to a section of garden at the side of the house. The formal hedges are twiggy and unleaved. Next to my computer are a coffee cup, a note pad and pen, and a stack of books. I am here at the invitation of Gina.

I haven't looked at this manuscript, such as it is, in years. Or thought about it, really. Or Randall. Even opening the file seems like a transgression. Although I'm still officially a trustee of the estate, I have very little to do with the running of it. Everything seems to be running smoothly enough. Pieces are authenticated, or not. Frauds are taken to court. Maintenance, where needed, is organised and effected with due discretion. The work, when it comes to auction, sells well. Occasionally we buy back a piece, most usually a *Sunshines*, if there's a risk of it not reaching what we consider an acceptable price. Occasionally, even, to keep it out of less than ideal hands.

The house hasn't changed. That is a lie. The house is the same, except that it is not full of people talking, laughing, drinking, singing, dancing, shouting, falling over.

Gina lives here alone now – I’m tempted to say, with her ghosts, but why would they be just hers? Her parents died. Her brother and his family moved to Canada. Do people emigrate any more, or do they just move country, like they used to move house?

She has put me in the room I stayed in with Justine, when we were first here together, seventeen years ago. On purpose? I don’t know. She has no children. This was her idea, the idea that I’d come down here and finish the book. ‘You should do it,’ she told me. ‘You owe it to yourself.’ As if the whole thing, right from the start, had been for my benefit.

I arrived last night and already I want to leave.

Everything she says is said with a kind of watery-eyed tragic amusement. She’s only four or five years older than me, but I don’t think she’s very well. If I look respectably grizzled, in a mid-to-late-middle-aged, edges-rubbed-off, taking-care-of-myself kind of way, she looks frazzled, as if she’s been through electro-shock therapy. Her hair is sparse and *un-done*, like women of a certain age need their hair *done*. From the back, following her up the stairs to the first floor, I could see her scalp through it, like dry ground through grass in summer.

I haven’t known anyone to so permanently have a cigarette on the go in years. The house reeks of it. It’s a smell I’d forgotten – more than a smell, it feels like a physical assault on all five of the senses. Listen to me: we’re all Californians now. The smell taints any stirrings of nostalgia that being here awakens in me. It makes me wonder if the house always smelled this bad. Perhaps that’s the point she’s trying to make, sucking up fag after fag: if it smelled this bad, back then, then how good can it all have been, really?

How come I’m here is that we bumped into each other at a funeral. No one from back then, funnily enough. We stood there in the cemetery, in the crisp, distant winter

sun, embarrassed into proximity, and said how good it was to see each other. In a moment of foolishness I let slip to Gina that I'd been trying to write a book about Randall and us all, how I'd holed myself up in Italy for weeks at a time, even enrolled on a Life Writing course on a Greek island to try and force myself to finish it, but that I'd pretty much given up on it. The next day she phoned me and invited me down. Seeing the place again would be bound to stir up memories, she said, and we could talk, reminisce. And during the day – she said this sternly, almost flirtatiously – she would 'lock me in the library'.

Gina has laid out all kinds of books for me here in the library, and shoeboxes full of photographs. There are monographs, catalogues, collections of critical essays, special retrospective editions of contemporary art journals. Most of them I have, but those that I don't spark no curiosity or enthusiasm. Last night we sat up until the early hours, drinking, and talking. It is clear that Gina is not well, is in the advanced stages of I don't know what – of alcoholism, certainly, but of something else, too. At a certain point in the evening all she could do was talk and drink and smoke. Everything else, even those actions ancillary to these three central goals – like getting up to get another drink, extracting another cigarette from the packet, lighting it, breathing, even – was a struggle.

What occurred to me, as we talked, is that she might have acted generously in inviting me down here, and laying out all the research material she has carefully amassed over the years, or allowed to accrete around her, but she regards my project to write about Randall as something of a joke.

'Have you got any regrets?' I asked her at one point, 'When you think back to that time.'

'*All I have* is regrets,' she answered, dragging herself upright – *inching* herself upright – in her chair. 'What *other* people call *memories*, I call regrets.'

(Transcribing her words, it seems like every second one needs to go into italics, which is surely as much to do with the effort it took for her to get them out, as with her wish to give them emphasis. A quick look in the library's OED confirms that there is no etymological link between *emphasis* and *emphysema*).

I said something in reply to her comment and she said, 'The chiselling *out* of epigrams is an occupation re-served for those who *live* without *hope*.'

(I'll stop italicizing. It's clearly highly annoying.)

I asked, 'Do you mean your art, when you talk about what you regret?'

'Not especially. I'm not sure my artistic... emanations, deserve special treatment. Look, Vincent, I *remember* it all, clear as gin,' – and she lifted her glass to hold it before her face, so that my image of her distorted, ballooning sideways, as, presumably, hers did of me – 'but I can't *see* it as separate from now. I can't think of you or me or Randall or Justine, gallivanting around, without seeing how it all necessarily led back up the years to here and now. It may have seemed like fun, at the time, but that's just because we couldn't see the consequences. And, try as I might, I can't untangle the one from the other.'

She quoted a line of poetry at me: what I heard at first as Zeus's birds and the painted grape.

'Wait there,' she told me, and got to her feet and went out of the room. She was listing like a holed boat, and knocked against an occasional table on her way to the door. When she came back, quite a few minutes later, she had a book in her hand.

'The Metaphysical Poets,' she said, flipping the book to show me the cover. She made it back to her seat, set herself up with fag and glass, and found the page she wanted.

Here's what she read, from Abraham Cowley's poem 'Of Wit'. (The italics, this time, are Cowley's: I'm copying from the book, which she left with me when we went to bed):

London that vents of false *Ware* so much store,
In no *Ware* deceives us more.
For men led by the *Colour*, and the *Shape*,
Like *Zeuxes Birds* fly to the painted *Grape*;
Some things do through our Judgement pass
As through a *Multiplying Glass*.
And sometimes, if the *Object* be too far,
We take a *Falling Meteor* for a *Star*.

The satirical point of it was obvious, and remains so, this morning: Randall the meteor, vending his false wares; me, and people like me, with our multiplying glasses (telescopes), taking him for a star, a sun, when he was nothing of the sort.

But in fact it was the grapes that she was particularly after. That she was particularly pleased with. She explained the reference to me. Zeuxes, or Zeuxis, was a painter of Greek antiquity, who entered into a contest with his great rival, over which of them was the top dog. Zeuxes, for his part, painted a bunch of grapes of such miraculous verisimilitude that, when he pulled back the curtain covering the picture, the birds flew down from the sky to try and peck at them.

'That's all that Randall was doing, wasn't it?' she said, the book flopping closed in her other hand. 'He made things that looked *so much like art* that all the little birdies, Jan, and the Sheik of wherever, the bloody Akond of Swat, and that Yank who bought up all those Anti-Cutes, they all flew down and gobbled them up. Peck peck peck.'

And she put her head on its side, eyes narrowing as she drew on her cigarette.

I replied that it was certainly an interesting metaphor, but that, in any event, Zeuxes still won. I was pissed, and I didn't want to let that stand. The birds came, I said, and they pecked, didn't they? He was still the best painter.

But no. Apparently not. This next part took some time – some gin, some fags – to establish, in part because it wasn't in the poem, but the punch line of the actual story was that the other guy won. Zeuxes' rival, who was called Parrhasius, applauded the grapes, and then brought out his canvas, complete with curtain, for comparison. Parrhasius invited Zeuxes to draw back the curtain to see the painting, but when he tried to do so, Zeuxes discovered that the curtain *was* the painting. It was a painting of a curtain.

Zeuxes fooled the birdies, but Parrhasius fooled Zeuxes.

The looping, infinitely regressing, self-reflexing, paradoxical implications of this were, to say, the least, rather beyond us by this point last night. If Zeuxes is Randall, who was Parrhasius? Koons? Duchamp? Saatchi? She batted the question away. 'Pick who you want. Either way, there's no art there.'

That's what gives me pause, this morning, as I leaf through the monographs in the library – the only place, after all, where I can be sure she'll leave me in peace. Is there any art in here, or does it just look like art? And is there a difference?

Right then.

I have Gina to thank, for this at least.

This afternoon I took a walk down to the beach. She couldn't come down with me, she said, she wouldn't get down, let alone back up, but I think she saw, at lunch, that I was on the point of leaving.

You can't go without going down to the beach, she said.

Just the bare fact of the trees that I ran my hands over as I descended, the same trees that were there, ten years ago, that preceded us all by decades, some of them, and will outlive us by that, or more, did something to loosen my mind, in its harness, or sharpen it.

Everything in the world runs on loops and cycles, but all at different rates. We are fooled by the persistence of the sun rising and setting, and of spring coming around again after winter, into linking our own lives to these cycles of recurrence. Carving your initials and that of your lover on a tree trunk gives you the momentary illusion that your love will last as long as that tree. When, of course, the tree, as it grows, distorts the letters until they are illegible.

The cold wet air of the riverside, the trees, and the pebbles on the beach. You can throw them out, but the sea shrugs, and rolls them back in on the next tide, or on a tide ten years from now.

I threw some stones into the river, skimming them like we used to do, until my fingers got cold. Then I clambered back up the hill, and poured myself a coffee and sat down with the boxes of photos.

Just holding them makes me feel as if we're all of us dead, not just him. There's even a couple of envelopes with the negatives in, long thin strips of shimmery dark film that you can hold up to the light to see us all, done up as evil clowns, posing ludicrously. How you would explain the process to someone today, I don't know. It must seem like something from the Middle Ages.

I've picked out and have in front of me some shots from Millennium Eve. There's one with Randall and Justine, Gina and Matthew, standing in the drawing room, holding drinks. Another shows what I suppose someone must have wanted to seem like a reunion: Randall and Justine, me, Kevin and Anton, Lee, Malcolm, Gina. The circle, or what was left of it, ten years on. You can just make out Matt, Tacita's partner, looking

on, smirking at our oafish self-congratulation. Who else was there, that declined to take their place in the line up? It was a night characterised by awkward reintroductions, after all. I think Tanya must have been there. Aya was in South Africa, Griff in Berlin.

The photos don't speak to me. But being down there, sat on one of the tree-trunk benches around the fire, then moving to the next, then to the next, and getting nothing but a wet backside as my thanks.

It wasn't the first year since the death of Hem, but still I think Matthew wanted to make it more than just another New Year's party dominated by a gaggle of artists, 'snorting and cavorting' as Hem used to say, before softly and suddenly vanishing away, minutes after midnight, to go down by the river.

So he decided to frame our regular party inside a bigger, brighter one of his own design. Not that there weren't other parties to go to, that night, and Pelpoe was out of the way, but he did it right: sent out the invitations early, impressed on people the idea that this was his big blow-out, to show that he had not succumbed to grief, a celebration of Hem and his life together. And he was a man of some standing, a knight of the realm. Gina joked that we'd better enjoy the party, because it was probably costing her half of her inheritance.

I remember her dancing with her father, a delicate waltz, early in the evening – the dance he would have had at the wedding she never had – and being hugely moved by the amount of love and warmth towards them, or him, in the room. The thought that the two of them, the movement of their feet across the floor, were actually being impelled, driven, by the love in the room. Molecules in a box. Their dance was an expression of it, just as it, the love, was a reaction to it, the dance.

I was there, with a new partner, the first time I'd taken someone other than Justine to Pelpoe. More importantly, though, Randall was there, so soon after his triumph

at Venice, with Justine, and Joshua, now eighteen months old, tottering around in a little hooded top like a pixie, crying to be picked up. He wouldn't be held by anyone other than Justine or Randall, and screeched when it was attempted. Justine, bless her, did try to give him to me. This strange, wonderful, improbable child. So robust, but fizzing with a kind of combustible danger, the way his limbs shivered with it, as if he might explode at any moment. One of the photos in Gina's collection, taken by I don't know whom, shows me holding Joshua, and Justine standing next to us. Of course, Joshua is crying and reaching out for his mother, and of course there's a look of embarrassment and uncertainty on my face that marks me out as so obviously not a parent of anybody, least of all the child in my arms, but it's still, well, it's something.

I remember how Randall slid into the room, sending Justine in ahead of him, as a kind of ambassador. People were always glad to see her, and it would have been hard to completely snub Randall, when he sidled up, oh so humbly, to insert himself into our group.

It helped, of course, that Justine had Josh with her, hitched up on her hip, face most often buried in her shoulder. Plenty of people had never even met him. I'd only seen him a few times since the move to Cambridge. He stumbled about, in that clumping inquisitive way toddlers have. The beginnings of his motor problems, while apparent, at that stage, just made him look more adorably childish.

And it helped that it was Millennium Eve. Nobody was going to start a fight on this night of all nights. And Matthew's jovial, cheering presence, inching from group to group, his carer at his side, checking that everyone had a drink, that he knew who everyone was, that they were having a good time.

After the fireworks, and the further rounds of champagne, as ordained, we loaded ourselves up with booze and hats and coats and made our way past the big bonfire, where

we'd throw our Millennial sacrifices, later – much later, as dawn was breaking – and we went, slipping and sliding, down through the trees to the river.

Kevin and Anton were already down there, supervising the fire, checking the pots of soup and mulled wine hanging over it, the jacket potatoes tucked away inside it.

More and more people came down, and the fire burned stronger, and I remember an accordion, and dancing – of sorts. Silly, arms hooked through arms rounds around the fire. People bashing away with sticks, like Morris men.

At moments, you could see Randall in quiet conversation with people, people who still had it in for him after the Great Day of Art. Randall, head down, nodding earnestly, thoughtfully. Listening. Justine, watching him, watching for who else was there, waiting to speak to him. It was like people were lining up to let him prostrate himself before them.

Later, we talked, too. Sat on the corners of two of the trunk-benches. Justine snuggled up against him, the flames on the side of her face, my new partner snuggled up to me. The awful geometry of it, that felt wrong, even then.

It was then that he told me he was going to America.

'Come with us,' he said.

'To America?' I replied, dumbly.

'Yes. It'll be dull without you, Vincent. I mean, I have to go. You see that, don't you?'

He finished a beer and stood and held out his hand and I put mine into it and he tugged, tugged me up, despite my resistance. 'Come on, Vincent,' he said, and pulled me down across the sand to the river. I resisted, laughing. We were drunk.

'Come,' he was saying, flicking his head, cajoling, as if America was somewhere just across the water and over the brow of the next hill. 'Can't you see us?' And he stepped out on to these low flat rocks that stood out of the water near the beach. Stepping

out on them like they were stepping stones. He wobbled, held out his hands for balance, laughed. A foot went in, briefly, before he righted himself and went out to the next one. I stood on the sand looking at him, his bad impression of a bad acrobat.

I had known him for ten years.

‘The three of us,’ he said. ‘Come on, Vincent. It’ll be just like old times.’

Justine and my partner were watching us, from their places by the fire, warily, the one, and benevolently, the other.

He, beckoning with both arms, wobbling over the water. And he turned and threw out an arm, pointing, and sort of half-crooned, half-bellowed ‘Go West’, like in the song. ‘There we are,’ he said. ‘The three of us. Taking Manhattan. Flying down to Miami. Hopping across to LA. Lording it up on Martha’s Vineyard.’

And then, with a last overemphatic wave of the arm, almost as if it was intended, he overbalanced, and stepped heavily into the shallows, going down at the knee.

People hooted and cheered and clapped and it was, for a moment, almost as if the world was set back on its axis, and things were as they’d always been, and the way ahead was clear.

He got to his feet, making more comedy of his idiocy, the wetness of the water, its coldness, and came ashore.

Justine insisted he go back to the house and change before he caught a chill. He grabbed my arm as they came past.

‘Come, come,’ he said, nodding up the slope, the pebbly beginnings of the path. ‘Think about it, Vincent. For real.’

I allowed myself to be brought along.

‘Seriously, what’s keeping you here? Bring whatshername. And Justine wants you to come, too, don’t you, darling?’

She turned to raise her eyebrows, her face dancing in the light from the fire. He was drunk. We were drunk.

‘It’s only fun if Vincent’s there, isn’t it?’

She gave a nod, and tugged at Randall, who tugged at me, and we started up the path, stumbling and tripping. I said I’d think about it. I think, for the rest of the night, and maybe even for a few days afterwards, I really believed it might happen, it might come true.

Untitled (Ensō)

She walked up the dune and the sea came into view, like a person suddenly standing up from a table. It was a flat grey, the sand the colour of weak tea. There was – or was there always? – a breeze, like a hand brushed down the side of the face, and the smell of, what? Salt on sand, the two grains sifting together. The days here with no breeze were just the breeze holding its breath.

The beauty of the horizon, he always said, was that it wasn't flat. Follow it with your finger, he'd said, squinting and putting out a hand to point. It wobbles, like a Hodgkin. The only conceivable proof for the existence of God: that no straight lines exist in nature.

How like him, given this kind of place, faced with this kind of immense, inhuman peace, that he had to find something to *say* about it. He even wrote it down, in one of the notebooks he occasionally remembered to carry around with him, now that he longer had Vincent to do it for him. They always sound better when there's someone else to write them down, he'd said, and then he'd given her a look. His face, when she'd told him no, that wasn't her job.

She wrinkled her nose and breathed deeply. The simmering awareness of a fresh air headache: the price of freedom. She looked round for Vincent. He was standing by the car, bags in hand, watching her. How polite he was. How careful. And how dangerous because of it.

‘Come and look at the sea,’ she said, and the breeze rose, as if in gentle mockery of her, and dandled a strand of hair momentarily across her face.

He put down the bags and walked up towards her, shoes skidding on the sand.

‘Vincent. Take your shoes off. You’re on holiday now.’

He squinted up at her. ‘Am I?’

‘Yes, you are.’

He knelt and picked at his laces. His brown leather shoes, faithful as dogs.

‘I didn’t pack for the seaside either,’ he said. ‘Shall I roll up my trousers, too?’

He threw the shoes, one then the other, to land and roll by the bags.

When he reached her, she took hold of his arm and stood them facing the beach and the ocean. She saw them as if from the back, two wide vertical strokes, like fence posts, against the broad horizontal washes of the land and sea. She wound her hand further through the gap of his arm, then gave him, it, his arm, a squeeze. She felt a draught of gladness pass through her, like the coolness of a cloud passing in front of the sun, and the gladness was a response to the fact that she was able to communicate such things to him, and with such certainty of being understood. What she wanted to say, even as she perceived the outline of the thought in her mind, was that this was what she had missed since Randall’s death: that there was no one to whom she could express her feelings in such an understated, even *un*-stated manner.

‘If only I’d thought to bring my swimming trunks.’

She laughed. ‘In March? You’ve got to be joking.’ Saying it allowed her to tug again at his arm, a pretend admonishment, and then to disengage. She started along the

ridge of the dune towards the corner of the deck. ‘You’ll bring the bags, won’t you. Be a dear.’

Margaret had done her usual splendid job, stocking the fridge, putting out flowers, and cleaning just enough to make the place feel homely, while still basically un-lived in. She’d had to explain it to her, carefully, half a year into their arrangement, that they didn’t want to arrive to a strict, hotel-room level of cleanliness. There had to be a certain sense of neglect about the place, so that you could fully enjoy the opening of the windows and doors, of airing the place yourself, liberating it. You wanted to have to rinse a glass under the tap before drawing yourself a drink. That was what these places were all about, after all. Somewhere solid, that waited for you, holding its breath.

It wasn’t a large place, compared with some of their neighbours’: spacious rather than cavernous, deliberately short on guest bedrooms. Its purchase had, all along, been part of the grand American plan, with its twin objectives of helping Randall’s career step up to the next level, and of detaching himself from the endless merry-go-round of partying, bottoming out and recovery that his life, even in Cambridge, had become. This was a place for the three of them, for them to spend time together, as a family, and, in the evenings, a couple. To think and talk and replenish the reservoir of love. And it had worked. Joshua loved coming here, and still did. In a way it was more his place now than hers, venue for the kinds of hip, boisterous parties they had strictly avoided having before.

He’d made her laugh when he told her, in that gruff, resentful manner he used when he found himself being ‘grown-up’, that he’d ruled her gravel garden out of bounds to party guests. The thought of his sanctimoniousness nudged up against her memories of Randall paddling his feet in the pond, or sat smoking a joint on the low stone bench.

‘Did I tell you I’ve invited Joshua up,’ she asked Vincent, out on the deck, after they’d stowed their baggage in their bedrooms and they’d eaten some lunch.

‘Yes,’ he said, and paused. ‘I mean, good. It will be good to see him.’

She knew full well that Joshua and Vincent’s relationship was latticed with reticence and confusion, with mistimed gestures and deliberate and genuine misunderstandings, with gaps and sudden deep pits. At the funeral it had been Kevin who had looked to Joshua, all of eleven, guiding and accompanying him, both in the dense choreography of the day itself and afterwards, more generally. He’d done the crucially important thing of taking the boy’s grief and disorientation absolutely seriously, as the most serious part of the whole affair. It was Kevin who had made a point of seeing him whenever he was in town, of taking him to the movies and shows. It was he who sent the parcels that arrived out of nowhere, unattached to birthdays or Christmases, containing T-shirts and DVDs or whatever. The T-shirts were always the right size, whereas even Randall couldn’t be guaranteed to know how big Josh’s feet were at any given time. The point of all of this being, so far as she understood it: that his father hadn’t just been a famous artist, a celebrity, someone who was fair game for adulation or derision in the most public of spheres; he was also, Kevin seemed to suggest, an artist among artists, and that entailed a duty of care that, his father gone, devolved automatically to him.

‘I brought him a present,’ Vincent said, ‘but I doubt he’ll like it.’

She tutted, and he smiled, testily, not quite willing to insist on his point.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘He’ll roll his eyes. He’s at a difficult stage.’

‘A difficult stage, sure. It’s just strange to think that in a couple of years he’ll be as old as Randall was when I first met him.’

He stopped, and stirred his drink. She waited for him to continue but he just looked at her.

‘You should watch some of his films,’ she said.

As if that would help them understand each other. Boys' art, she thought, is so often a plea for understanding that, the moment you try to reach out – and show that you *do* understand – turns into an opportunity for evasion. She thought of Josh's digital shorts, that he produced at school, with their in-your-face insistence on his motor dysfunction, making of it an existential gambit, a challenge to the viewer. She knew why he made them – which wasn't the same as thinking them bad, or good. But she didn't doubt that they stood up to the scrutiny they were already receiving, what with America's avowedly dynastic approach to the creative industries. Here, at least, being the son of Randall was no curse. She dreaded to think how people would take him, back in England.

'Sure,' Vincent said. 'If he can't understand, just now, why his father ever so much as gave me the time of day, perhaps he'll learn. Perhaps making his films will help him. And one day he'll realise he needs someone dumb and philistine to use as a measure of his own brilliance. Or maybe not. Maybe it was Randall's particular genius to make friends with someone like me.'

'Someone like you. This is what your book is about?'

'It's not a *book*.'

'All this "I am not worthy" stuff.' She shifted in her seat. 'I'd still like to read it, you know. Honestly.'

'It's not for reading.'

'Why not? Just because of the paintings?'

He stayed looking out through the wooden railings towards the ocean, and she followed his gaze, seeing the water shimmering between the branches of the cedars and Virginia pines that grew on the dunes and shielded them from the joggers and walkers and occasional photographers.

Eventually, he said, ‘Don’t they seem like a betrayal to you?’ Then, when she didn’t respond, ‘I don’t literally mean a betrayal. The sex stuff is just ... It’s more, who were we – who were *you* – to be kept in the dark about this stuff? The brilliance of it, the sheer fucking *technique*.’ He was alert now, using his teaspoon as a kind of baton to rap out a counter-rhythm to his words on the table. ‘Aren’t you *angry* about it? You must be, surely. Else, why were you so antsy to be out of there.’

She spoke back quickly. ‘Are *you* angry? Because, Vincent, that’s who he was. That’s what he did. The reason I wanted to get out of there, the studio was ... well, it wasn’t because of the work. It was because of the place. It was *thick* with him, Vincent.

‘Everywhere I looked, bam! Randall, Randall, Randall. I’ve spent the last however many years carefully working him into the apartment, fixing him down. So he’s there, all around me, and for Josh too, but *safely*. Always where I expect him, never jumping out to shout Boo! And to just stumble across that place, to walk into it, it was overwhelming.’

Now he was looking at her, his teaspoon poised, still.

‘What he did in that studio is maddening, and as a trustee of the board I feel sick, to the stomach, at the thought of the choices and responsibilities it loads on me, but as his *widow*, the art is ... pff!’ A flick of her hand into the air, giving the gesture to the wind, to be carried away. ‘In fact ...’

‘Yes?’

‘Nothing. Your book, I don’t know what you’ve written, but I can’t see how these paintings have just invalidated it, all of it, just like that.’

She slowed her voice, spacing the words, giving them their measure.

‘When two people have promised each other eternal friendship, it is rare for them to remain on good terms for ever.’

‘Randall?’

‘No.’

‘A proverb then. A Japanese proverb.’

She bowed her head respectfully.

In the afternoon they took themselves off from each other, as if by silent agreement, for an hour or two. She meditated, leaving him leafing through various of the books on Japan that she kept at the house, along with some of her less valuable and more precious pieces: scrolls and bowls and ink stones. Then a fish pie left by Margaret in the fridge, then some music on the stereo, and a few hands of cards. The temperature had dropped, and Justine had sought out an old fisherman’s jumper of Randall’s for Vincent. The thick knotted pattern looked better wrapped across Vincent’s chest than it had done on Randall. On him the design was too dainty. He didn’t need anyone’s help to look like your idea of a rugged trawlerman.

Vincent had actually gone round, setting out and lighting two dozen tea lights on the decking, in their little holders, and the same again in the paper shades hanging from wires around the side fences. He’d knelt with a cigarette lighter she’d had to search through three kitchen drawers to find, bending to the candles with the concentration of a monk. She had humoured him by finding some shamisen music and setting it to play quietly. The glow of the concertina-ed shades, rose and pale yellow. Vincent shaking his hand, grinning, burned from using the lighter. A disposable model, translucent green, the same one that Randall had used to spark up his joints.

To see this other man, now, put it down on the table, carelessly, unknowingly, was a lesson in something that she did not care to pursue. The muted clack of it, the nub of its wheel, the refraction of the liquid through the thick plastic.

They had opened a bottle of wine with the meal, but Vincent had now moved on to whisky, she to vodka. On the table next to the whisky, the vodka looked vapid, barely

wet. The whisky glowed like varnish, it captured the flames of the lights hung around the terrace in its squat fist and crushed them to seeds and dancing filaments of brightness. No wonder they were so obsessed with it in Japan. ‘Unbelievable that it should not have been invented here,’ said her friend Ikuo, who always asked her to bring him at least one bottle of something new with her when she visited. He liked to imagine some forgotten court official of the Heian period, dribbling it out in measured drops into a black lacquered bowl. Whisky had the earthy taste of the human soul, he said, with the look and intonation which indicated he was talking of something else entirely, something dark and unspeakable and approachable only obliquely.

Though perhaps you’re right, Ikuo, she thought to herself, a while later, as she drank in the burnt note of whisky on Vincent’s lips. Standing together next to the railing, their only point of contact their mouths. And, as on the dune that morning, she luxuriated in the sense that she was safe with him, that he would not kick anything over in the rush to get to where they both presumably knew they would get to, eventually. It was the eventualness of it that pleased, and calmed, and reassured.

When they disengaged she found herself putting her hand up to the side of his face. ‘I might have a whisky, now, after all,’ she said.

‘You might as well.’

He took two steps away from her, turned and picked his way through the scattered tea lights to the house. When he had returned, and had poured out a drink for her, and she had taken it, she said what she had been rehearsing.

‘Just before we go on, Vincent, I had best tell you that though that kiss gave me great pleasure ...’

‘Good.’

She took a small draught from her glass, little more than a sip.

‘And it’s a pleasure I would like to repeat ...’

The whisky seemed to spread instantly around her mouth, to coat it with a film that was equally barbarous and refined.

‘Good.’

‘At some point this evening there will be a line ...’

‘I know.’

‘A line.’

‘Absolutely.’

And by that time they were kissing again. She put her hand up to his head again and he reciprocated, as if he’d been waiting for her permission, which she supposed she had in fact been withholding. His hand in her hair. She cut the kiss short.

‘It’s not that I don’t want to go to bed with you’ – and they laughed at each other, as well, she thought, they might – ‘but that I need a good night’s sleep more. We can talk tomorrow. About this. About the paintings, and Randall, and everything. Don’t you think?’

‘Fuck Randall, is what I think,’ said Vincent. And that was that.

Breakfast was a riot, a piece of ritual theatre they stumbled through, under-rehearsed, script in hand. It was, she thought, like the worst kind of date, overdetermined. Their solicitousness towards one other. The questions as to how they had slept. The distance they each maintained, circling each other in the kitchen and around the table. She had slept terribly, but when she had tried to lie to him about this, he had brought her up on it.

‘I heard you, walking about.’

‘Sorry. Did I disturb you?’

‘I was already disturbed, actually.’

‘So neither of us got any sleep then?’

‘There’s irony for you.’

As if in punishment she found Josh's films online and put Vincent in the downstairs media room with a jug of coffee to watch them. They were largely mundane, self-regarding talk-pieces, she knew, no better than you would expect from any precocious middle-class New Yorker of that age, really, but they were given a critical edge – this was the generally accepted idea – by virtue of Josh's wayward handheld camerawork. 'The shaking frame' he called it, and the name seemed to have stuck. An accentuation of the jitteriness of neo-realism. A gimmick and a distraction, was her private, unvoiced opinion, but then who was she to say where his work stood with regards to the fashions of the age? It was the prerogative of the older generation to affect long-sightedness, to overlook the infinite nuance of the contemporary for the blurred assurance of posterity.

He came out after thirty minutes, having, presumably, either fastforwarded through them, or just given up altogether. The grimace he gave when she asked him what he thought of them, gave the impression that it was a struggle to come up with an opinion at all. His hand to the forehead, flicked away, as if to mime a thought that had been there, but that had gone.

She was sitting in the sun lounge, reading a magazine.

'He can tell me what I'm supposed to think when he comes,' he said, and she nodded and continued reading.

He sat down in a chair across the table from her, a shape in her peripheral vision. She carried on looking at the words on the page for another minute, taking nothing in, but unwilling nevertheless to give in to him too easily. She turned a page with a flick, then looked up. He looked so funny, so pitiful, telegraphing his distress. She closed the magazine and placed it on her lap.

'What I don't understand,' he said, 'and apologies if this sounds like an accusation, is how you can not have known he was up to something.' He paused, as if to

let her catch up with his return to the subject matter. ‘We were going to talk about this, right? That was why we came out here.’

She nodded.

‘Fine, so. The smell of, I don’t know, turps on him, or white spirit. Paint under the fingernails. Or the sheer amount of time it must have taken him to make the paintings. I mean, there’s no suggestion he was making them when you were in England, is there?’

‘He might have been, I suppose. It’s unlikely. But that question, of how I didn’t suspect. That’s an interesting one.’

He was sorting through pebbles in a bowl. Grey, black, mottled or with stripes. They’d collected them, over the years, from trips to the North Shore. He took up a handful of them and then tipped them to the other hand, pouring them in a brief clattering fall.

‘I didn’t suspect, or rather I did suspect, but the wrong thing.’

The nature of his attention, the heavy ocean-clouded mugginess of the day, made it hard for her to be sure of how she was putting it. She felt all manner of coded anxiety play out across her face.

‘I thought he was having an affair,’ she said.

‘An affair,’ he said. His face, angled up from his stooped posture, elbows on knees in his chair, seemed as lidded as the sky. He sat back and looked at her. ‘You thought he was having an affair.’ His hands still. The pebbles stopped.

She shrugged. ‘Well, everything you said. The time away, and away from the Brooklyn studio, too. The cell switched off, the assistants not knowing where he was. The coming home showered. Sometimes he said he’d been at the gym, but you couldn’t believe him.’

‘And you thought he was having an affair?’ His disbelief dredging a trench in his voice, guttering it like a candle. ‘And you just. I mean, what did you do? Didn’t you say anything? What did you *think*?’

‘Vincent, I didn’t really think anything. Or, no. Don’t be silly, of course I wasn’t happy about it.’ A seagull, passing by them along the skyline, let out a sardonic cry. ‘I was not happy about it at all, Vincent, but, you know what? I didn’t do anything.’

He came around the table to her, and sat himself down on the sofa. She felt his closeness again and, again, the sense of them being in parallel. That was what had changed, she thought. Vincent is here, and all the time I thought of him here I thought of him facing me, in opposition, a challenge, something to be faced up to. Yet here we are next to each other, facing the same way. She took his hand and placed it in hers, closed her other hand on top of it. She spoke evenly, hoping the words would be heard evenly.

‘This is Randall, Vincent. I don’t have to tell you about him. I thought he was having an affair and, I didn’t like it, and I didn’t confront him about it, but I did accept it. For reasons that were small and practical. Our life, our home, Joshua, his happiness. The delicacy of his happiness. His work, my work, this thing we were building. Which was something, Vincent, that I wanted, more than anything. You know that. And of course there were other, bigger, sillier reasons, to do with who he was. The person he was, which, I know, is foolish, but still. And in any case, I had let it go before, so it made no sense to make something of it now. I felt like I risked exposing myself.’

Her words, that she hated. His hand, lying between hers like a dead thing.

‘How do you mean, you’d let it go before?’

‘I mean, if this was an affair he was having, which now it seems he wasn’t – or, who knows, perhaps he was as well? It’s not as if these paintings *dis*-prove anything. It wasn’t as if it would have been the first time. There was Aya, obviously, Maxine, I think, Gina.’

He said something and his hand tugged in hers and she released it. He reached for a glass of water, as if to disguise the movement. That wasn't enough, though, and he stood, walked a few steps, then turned.

'Is that right?'

'It is.'

'What a *bastard*.'

'Vincent.'

'Is there *anyone* he didn't fuck?'

'*Vincent*.'

'And now he expects us to, I don't know. What does he expect us to *do* with it? If we put it out there we'll fuck off a lot of people. *Fine*. But we'll make ourselves look ridiculous into the bargain. We will, right? We'll be a laughing stock.'

She held her silence, watched him pace, listened to him lay out the plan of what would happen. It would be seismic, an earthquake. There was nothing like it that had happened in their lifetimes. It would be pandemonium. Because there was no doubt about it: the pictures would blow everyone's sense of who he was, as an artist, sky high. He mimed an explosion with his arms, puffing out his cheeks and goggling his eyes. The fall out, the dust clouds. The reverberations. The toxicity in the water table. She let the words wash over her: they would have to go into hiding. A convent. She'd have to take holy orders.

'Imagine what they'd say,' he said, coming to stand in front of her. 'Imagine what Feaver or someone like that would say, the language he'd have to reach for to describe the paint. The *method*, the application, the physicality of the paint, the way he's put it on, *screwed* it into the canvas, into what's already there. It's miraculous, isn't it?'

He crouched down in front of her, she heard his joints click, and smiled, but he missed the smile. He had her hands in his hands now, his arms rested on his legs. He was looking up at her, jiggling her hands in time to his words.

‘It’s the best work he’s ever done, isn’t it?’

She sort of nodded.

‘No one’s done anything like it, have they?’

Again, the gesture adumbrated, barely sketched in.

‘It would fuck them up, good and proper, if we put it out there. And I want to. I want to. But it would, don’t you see, it would destroy ...’

His hands, holding hers, went on with their movements, silly jiggling motions like a girl jiggling the reins of a pony, but the words had stopped, and the look on his face, when she looked at him, was one of, if you had to put a name to it, fearfulness. Then, though it wasn’t clear how it happened, or whose idea it was, his hands were holding her head, and his knees came down on her knees, hurting her, and he slipped to the ground and pulled her head down and brought her mouth to his. A jarring, deliberately awkward kiss, with none of the delicacy of last night.

She tried to tell him to wait, to slow down, but the trying didn’t reach as far as the telling, and she joined him in the kiss, as if that was the only way, now, to tell him.

He paused, tightening the grip of his hands in her hair, and he said, speaking the words so close that she felt the movement of his mouth on hers, and heard the terror in them, ‘I would destroy every last one of those paintings, I would build a bonfire of them and set them alight and stand there and watch them burn, if it meant I could be with you, Justine.’

She pushed him away with her mouth. ‘We can’t do that,’ she said, and he nodded and said, ‘I know,’ but they were still kissing, and he had fallen over backwards on to the rug, one arm rested awkwardly on the glass table, with its bowls and its pebbles

and its glass of water and its magazines and its pine cones, and she said, 'Get up, then,' and they got up, and when they were upright she pushed him backwards, her hands on his chest, guiding him, and his hands locked about her wrists, like a game of trust, walking backwards, and he said, 'Now?' and she nodded, repeating his word, and steering him into her bedroom.

The fraughtness of their lovemaking, the unlikeliness of it, was as a provocation, the wilful amateurishness of it only making it more fraught, and she regretted it, even as they manoeuvred themselves through it. She regretted their seriousness and their soberness and their lack of moment. But the moment had its own logic. This is passion, she told herself, as they removed the first items of each other's clothes; this is passion and the consequence of passion. Passion in the daytime, as they quickly finished undressing, where it doesn't belong and so is so much more passionate. And if a kiss is a form of promise, she thought, then what is this, this polite, urgent, awkward fucking, is this a promise too? And if so what are we promising?

And looking up at his face she was aware of the subtle play of negotiation and reciprocation in their love-making, even as they used those elements to try to obliterate any sense of conscious design. Their turn-taking at grabbing and taking, at slowing and obstructing. Until that moment when she sensed him pull ahead of her, and watched him go, as if he was racing breathless up a hill whose summit she knew she would not reach. And perhaps out of delicacy, perhaps in order to concentrate on her own abstraction, she turned her head and looked out through the wide glass doors at the dark green and grey of the gravel garden. The circles and swirls seen slant in the gravel, so human, so falsely perfect, and behind them the dark green backdrop of the Virginia pines, so eerie.

When he had come he lowered himself on to her and they lay like that for some time, and then he slid and out and shifted sideways to lie next to her, on his back,

breathing heavily. After a minute his breathing had slowed and softened, and she looked and saw that he was asleep, his eyelashes fluttering.

After a while he woke from his doze and shifted himself up onto his elbows.

Then he said, 'What's that?'

It was a scroll, by Deishū, one of her favourites, hung on the wall opposite the bed, in an alcove improvised between the wardrobe and the door to the shower room.

'It's Japanese calligraphy.'

'It's a circle. Like Randall's circles.'

'It's called an ensō.'

He got up and walked naked over to look at it, then lifted a hand and traced the circle, the thick inked Zen swirl, giving a little twist at the end to disengage, there where the artist had let his brush tail off, leaving the merest hint of gap, making the shape both complete and incomplete.

'You know his circles? He told you about those?'

'Of course he did. He bought it for me. It's eighteenth century. By Takahashi Deishū.'

'Should I have heard of him?'

'I wouldn't have thought so.'

'And this is a haiku?' Indicating the kanji next to it.

'Yes. By Kabayashi Issa. It means, *The world of dew. Yes, it is a world of dew, and yet. And yet, dot dot dot.*'

The way his hands hung limp and slightly curled at his sides, the hair-flecked dune of his belly, not a shred of self-consciousness.

'He made four thousand of them. Did you know that? Four thousand attempts at a perfect circle.'

She looked at him and thought, but didn't say, These aren't supposed to be perfect. That's precisely the point. It's the imperfections you should cherish.

Later they showered, and she said, almost unthinking, as she towelled his back afterwards, 'At least we know what we might be letting ourselves in for,' and at that he turned and took her face in the flats of his hands, most possessively, and kissed her, most expressly and explicitly – in a way that seemed to carry a real intention. She closed her eyes and murmured her assent, thinking as she did so that, contrary to what she had thought earlier, it was quite possible to sleep with someone, to fuck them, by accident, but that a kiss like this was always meant.

And then, when they were dressed, and she was sat at her dressing table drying her hair, he said he was going to make a fire.

'A fire,' she said, looking at him in the mirror.

'Yes.'

'To throw the paintings on?'

The severity of his expression was as if he knew he was being called, already, on the nonsense he had spoken in the heat of his passion.

'If we had them here, now?' he said, talking to her reflection. 'Yes, I would. Right now, I'd throw them right on.'

'You don't really mean that, do you?'

'I don't know what I mean. There's too many thoughts jumbled up in my head to know which ones are real. But I'm going to build a fire, on the beach. It will be nice. We can sit out round it and pretend we're at Peplow. Watch the sun go down, have a beer. And it will give me something to do, building it. Otherwise, I'd just spend the rest of the day wanting to be in bed with you.' And he walked behind her, and lifted the hair from her neck and ran his hands back through its length. 'Which, even if that was how you

wanted to spend the rest of the day, which I would by no means assume, would probably do me all kinds of irreparable physical damage.’

So while he went out, cockahoop, to gather firewood from up and down the beach, she went and sat out in her garden, and thought about meditating. While she was sitting there considering it she watched a scattering of tiny birds, like British sparrows, with speckled undersides, fly hither and thither in the branches of the cedars and pines, almost as if they were getting blown about by the wind. She wondered when the hummingbirds would arrive. She was here so little, since he died, she had no sense of the seasons. It occurred to her that she could move out here, among her bowls and prints and books. She would be quite happy, for a time.

Then she thought about Vincent.

The hardest thing seemed to be working out exactly what they had said, and what they hadn’t, and what was implied by it – by what was said and what unsaid. Was that which was spoken necessarily more important, more true, than that which wasn’t?

She thought of Ikuo, her friend in Kurashiki, the only other person since Randall that she had gone to bed with, and of how you might choose to interpret that fact, and the fact of the distance between them. And she thought of how Joshua, when she had told him about Ikuo, last year, had seemed to accept the idea of such a person, but had then changed his mind about going with her on her trip to Osaka that summer.

She reached up to the dwarf willow tree that grew by the bench, rising and falling like a fountain, and took and twisted a new leaf between her fingers. She rolled and crushed it, resolving its green skin to a sort of fleshy gunk, like the insides of a squashed bug.

She considered the garden, the few trees and the individual rocks, and the rings of gravel radiating out from them. The garden felt fraudulent, a *trompe l’oeil* that, if she took a wrong step, would be revealed, with every rock, every plant, every tree a flimsy,

two-dimensional façade. Was her life like that, she wondered, her pretence at serenity and containment? She flicked the mess of leaf to the ground.

He returned at a quarter to five, happily exhausted, saying he was done – ‘a real Peplow fire,’ he said. ‘I wish the rest of them were here.’ And she looked at him, collapsed in a chair, and put her head on one side.

She opened a beer and passed it to him.

‘I do,’ he answered her. ‘I actually do. I was there, you know, last year, or the year before.’

‘I know,’ she said, but she didn’t have the heart to tell him what more she knew: that Gina had phoned her, the very day he’d left, and asked her if she knew that Vincent was writing a book about them all.

‘I was trying to write. All part of the grand plan. She’d pulled out all the stops, Gina. Piled up all these photos and books and stuff in the library for me to look at. It didn’t work. I think I finally realised the project was too immense. That the more I wrote, the less he was there.’

Then, as she busied herself putting Margaret’s quiche and potatoes on plates, he went on. ‘I don’t know why I thought it would be a good idea for you to read it. I guess it was just meant as an offering of sorts.’ He laughed. ‘In any case, all this... stuff has saved me an immense amount of effort.’

After their food, they waited for dusk to come, then she pulled on a thick cardigan and they unlocked the beach gate and went on down the steps between the banks of grass, she carrying a blanket, two cushions and two glasses, he a cooler with beer and, shoved under one arm, the bottle of whisky. They walked single file. He was in Randall’s jumper again. They had not touched since the morning.

There was the sea again, seen before you saw the beach, bright and dark and deep. And there, as they crested the top of the dune, was the tide, a pale shimmer of movement beyond the fire, unlit, a small grey house of stacked wood. The sand was heavy, slow going, shifting out from under your feet in tiny, abrupt landslides, more so in the dark than by day.

The fire, when you got to it, was bigger than she expected, an irregular pyramid of bleached driftwood and darker branches from the cypresses and conifers. There were pale balls and twists of paper scrunched up and shoved deep into gaps and crevices. One bigger log rolled into position for a seat.

Vincent knelt and took out Randall's lighter, sparked it and touched it here and there to the paper, then scooted around to his right and repeated the exercise, until he had lit the fire at six, seven spots.

She sat on the blanket, her back against the log, enjoying the spectacle, enjoying watching him move like that around the fire, on the sand, shifting his posture unthinkingly, like how a boy moves. And she was glad when it seemed like the fire had taken, and he came and sat himself down, along from her. Close, but not too close.

'A Peplow fire,' she said.

They watched it a while, then he said, 'A marker. That's how I always thought of the fires at Peplow. As punctuation. A way of measuring out our lives.'

'The end of something, the start of something.'

'Maybe.'

'You remember him, that Millennium Eve. His jacket. You put on, what did you put on?'

'My phone. My mobile phone. You put it in that book of poems.'

'Bashō. I'd forgotten that. How like you to remember.'

'Of course I remember.'

The fire grew, and diminished, at the same time, became concentrated, throwing out real heat. He planted his beer in the sand between them, twisting it in, then produced another piece of paper from somewhere. He balled it in his hands and threw it on to the fire.

She watched him, drinking her beer, as he repeated the process with another sheet, plucked from down beside him, where she couldn't see.

‘What’s that?’

‘What’s this?’ He took another sheet. ‘It’s my manuscript.’

Her laugh, a reflex, escaped her mouth even as she realised he was telling the truth. She leaned, then lunged, to try to grab the sheet from his hand. The bottle stood between them toppled, sending its contents gulping out into the sand so she had to bend to right it.

‘What do you mean? Are you mad?’

They grappled for a moment, incompetently, the blanket rucking under them, he twisting away from her, to keep the sheet out of her grasp.

‘Don’t be stupid. Give me that.’

He abruptly shifted his position and his grip and pushed her backwards by the wrists, forcing her over and down on to the blanket with a grunt. It was a violent movement, deliberately careless, but it hurt her nonetheless, her wrist bent back to the limit, and she said, ‘Ow.’ His expression flickered with uncertainty, and she yielded, as much from a kind of compassion as from anything else. He had her arms pinioned either side of her head.

‘I want to read it,’ she said, aware as she said it of a childish taint to her voice, that mixed plaintiveness and seductiveness. ‘Why can’t I read it?’

But his face was still tense, concentrating on his own sense of injury, and the words came out angry.

‘Because it’s shit.’

He pushed down on her wrists.

‘Stop it.’

‘Because it’s all wrong.’

Another push.

‘I said, stop it. You’re hurting me.’

‘Sorry.’

He released her and sat back, taking his weight off her. They were both breathing heavily. Rolling around on the blanket like teenagers, she thought, in accusation, and then thought that it was no less ludicrous than what they had done, that morning in the bedroom.

But when he spoke he said, ‘Because I thought I knew him and it turned out I didn’t.’

She watched him, blankly, and tried to gauge from his expression the rhythm of his thoughts, if he was thinking about her at all, or just about Randall.

‘Because he doesn’t deserve it.’

There was a breathed word that might have been another apology and he lifted himself off her. She sat up and sneezed, dusting sand from herself, shaking out her hair. He came back to the fire, bag in hand, then, as she watched, he upended the bag over it. The sheets fell with a great thump, smacking up sparks and sending a couple of rogue sheets blowing and flipping over the sand towards her. She grabbed them, looking to see if he would do anything to stop her. He didn’t, and she brought them to her face to read.

“‘What was impressive’,’ she said, “‘was the high-velocity impact of the pellets on the canvases, the way they sprang immediately to life, the paint thudding in a lovely pattern of splatters springing up as if by magic.’”

Vincent was crouching sideways, face towards the sea, as he poked the burning book with his stick, separating out the pages.

‘Vincent. You’re not seriously telling me that’s your only copy.’

He settled back on his haunches, then toppled back onto the sand, half-on purpose, making an ‘ooph’ sound.

‘Of course not. God, I wish it was. This is a symbolic act.’

‘And as such ...’

‘Entirely meaningless.’

Randall’s phrase. Vincent stamped angrily down on another sheet that had lifted off the fire and then, caught by a gust of wind, plummeted abruptly to earth.

‘You can’t destroy anything properly, these days. I could delete it from my laptop, but it would still be in the cloud.’

He waved his stick at the sky.

‘It’s all up there, somewhere. Everything’s stored. Nothing’s forgotten.’

Having foot-dragged the escaping sheet within reach, he picked it up and returned it to the fire.

She turned to the second sheet in her hand.

“‘Somebody had found the switches for the main lights, and they blinked on to show people, still pushing helplessly away from the assault. The eye was drawn to each fresh burst of yellow – who was hit? who was hit? was I hit? People were yelling for Randall to stop, or for others to stop him. A man’s voice, plummy and shrill, was repeating ‘It’s just paint! It’s just paint!’ over and over. Other people were sobbing, cowering, hands over heads.”

She laughed, and he looked at her, enquiring.

‘The paintball show. This man. *It’s just paint. It’s just paint.*’

She caught the bowed tension in his smile, the small shake of the head, the deep muscle satisfaction that was beyond concealing.

‘This seems perfectly well written, Vincent. I’m enjoying it.’

‘Thank you. But the well-written-ness of it is beside the point.’

‘So help me out here. Are you angry with Randall because of the paintings, so you don’t want to be his friend anymore, or are you angry at yourself because you were tricked?’

He lowered his head to knees.

A sound came from him, but if it was anything more than a mumbled groan, she wasn’t able to say what it was.

She drank from her beer and watched him. To become involved with someone who was still so caught up with the memory of someone else, her husband no less, was a sure-fire route to turmoil and damage. What he had said that morning, that they were free agents, that they could do whatever they wanted, they owed nobody anything, now seemed risible.

She stood and walked down past the fire towards the sea, balling and throwing in her two pages as she went.

The sight and sound of waves on the shoreline at night always seemed to her obscene, uncanny. The fact of their eternal recurrence, during the day, was fine, but in the dark, when everyone was supposed to be asleep, it seemed demented, unreasonable, as if they were proof that the unconscious mind lived on after death.

A shout from the house.

‘Mum! Are you down there?’

They looked at each other, surprise mingling with a gleeful kick of adrenalin: the ecstasy of being found out.

‘I thought you said he wasn’t coming till tomorrow.’

‘He’s not. He wasn’t.’ She turned and set off up the beach.

‘Hi, honey. Yes. We’ve made a fire. Come down.’

Josh’s head and torso appeared over the top of the trees. He must have clambered up on the railings of the decking. An arm waved and she returned the greeting.

‘We’ll come down. Do you need anything from up here?’

We. She looked back at Vincent, who was using a branch to pivot bits of half-burned log from the outside of the fire into its centre. Even in his attempt to exorcise Randall, he was only ever copying him. The burning of the past, the raking of its ashes into the ground. We, Josh said. He would have needed someone to drive him up, unless he’d got the train and a cab. She wondered if this might be this new girlfriend, evident more in the gaps in what he would tell her, than in any direct account.

She went back to the fire and busied herself with the blanket and bottles, then turned when she heard voices behind her.

It was a woman, short, in dark clothes, a sort of cropped biker’s leather jacket and tight black jeans. Justine didn’t recognise her. Intensely put together, quite striking, hair in an almost bob, with daggers of red cutting down to the edges of it in a couple of places – older than Josh. Late twenties, at least. She was traipsing down the beach, behind and to the side of her son, but carefully in range of him, if needed.

‘The ocean at night,’ she was saying. ‘This is just so evocative.’

Josh wobbled over to her and half-fell into her, bracing himself on her arms. They kissed cheeks. They kissed cheeks, knocking and nudging. His stubble was growing out into the closest he’d had to a beard. A silly flat cap on his head, like something a country gent would wear in England.

‘Woah. Josh. You’re getting so strong.’

Josh righted himself, then took a step backwards and reached out an arm towards the woman.

‘Mum, this is Gabriella.’

Gabriella stepped down the beach and put her hand out. ‘Gaby, please.’

‘Justine.’

‘I’m very glad to meet you.’

‘Likewise.’

Josh clapped his hands together. ‘Good. Well, I’m glad that’s done, then. What have we got here? Beer. Whisky. No s’mores then?’ It was as if he’d upped the American in his accent a notch. There was a bluntness about it, too. ‘Vincent. Good to see you, too, man.’

Vincent walked towards them around the fire, scuffing the burnt black specks of paper into the sand as he came, and he and Josh shook hands. Then the four of them arranged themselves variously on the log and the blanket, all facing the fire. Josh on the log, with Gabriella in front of him on the ground, leaning her back against his legs.

She was a make-up artist, she said – but a good one, Josh added, listing the names of the magazines and shows she’d worked on. Gaby talked animatedly away – about Marilyn Monroe, the photos of her on the beach at Amagansett. All of it utterly safe, gossip solidified to ancient history. And all directed largely at Josh as a kind of intimate lecture, as if it was her job now to educate him. Josh responded happily enough, making jokes, asking questions.

She pictured the four of them, from above now, as a kind of schematic diagram: four black circles of varying dimensions, with dotted lines curving between them. The relationships, stated and unstated, the angles of influence and tension, the differing dynamics of each possible pairing.

They drank. Gabriella held on to her one beer, while Josh was already cracking his third. He was talking about his childhood memories of the place. The dog they'd had for a while, the kids he'd formed summer-long alliances with, the toys he'd buried in the sand. His fear of jellyfish.

Four notes, they made, it seemed to her, a strange intangible chord. She and Josh forming an octave perhaps. Vincent a seventh, desperately trying to resolve itself to her note. Or she was the base note and the others ascended variously from her. Gaby, wavering between them all, creating fields of dissonance.

'Josh, darling,' she said, 'Gaby's finished her beer.'

'Sorry. Another beer, Gabs?'

'Actually, I'd prefer a glass of wine if you have one.' She looked at Justine.

'I'll fetch a bottle.' This was Vincent. 'I need to go to the loo anyway.'

He stood and dusted sand from himself. 'Anyone else need anything?'

'I'll come with you,' Gaby replied. 'I need to use the restroom too.'

Josh waited till they'd gone, then brought his beer bottle up to his mouth.

'So. You two. You having a nice time here?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said. She drew the word out, turning the word half into a question.

'The perfect spot for a quiet, intimate weekend away from the hustle and bustle of the city. All those godawful *people*.'

'Exactly.'

'Those peeking, prying people. He was, what, just over here, was he, just passing through town?'

'No.'

'Thought he'd look you up for old time's sake.'

'No, actually.'

‘Or has this been going on for a while, in secret, unbeknownst to me.’ He threw something, a scrap of twig or beer label at the fire. ‘Poor Mr Ikuo.’ A touch of parody in the voice, of offensiveness in the parody. ‘He will be sad.’

She wasn’t angry. Not yet. The rudeness was just a feint.

‘He was here on trust business. Something we needed to discuss.’

‘Oh?’ He had produced a cigarette, handrolled, from a pocket, and it bobbed in his mouth, unlit. A joint, no doubt.

Part of her wanted to force the issue, but she recoiled from doing so. Something warned her that using Vincent to make this point had hazards of its own. He was too blunt a tool with which to try to fine-tune her relationship with Josh.

‘Nothing interesting,’ she said to him.

He shrugged, then dipped his head to light the cigarette.

‘So, more to the point. What do you think of Gabriella?’

Offering her the joint as he said it.

‘This just weed?’ she said.

‘Sure.’

She got up and went to sit next to him on the log, and took the cigarette. She considered it, then took a small toke. She held in the smoke, hand on her sternum.

‘She seems ... nice,’ she said, letting the words ride out on the back of the smoke.

‘Nice? Christ, don’t tell her that to her face, she’d be distraught.’

‘Well, that’s the thing about niceness, isn’t it? Sometimes you need something to bring it out. Or set it off. A pinch of salt. Come on, Josh. I’ve only just met her. She seems cool.’

He laughed, one of his lopsided, yawning laughs, and took back the joint.

‘But seriously. You and Vincent. Are you two *going out*? Or whatever you want to call it.’

‘It’s early days, darling. I don’t know what to say. It might happen.’

‘Might *happen*? Please, spare me the details.’

‘Well, Josh, it’s already happened, since you ask.’ She grinned at his grimace.

‘But it might go on happening, I don’t know. I really don’t know.’

She put an arm around him, felt the jitters and jumps of his body, its permanent electric current. They sat like that for a while, he with his chin on his raised knees, lifting himself only to smoke, she with one arm around him, the other pushing and pulling at his hair, arranging it on his scalp, and around his ears.

Then, when they heard the first sounds of the others coming back, he leaned himself back upright, and glanced at her quickly, an apologetic smile on his lips. They turned to watch them appear over the top of the dune, the two of them laughing at something. Vincent raised an arm, waving the wine bottle.

Josh shifted himself on the log, making a space between them, then said to her, quietly, while they were still out of earshot, and with a look of frank appeal on his face, ‘Just not him, Mum. Not him.’

‘Why not?’ she said back, not hiding her hurt.

A jerk of the head. ‘Look at him, Mum. He’s a fucking douchebag.’ His shoulders hunched, his mouth gaping, as he gagged on the words.

Then they were back, and the fire burned on, folding in on itself as it sank towards the sand, condensing its powers to a shimmering, hallucinatory centre. The beer and weed and now the wine dried her mouth and slid another harmonic and rhythmic layer in under her thoughts. Those four notes, that she had earlier imagined as a chord laid out on a piano keyboard, had unfurled into a rising melody on an acoustic guitar. La-da-da-da, la-da-da. She imagined herself playing it, her left hand holding down the pattern, the thumb and fingers of her other hand taking the same steps up the strings, over and over again.

She watched Gaby run her hand over her son's incipient beard, glad that she wasn't some simpering cute-as-pie girlie his own age, someone to fawn over him. She seemed to have no truck with the idea of his film work as anything other than necessary, youthful experimentation. 'He's got a good eye,' she'd said, when Vincent asked about it. 'Just so long as he doesn't settle for being the wonder kid with the shaky hand.' It was what she would have wanted to say herself.

The evening ended at around midnight. They gathered their stuff and made their way back up the slope, Gaby pressing herself to Josh's side, seemingly hanging on his arm while, Justine saw, actually supporting his now rather watery steps.

The two of them disappeared along the corridor to Josh's room, leaving Justine and Vincent in the main lounge. She sensed him hang back, uncertain. It was amusing to have such minor sources of power, but she was too tired to really enjoy it. She took them to her room and they made love, again, with all the seriousness that a second time carries with it. There was a deliberate slowness on both their parts, with much shushing and caressing and, in his face, a certain sternness.

It lasted while it lasted, and when they were both done she found she had his head on her chest. His eyes were open, he was staring out at the garden, at where the garden would be if it could be seen. They could see each other's reflections in the glass doors.

'You're thinking about the paintings,' she said, and she brushed a little at his eyebrows, smoothing them.

He talked, almost whispering, and she felt the movement of his jaw against her breasts. 'I thought when I came out here it would be easier, but it's not. There's something dreadful about it. Like trying to bring two opposing magnets together. What I keep coming back to' – and she felt the words as much as heard them, the way they resonated through the cavities of her body – 'is that if we destroy them, no one will know. The world will carry on. My book, quietly erased. The paintings, gone. Do you

remember that Martin Creed thing? The whole world plus the work equals the whole world.'

'And Randall?'

'Randall. Do we owe him anything?' His eyes flicked up. 'Is that the wrong thing to say?'

'You seem to be saying that if he hadn't painted these paintings then he would deserve to have the world see them, but that having painted them somehow disqualifies him.'

'I'm not sure what he deserves. What about what we deserve? I even thought about them just now, when we were making love. How wrong is that? It's as if that was his plan.'

Her hand stopped, where it had been crawling through his hair.

She said, 'That won't change, if we destroy them.'

'But if we show them, it will destroy *us*.'

She looked at his face, but what she was thinking wasn't what he'd said, the meaning of it, but simply the word he'd used. Was there suddenly an *us*? she wondered. Not that her not knowing that there was would mean that there wasn't. She carried on with her stroking, looking down the bed to where the painted circle hung, with its poetry, its simple, single, endless statement.

He was up before her in the morning. She found him on the sun deck, with no sun but only cold morning air. A coffee jug and two cups on the table in front of him. She poured herself a cup then took a chair. When she spoke she kept her voice low, aware of the presence of the others in the house, of not knowing how long they had to talk before they turned up.

‘How about this. We don’t destroy them. And we don’t show them. We just put them in storage, in a lead-lined box in a bank vault somewhere, together with all the documentation, all the everything, and a little note that says, you know, don’t open until after we’re dead. How does that sound?’

He let out a sigh that said he didn’t buy it.

‘I know, I know,’ he said. ‘It’s a good idea. And I’ve thought of it, too. But the thing is, I don’t mind being a coward, but I don’t want to be *thought of* as a coward. Destroying them is the cowardliest thing ever, but no one will ever know. But simply shunting them into the future, buying ourselves some time, so that we can have...’ – and his words floundered, he filled in for them with vague gestures – ‘so that basically we can do what we want to now, while we’re alive. Doing that would make us look ridiculous, because it will be obvious that we were ashamed.’

‘But we’ll be dead.’

‘Doesn’t matter. We’ll still look pathetic. And petty. More to the point, we’ll be killing the paintings as surely as if we pour petrol over them and set them alight. They only work so long as the people in them are alive. You, me, Tom, Kevin, Jan. All the players and walk-on parts. That’s their power. If there’s no one around to slander, they’re worthless.’

He looked at her, and said, ‘What do you think?’

‘I don’t know what I think,’ she answered, and they sat there, drinking their coffee and trying to think.

‘Morning.’

They turned, together, at the sound, and there he was, Joshua, in a dressing gown, standing in the doorway. She wondered how long he’d been there, and decided it can’t have been more than a moment or two.

‘Morning, darling.’

‘Hi there.’ Vincent’s efficient, collapsible smile.

‘Any more coffee?’ Josh said, scratching at his beard as he ambled over to them.

‘You’ll need a cup,’ said Vincent, and he made to get up. ‘Do you want me to get you one?’

Justine pushed hers across the table. ‘Use mine. I’ve finished with it.’

He waited while Vincent poured him some into it, then said, before he even picked it up, ‘I know, you know.’

‘What?’

‘I know about the studio, the paintings.’

‘What do you mean?’ she said.

‘What?’ This was Vincent, now, angry. ‘What studio?’

The tone of his voice was itself a betrayal. She put a hand on the table. It was enough.

‘The studio,’ Josh said again. ‘With the paintings.’

‘Oh for fuck sake.’ Vincent rattled the chair backwards across the wooden boards. He looked for a moment as if he wanted to hit Joshua, but he pushed his chair again and stepped away from the table.

Joshua looked at his mother, his face skipping with sly triumph.

‘Well?’ he said.

‘Yes, alright. The studio. But how did you know about it?’

‘How did I know about it? I might ask the same of you.’

‘For fuck sake. This is a fucking farce.’

‘Vincent, please. Well, you might ask me, and I’d tell you, though it’s not very interesting.’

‘Well?’

‘The lease ran out, and the landlord traced it back to us.’

‘So you’ve been there?’ He’d interrupted her, a small glimmer of anxiety.

‘Yes, we’ve been there. But Joshua, how long have you known about it?’

‘How long have I known about it? Oh, since about the day that Dad took me there.’

‘He *took* you there?’

‘Yes, look. This is getting a bit tedious. How about I tell you all about what I know about the studio, and the Fuck Paintings’ – the title, and the certainty of his use of it, made Vincent look round – ‘and then you can tell me what you know.’

‘Fine.’

‘Or, even better, why don’t I show you.’

Joshua refused to say any more until he had gone to get dressed. A straightforward gambit to rile Vincent. It was ten minutes before he re-emerged with Gabriella, who looked suitably bemused by the sudden acceleration of the day into some kind of family drama. When it became clear that Josh intended to include her in whatever he was going to show them, Vincent tried to take a stand.

‘I don’t mean to be rude, Josh, but I think this is really something we should be keeping to ourselves.’

Josh did a gawping double-take.

‘You are joking, right? For a start you don’t know what I’m going to show you. Secondly, this is a film that *I* made, with my father’s permission. You can’t decide who I show it to.’

‘Who *have* you shown it to?’

A pause, a beat for thought.

‘No one, as it happens. But it’s my choice who I do.’ He turned to Gabriella. ‘Come on.’ And he led her down the stairs to the media room, where she’d sent Vincent the previous morning, to watching his online videos.

It was cool and dark in the room, with the faint musty smell of smoke. Josh gestured at the sofas, telling them to sit, then went to the computer and started typing.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said, while he waited for his log-in, wherever it was, to process. ‘It’s all perfectly secure.’ Then, with an edge of seriousness to his voice, ‘By the way, where *is* the studio?’

‘Oh, roundabout,’ said Vincent, cutting in.

‘Alphabet City,’ said Justine.

‘You’re not going to give me the address?’

‘Not just now,’ Vincent replied. ‘Let’s just see what it is you’ve got to show us.’

In the end she and Vincent sat on the ancient sofa. Josh perched on the arm next to his mother with a pair of remotes, Gabriella sitting next to him on a leather cube.

‘Right, to set the scene, this was a day out. The date, which is recorded in the corner of the screen, is 18 July 2008.’ Josh looked at them, giving them a moment to calculate for themselves the few months that separated it from Randall’s death. ‘A Daddy day out, with me filming it all, on a camcorder you’d given me for my eleventh birthday. Unfortunately I didn’t get to film the journey there, as the driver wouldn’t let me film in his cab.

‘We started at Chelsea Piers. We had lunch, then we were going to go to the Police Museum.’ Justine nodded; it was always one of his favourite places to visit. ‘But then Dad changed his mind and gave the driver another address.’ To Gabriella: ‘My childhood. It was a *treat* to go someplace in a yellow cab rather than in a fucking chauffeured Lincoln. Anyway,’ turning back to the others. ‘I filmed about two hours’

worth of stuff, just on that day, it's all unedited. This is about three-quarters of the way through.'

Then, 'Ready?' he said.

She nodded.

Josh brought up a window on the computer screen, showing a street view, blurred, tilted and stilled. A yellow cab, a dark figure. Before she had time to analyse it though, the image launched itself in time and sound on the television.

The wailing dive of a siren, a snatch of talk.

The street bright grey, Randall leaning in conversation with the cabbie, hands braced on the top of the door. The image jittering, in a way that was instantly recognisable. Randall's hands padding out a beat on the metal of the roof.

Then he straightens and the car moves off, as if released.

It is the street alright, she recognised it.

'Ready?'

'Ha.' A curt laugh from Vincent, and she guessed at his meaning. The way that Josh had anticipated and copied exactly the intonation of his father's voice. It was Randall, delivering himself up in a single word. Anything, anything to get a rise out of life.

'Now Josh, like I said. This is top secret. Top. Secret. Not a word, to Mum, or anyone. It's just between you and me, and your little camera. Scout's Honour?'

Randall lifts his hand, formed into the three-fingered salute, watching for the response. Satisfied, he nods, turns.

She looked over and saw that Gaby had shifted her stool nearer to Josh, and had her hand on his knee, with his hand on hers. Josh was fixed on the screen, mouth hanging open. His face was at once passive, given over entirely to the act of watching, and somehow strained, the mouth giving the occasional twitch and yaw.

The camera follows Randall up the alleyway to the door, the yard, retracing their steps from two days ago. But in the film it is the heat of summer. Randall in loose chinos and a grey cotton T-shirt. Then they are through the door and bouncing up the stairs. A pause at the top, then – ‘Ta da!’ – they are inside.

Randall takes a stride into the centre of the room, gives a foppish twirl of exhibition. ‘Here we are. My gaff. Where I do my stuff.’

‘Cool.’

Josh’s voice, irrefutably her boy at ten, talking to her across the years and the involutions of the medium.

The camera walks into the middle of the room and starts a slow panning turn of its own, leaving a stationary Randall to slide sideways to and then off the left-hand edge of the screen, smile on lips and hands on hips. The image runs over the windows, their leaded panes and long cluttered sills, the laden trestle tables, the back wall with the chairs and lamp and sofa, then past the door to the racks, guarding their secrets, and on past where the corridor to the kitchen begins towards the single picture stood on an easel – impossible to see what it is – and the pots and rags and general mess.

‘Josh,’ she said.

He froze the picture.

‘Did you go back again? Or is this the only time you went?’

‘This is the only time.’ Then, still holding the remote paused, ‘The mad thing is, at the time I didn’t think it was anything special. It was just somewhere he took me, a bit grubby, a bit pokey. The whole thing obviously meant far more to him than it did to me.’

‘The only time, then.’

‘The only time.’

She spoke softly: ‘Did he *show* you the pictures?’

‘We’re getting to the pictures.’

And the frame slides on, until it arrives back at its starting point, where Randall was, and should be, only he is gone. The camera waits, then, almost before you notice it, starts zooming in through the zone of his absence towards a coat stand placed incongruously in a corner, draped with jackets and an old-fashioned hat, a swatch of colour that might be a Hermes scarf. Then, still zooming in, it pans back to the left, towards the painting on its easel. It has just broached the edge of the canvas when Randall's voice comes from another room.

'You want something to drink?'

The image jerks away, throwing itself wildly over a stretch of blank wall, then collects itself.

'You got a Coke?'

'Coming up.'

The camera walks over to the window and films out of it, its processor struggling to pick out objects in the dazzling wash of the sun, then turns for the re-entrance of Randall, can of drink in hand, the image darkening, adjusting itself.

'Here you go. Look, put that down for a moment.'

Cut.

'There was a ping-pong table in it, and I thought, blimey, that's the life.' Randall is on the sofa, now, leg hooked up on his knee, looking sideways along it to where the camera is placed, Randall's slouch, his gut. The state of his hair. The image circles around his face, then moves in on an ear, silently, hungrily, until you can see the hairs tickling out of it.

'We knocked about a bit. I'd love one here.'

'Why don't you get one, then?'

'Who'd I play with?'

'Me. I'd play with you.'

‘Josh. Listen. Nobody comes here. Nobody’s been here.’

A sudden movement takes Randall out of the frame entirely, and the camera backs out of its zoom until he’s caught once more. He’s put his leg down and is sitting forward, turned towards the camera.

‘Josh, you are the only person apart from me who has ever been in this room.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of the paintings I’m making here. They’re... sensitive. You know about my work, right? The kinds of stuff I make. I can’t have anyone knowing about these paintings.’

She was looking hard into the image, trying to read it, to gauge if there’s any sense of awareness, in his eyes, or the lines around his mouth, of an audience beyond the camera. Is he talking to them, here, now, or is he just humouring a small boy with a video camera?

‘Can I see them then?’

Randall shifts his gaze to the painting on the easel and the camera follows. It’s barely a quarter done. Again, the pencil lines sketching out the figures. The first blocks of flesh tone. Three of them it seems. She can’t quite place it.

‘You want to see the paintings?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Okay, then. They’re pretty rude, Josh, just to warn you.’ But his tone is warm. Why would he have brought him here if not to show him the paintings? ‘If Mummy knew I was showing you stuff like this she would be mad as hell.’

He gets to his feet and the camera follows, lurching up, and trying to disguise the lurch. It melts her, almost, the bovine stupidity of the camera action, her son trying to use it as an eye, with a single focal point, swinging this way and that. He has, at least, improved in that. Randall goes to the storage racks.

‘I mean, this is nothing I assume you haven’t seen on the net.’

Randall looks at the camera, questioning, and the image lifts momentarily, riding the wave of a shrug.

‘Right, then. What shall we have?’ He compresses his face and gives a short bleak laugh, trails his hand along the ends of the racks, and saying, ‘No, no, maybe not.’ Then he stops, tapping the wooden structure. He gives a tug and trundles one out, about a third of the way along, stepping backwards to bring it into the room.

It has two canvases on it. The first is two people on a bed, the second a larger grouping in front of a window with thick red curtains – the one with Jerry Saltz, Zach Feuer and Dominique Lévy. It’s the first one the camera moves in on, though. It’s the girl, the unknown girl with the short reddish hair and small breasts – who is she? an artist? a critic? – being taken from behind by Mishi Korvacs.

‘Oh my God.’ Gabriella had her hand to her mouth, swallowing back a laugh that is half giggle, half shock. ‘Sorry,’ she said, and waved her hand in front of her face.

The painting grows, stretching itself to fill the rectangle of the frame, as the camera approaches. It becomes brighter, deeper, more intense. The woman’s left hand is twisted up behind her back and held there by Korvacs, the pose bringing her breast and torso up towards the viewer. A burning bright smear of paint beneath her, just behind her bent right wrist, the one that is taking most of her weight, is like an explosion seen in the distance, like the last light of a crushed sun.

‘Oh my God,’ said Gabriella again, softer this time.

‘Actually, Josh. Probably best if you don’t film these, if you don’t mind.’

And the camera seems to linger, floating in the air, then cuts.

A momentary shift in the room, as the four of them adjusted themselves, but the film has already moved on. Randall is stood at a table of paints, lifting and checking tubes and jars.

‘That was ...’ – Gabriella gathered herself – ‘quite something.’

‘The artist at work,’ says Randall, intoning deeply as for a documentary voiceover. ‘Right, good. This should do.’ He goes over to the barely started canvas – now she can see it is the one that will become the double portrait of Ingvild Goetz and André Emmerich – and peers at it. He flicks at a speck of something caught on the surface with his forefinger. He has a ragged-edged piece of chipboard for a palette and a short stiff brush in his hand, then another, more pointy one, that he clamps between his teeth.

He spreads some pink and some beige on to the palette and mixes them with the stockier brush, then swaps brushes and dots a tiny peck of it on the canvas, where the shoulder of Goetz, the woman, is spreading down towards her breast. He stands back and squints, bends back to his palette. The camera zooms in until the brush fills the screen, lifting and folding the two paints, bringing in some white, shifting ratios and tones. It works quickly and precisely, darting and hovering.

‘Of course, real painters have assistants to do this shit for them.’ The words come clumsily, the consonants obscured by the brush in the mouth. ‘It’s only Sunday painters who have to mix their own colours.’ And back to the canvas. He gives a quick glance at the photos tacked in a row along the top of the heavy easel. The camera records them. Glossy mag shots of Goetz and Emmerich, and three pictures clipped from porno mags.

‘Who are they?’

‘These guys?’

‘The people in the photos, that you’re painting.’

‘Ha.’ He pauses, umms. ‘Just people, Josh.’

‘Do you know them? Do they know you’re painting them having sex together?’

‘No, they don’t.’

It's a response that seems to close down that line of enquiry. Randall steps back, and Josh moves in on his face. Justine starts, astonished, as the close-up hovers and holds: Randall, looking at a painting that he's in the process of making. It's the lines around the eyes, the continual, infinitesimal play of iris and pupil. All for Ingvild Goetz and André Emmerich fucking on a bed. She can think of nothing he's ever made, in his career, that he looked at with this degree of empathy and care. Junk model forts and moon buggies, slaved over with Josh at the kitchen table, yes; but not out there in the world, not professionally.

'How long does it take you to finish a painting?'

'A long time.'

'What sort of paints do you use?'

He laughs. 'What is this? You're, like, bloody Hans Namuth?'

'Who's Hans Naymouth?'

'Hans Namuth. He's the guy who made the film of Jackson Pollock painting. We saw it at Moma, remember?'

'Yeah, I remember.'

Then he puts on a strangled voice, like a warmer Stephen Hawking. 'Sometimes I use a brush, but often prefer a stick. I thin the paint with Wild Turkey, I find it flows better from the stick.' A tumbling little laugh, at his own joke. He rubs an eyebrow and returns to the canvas. 'I also use sand, pebbles, broken glass or other foreign matter. Lego bricks. Poker chips. Shattered remnants of my own ego. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement. Or is the other way round? A statement is just a means of arriving at technique. Here.' He looks to Josh and gestures with the palette. 'You want to have a go?'

'Me?'

'This is unreal,' said Gabriella.

Vincent gave Justine a nudge, and nodded past her, across at Joshua. She looked, and saw it as much in his bearing as in the shine of his eyes, how they reflected the light from the screen. He wasn't crying, but he wasn't far off.

Then Gabriella noticed, and brought Josh's head down onto her shoulder with her hand. How easily it went, how placidly.

'Here we go,' says Randall, bringing them all back to the screen. The image gives a vertiginous dive and slower rise that show the camera is changing hands, and suddenly there's Joshua on screen, from above. The top of his head.

Joshua, aged eleven, looking up at his father. His hair long, draped in girlish bangs over his forehead. He's wearing a faded Spiderman T-shirt. His shoulders so thin, she thinks, his cheeks so apple-round. The nose a boy's nose, just beginning to descend. His head stuck just a little on one side, his mouth smeared into a smile.

'Oh my God.' This was Gabriella again, an exhalation that mixed delight and, Justine can tell, something like shock. Her fingers, in his hair, wrested his head from side to side. 'Look at you. You're so gorgeous.'

Josh was staring, fixed absolutely determinedly in his pose. Justine looked up at the ceiling, blinking and widening her eyes, and back down.

On the screen Josh takes his place in front of the easel, exchanging quick looks with his dad, who's giving him instruction and encouragement, his arm darts out into the frame now and then, to point where to go.

All she could think, though, is that it wasn't her who had his head on her shoulder.

And a second, terrible thought, though it was only the crystallisation of what she already knew – that he was as lost to her here in the room, now, aged nearly nineteen, as he was there on the screen.

Young Josh groans in frustration, angry at his clumsy grip, at the sheer difficulty he has in making so delicate and precise an instrument do what he wants it to. She saw the quiver, his attempt to master it.

‘You’re doing fine.’

‘I *can*’t.’

‘You’re doing great, Josh. Keep going. That’s it. Now mix in a touch more of the white. No, no. Not too much. Don’t worry. Yes, that’s it. Now try that where it goes towards her neck. Just there. And a bit more. Good, good.’

Then comes an interruption. The trill of a cellphone. The camera drops to spin in space, presumably dangling by its strap from his wrist, showing a blurred image of the floorboards, Randall’s shoes.

Over this abstract image, Randall’s voice.

‘Ha! It’s Mummy. Look, hold this. And, Josh, shush, yeah?’

And then the camera is back with Josh and he has it on Randall, who puts the phone to his ear.

‘Hello. Hiya, doll. Yes, we’re having a great time.’ He winks at the camera, and Justine put her hand to her mouth. Her other hand, the one that Vincent had, he gripped tighter. ‘We’re at the Police Museum, so I can’t talk long. We were going to go and get a burger at the Parker. You want to come? Right, okay. Look, hang on a sec. I don’t think I’m supposed to be talking right here. There’s a guide. Josh, you wait here and look at these badges and stuff for minute.’

He waves a hand vaguely, in the vicinity of the easel, his eyebrows lifting in a dumbshow of conspiracy.

‘Sure,’ says Josh’s voice.

‘Wait. Say hi to your Mum.’

And Randall bends towards the camera. The phone, disappears off-screen to the left, Randall's face invading and colonising the screen, a grotesque, unwilling close-up.

'Hi Mum.'

The voice comes distant and crackly.

'Hiya sweetie. You having a good time?'

What hits her, the thing she is able to compute, is the plain dumb foolishness, as always, of the sound of her voice. That is what she clings to. How silly and sing-song she sounds. Her fingers have travelled up over her mouth so that now they rest on her nose, she is vaguely aware of the movement of her lips against her palm, ghosting words she cannot hear.

'Yeah. Totally.'

'Good. See you later.'

'Later.'

'Love you.'

'Bye.'

Randall peels back. A grin of success, he puts his finger to his lips.

'Okay, I'll be two minutes,' he says, then, sternly: 'Don't move from that display case, yeah? Look at that motorcycle.' And he turns and walks away to the kitchen door. His words – the conversation he is having with her – diminish as he goes.

Hiya sweetie. The times she has said that to him, on the phone, and face to face.

'Josh,' she says, 'How can you not have showed me this?'

And she reaches out to him, waving her hand for him to take, like an elderly lady would, and he takes it, his fingers holding and squeezing hers.

He's smiling and blinking, his face doing hiccups.

'Sorry, Mum.'

'Why didn't you *tell* me? About all of it.'

‘I don’t know. I tried, I suppose. Wait. There’s not much more to go.’

And he slips loose his hand and turns back to the screen. The camera is in rapid, chaotic movement, the image jerking and skidding as Josh trots across the room. Then there’s his hand pulling, tugging at a frame, out it comes and Josh steps back to focus on it.

Gabriella laughs. ‘Good God. You little pervert, you.’

Daphne Guinness, looking particularly gruesome, is astride Jeffrey Deitch, while she leans over, mouth gaping next to François Pinault’s erect penis.

‘Who’s that?’ A laugh. ‘That’s crazy. Is that ...’

‘Wait. We’re nearly done.’

And the camera scoots back around the pulled-out end of the rack to see the other side and there it is, the camera stops and lingers, catching its breath. There’s a painting, but it’s too close, out of focus. It’s visible as blocks of colour only.

Josh moves carefully backwards, giving the camera time to work out what it’s looking at. It’s big, huge. Double the size of the others, bigger. An orgy of eight. A roundelay of fucking and sucking and tugging and fingering.

You can hear his silence above their own. His breathing.

‘Wait,’ Justine says, and Josh pauses the film.

She looks at the painting. She counts off Randall and herself and Jan de Vries and Tom and Larry and Daniel Kunitz and Dalia Oberlander and Lisa Dennison, all serenely bundled and twisted and turning in a circle. Eight of them.

‘Which painting is that?’ she says to Vincent.

‘I don’t know,’ he says.

He gets up and goes towards the screen. ‘Play it,’ he says to Josh.

The camera steps back into motion as Josh, in the film, begins to scan the canvas, starting in the top-left corner and moving methodically around it. She still can’t figure it

out, though. There's simply no picture as big as this in the studio. She lets herself be guided and instructed by the image. There's Randall, behind her, heaving away, grinning like a Christian, while he grapples behind him with de Vries's oversized dick, who's looking down at his performance with the look of someone being pestered by a cute, annoying puppy. And her, gasping in what could just as well be pleasure as pain, but concentrating, too, on the progress of her hand up between Dennison's legs. Who in turn is servicing Nasmith.

'Josh. Turn it off.'

It's Gabriella that says it.

'That's enough, now. Give me that.'

'But I don't recognise that painting,' Justine says. 'It's not there, Vincent, is it?'

Gabriella and Josh are tussling over the remote now, whispering and muttering their argument, on their own private terms.

'Give her the remote, Josh,' says Vincent.

'Fuck off, Vincent,' says Josh, grinding the words out almost unthinkingly.

'Fine.' Vincent gets up and goes to the computer, but just as he has his hand on the mouse Josh calls out, almost yelping.

'Wait!'

He's wrested the remote free from Gabriella and hefts it, held loose in his hand, safe, like a half-surrendered gun.

'Alright,' he says. 'Okay.'

Vincent looks at him.

Josh points the remote and presses. The image freezes.

'I said turn it off.'

'Josh.'

The image is frozen on her and Randall, his cock half in her, half out, the dip and rise of her back to her shoulder and hair, her head thrown back. Even frozen and slightly blurred she sees and gasps inwardly at the way the brush drew back across her cheek, through the paint, making the paint and the flesh one.

‘What *is* that painting?’ she says, again, but they all ignore her, Josh and Vincent madly fixed on each other.

‘Look,’ Josh says, waving his arm at the screen, shouting now. ‘It’s real. You can’t make it just go away.’

Anyone looking at him who didn’t know him would think he was drunk. The way his arm seems to tip him close to over-balancing entirely. Gabriella looks ready to steady him if he goes.

‘I could click one button, and this would be out there. How long till it was in every in-tray in New York? You might have the paintings, you might know where they are, but I have evidence.’ He’s batting himself in the chest with the remote, his voice deeper and harsher than she has known it, running up against the limits of expressible feeling. ‘This is *proof*. And if I thought for one moment that you ... In fact, yes. Perhaps now it’s time that you told me what you were going to do with the paintings?’

He points the remote now at Vincent, now at Justine.

She holds his gaze.

She can see through his anger, his eagerness for confrontation. He thinks the paintings are important, but they’re not. Which doesn’t mean they should be ignored, or destroyed, or anything-ed at all, but that they mustn’t fool themselves, in the bust-up that’s coming, that they’re talking about art.

‘Perhaps we should go upstairs. I could make some coffee.’ Gabriella.

‘Yeah, great. Everything’ll be okay *then*.’

Gabriella gets up and goes, head down, as if to spare herself the acerbity of his tone, and Vincent, at Justine's nod, follows her. She gets up and goes towards him, but he tosses the remote down at the sofa in a gesture that is half defiance and half disgust – it comes that close to hitting her – and moves around her towards the stairs.

Upstairs they are silent, the four of them turning, independently, between the kitchen and the lounge, all the time forming into the new configuration of this pattern they seem to have made. It must look to Josh like Gabriella has crossed over, that they are a triangle set against him or surrounding him. That is certainly how he seems to regard them when he sits himself in the centre of the sofa, back to the view, his arms spread out along the cushions behind him. Head tipped high, chin jutting, a line of defence.

Gabriella puts coffee on the low table in front of him, for which she gets no thanks or sign of acknowledgement. She positions herself along from him, perched on the wide arm of the sofa, but turned towards him.

Justine takes one of a pair of chairs across the low table from them. Vincent is by the kitchen counter.

By virtue of the way he ignores him, by the angle by which his gaze diverts from him, she can guess that, for Josh, this is between him and Vincent. Precisely because of this, she makes the first move.

'Josh,' she says, and his look to her is a picture of disaffection. 'Josh, above all, we have got to be slow and sure and sensible about how we approach this. This stuff is extremely sensitive.'

'Wrong.'

'Josh. Let me finish.'

'No. I don't know what planet you people live on, but where I come from there was an artist called Randall. What he made was not "stuff", it was art. To be honest, we don't

have the right to be sensible or slow or sensitive about any of this. That's not our job. Our job is to honour his memory, and to be grateful for what he gave us, and to share what is in our power to share.'

He leans forward and picks at the bowl of pebbles on the table. He scoops up a handful and chucks them softly in hand, lets the soft chatter of their fall play under his words.

'Josh.'

'If you're embarrassed by what he painted, then bad luck. Your embarrassment might even make you a better person, it's not impossible. Certainly, in a hundred years' time, when these paintings are still hanging in whatever passes for houses in whatever is left of this fucking world, and we're all, God willing, dust, then no one will think any the worse of you for your inclusion in them.'

'Listen, Josh.'

'Ooh, Vincent. Listen to you. I'm all ears.'

'First off, no one is denying that these are great pictures.'

'Well, that's nice to hear. I know how much my father relied on your judgement in these things.'

'Joshua!'

'They are truly astonishing, humbling pictures. But that doesn't mean we are bound to treat them in a particular way. There's any number of projects which *your father* followed through to quite surprising levels of completion, but which then, pfft!' – Vincent gives a conjuror's twist of the hand – 'were abandoned. There are, quite literally, warehouses *stuffed* with work that no one has ever seen, and most likely never will.'

He's come away from the counter now, and sat himself on the arm of the chair next to her. It's a confident, casual pose, a boardroom feint. Josh watches him, passing the pebbles from hand to hand.

‘This studio,’ Vincent goes on, and he gives an awed shake of the head. ‘We’ve only just found it, only just started exploring it, and there’s an awful lot of very careful sifting to be done, but there’s no indication – and no indication in your film either, if we’re honest – that he necessarily intended these pictures for exhibition. Yes, he was a joker, your father, and there’s nothing he loved more than putting as many cats among as many pigeons as possible, but he also operated absolutely and entirely according to his own rules. If you try to approach according to normal precedent, you’re going to come a cropper.’

Josh puts up his hand. ‘Vincent, I appreciate that you knew my father for many years ...’

Vincent raises his voice. ‘And that’s not even taking into account the legal...’

‘But Vincent, if you think you *knew* my father, then you’re *wrong*.’ Vincent goes to talk again but Josh shouts. ‘Vincent, shut the fuck up.’

He flings a pebble across the table at him, so wildly that it goes wide, hurtling over Justine’s head. It’s a clumsy action, so clumsy she knows it’s entirely meant.

Vincent flinches; they all flinch. Josh gets up from the sofa.

‘You didn’t know my father.’

Another pebble, going wide on the other side of him.

She’s saying his name, but he’s not listening.

‘You counted his money for him. You knew the inside of his bank account, his wallet, the state of his trouser pockets, but up here’ – he knocks his balled fists either side of his head – ‘you knew nothing about who he was. So I will not’ – a pebble in the direction of Gabriella, who’s up and moving towards him, another one thrown lengthways down the room so it hits the doors to the hallway. She only hears the clatter of them now, the chip and thack of stone against glass, against wood, against plaster.

Everyone's on their feet now, Vincent stepping towards him, Josh stepping back, the last pebbles leave his hand in one wild swipe that sends them skittering over the floor, over the kitchen counter. One of them, finally, hits Vincent, who has his arm up to protect his face.

'If you had an aesthetic fucking cell in your body,' Josh is yelling. 'If you had an ounce of understanding or love for my father ...'

But Vincent has his hands on him, pinning his arms to his side. He is shaking, her boy, his mouth working, making spit. All three of them are on him, by the doors out to the veranda, all of them shouting. She's telling Vincent to let go of him, Vincent saying things to Josh she can't or won't hear, she only wants them apart.

In the end it is Gabriella who gets him outside, and she is left with Vincent.

He is livid, his face a strange mottling of red and grey. He throws his arm out at them outside, the action makes him cough.

'How are we supposed to deal with this behaviour? It's like dealing with a ten-year-old child.'

'He *is* a child, Vincent, give or take.'

She turns him from the window, brings him back into the room.

'Vincent, come. Come. He's upset. Think how long he's held onto this.'

'Exactly. He's happy keeping it to himself when it's his special secret, but now that other people are in on it he wants to blow the whole thing sky-high. It's pathetic.'

She's listening to him talk, but really she's intent on Josh, outside. He's leaned himself on the railing, bowed over it, his arms pushed over it, his hands hidden by his body. Gabriella is in a chair, sat sideways on to him, her hand up and resting in the small of his back.

She is talking, but he gives no sign of heeding her. Physical exertion is so tiring for him, Justine knows. She's listening to Vincent, then, and watching Josh, but all the

time she's thinking about Randall, in the video, leaning in to squint at the canvas, and talking to Josh, telling him where to put the paint. Holding out the phone to him.

She turns to Vincent. 'I want what you want, Vincent, but we've just got to tread so carefully. Think about it from his point of view. The importance to him of all this.'

'Well, obviously.'

'And, really, we do need to go back to the studio, think about what it is we're dealing with. Take our time.'

'Take our time. Exactly.'

'Vincent, listen to me. I don't know *what* I think about the paintings. But if Randall wanted them shown, then we have to do it, now.' She gestures with her arm.

'Now' means all of this: Josh, the film, Gabriella. 'We can make it work, if it comes to that. If we take it step by step.' His look now is blank, an interrogation. It's her use of the word 'we', she thinks, the word 'it'. He wants her to repeat herself, to empty out her words like you empty out a handbag for a security guard at the airport, to show what they contain. Her hand is on his arm and she's trying to make her look answer his question, to make it stand as surety for what she hopes is true belief. That it – we, they – can work, whatever.

Then she catches a movement behind him and it's Gabriella, standing now, a signal to come out. Justine slides open the door and steps out. He is still facing out towards the ocean, hands thrust into the pockets of his hoodie. Gabriella's look says he is calm again. The day is progressing, the grey cloud dissipated to let through a dry glare. A breeze drifts across the decking, setting a lantern spinning on its wire.

Josh turns and looks around at them. They are reconvened, in a manner. Vincent in the doorway, half in, half out, where Josh had stood this morning, an hour ago.

'Josh,' she says, and as she talks she's after her voice, trying to slip the leash of compassion around it, but the effort to make it convincing seems to drain it of any truth.

Her throat mangles everything that comes out through it. ‘Josh, come here. We can sort this out.’

There is something that might be a nod, might be a shrug. She puts her hand on his shoulder, so they are embracing, but loosely. His one hand bunched in his pocket, the other brought out to lay flat around her waist. He pats her on her side, above her hip. A familiar gesture, almost one of commiseration, as if to apologise for the fact that this is the only intimacy left to them.

‘It’s just that fucker,’ he says, nodding calmly across the decking at Vincent. Then he checks himself. ‘I mean. No. I don’t mean that. I’m not trying to be offensive. It’s just, you guys have all the control. And this is something I’ve got, from him, and I don’t see why you all get to dictate what happens to my Dad.’ And he disengages himself, scrapes out a chair and sits at the table. He takes his hand out of his pocket. In it is his phone. He checks the screen and then puts it on the table in front of him.

‘He *trusted* him, Josh. That’s why he wanted him as a trustee.’

‘Not enough to tell him what he was doing, obviously.’

She sits down too. Vincent remains where he is, happy, for the moment, to be spoken of as if he’s not here.

‘He didn’t trust any of us enough for that.’

‘He trusted me.’

‘Of course. He trusted you not to tell. That doesn’t mean you alone get to decide what happens to them, Josh. We just need to take things slowly.’

‘Take things slowly. It’s funny. You all keep saying that.’

‘These paintings, Josh. The thing to remember is that, at the moment, we are in control. The moment we put them out there, we lose control of them. The world will take over, and the world will not necessarily want what we want.’

Then a thrum and a thrill.

It's Josh's phone, drumming on the wooden slats. But he doesn't answer it. Instead, he stays sitting in his chair and says, 'It's for you.'

She leans forward and look at the name on the display.

She picks it up and presses to answer.

'Larry,' she says.

'Oh. Justine. Hi. This is Joshua's phone, right? I just got this text.'

There's a sound and she looks round. It's a chair, that Vincent has just kicked over, spilling a plant pot and scattering tea lights. He goes in through the sliding door, spitting words and banging the glass with his hand as he goes so it wobbles.

'Yes. This is his phone.'

'Is everything okay? He said there's something I've got to see. It's got to do with Randall, I take it?'

'Yes, Larry, it's to do with Randall.'

And she talks on, and her voice sounds more real to her, disappearing into the clever little vortex of the phone, than at any other time over the last week. She takes care not to look at Josh, or at Gabriella. She keeps her voice sweetly neutral. She tells the phone a day, and a time, and the address, and the clever phone tells them to Larry, and then he's saying something else, the phone's telling her something else, but she puts it down on the table, still talking away, but tinnier now, more distant, and she slides it with a push towards Josh. He is talking, too, but she ignores him and gets up and walks into the house.

Vincent's not in the lounge, nor the kitchen. She calls his name and goes through to the hall and along into the bedroom and out into the Japanese garden where, to judge by the gate standing open at the far end, he just was. She takes the round stones laid in sequence across the gravel, with its widening and intersecting circles, and past the flat

silent pond to the gate, and she goes out through that and along the side of the house to the path down to the beach.

She goes past the back door and glances up through the section of slatted fence where you can see onto the decking, but it is empty.

She breaches the crest of the dune and there he is, walking past the remains of last night's fire. She walks faster, her feet slipping on the slope, feeling the sand creep in over the tops of her shoes. She wants to call his name, but something stops her.

He's stopped now, down at the water's edge, there where it laces the sand in wide shallow arcs, that loop on, without interruption, in either direction. And he stands, his hands by his sides, looking out towards the particular nothing that the ocean holds somewhere within itself. She follows his gaze, as she comes below the high water mark, to where the sand is firm and still half-wet, and the thought comes back to her, like an echo, or a long-delayed message, bouncing across the waves: that we made it here, together, to the far shore, we pilgrims. Not in the manner that any one of us would have suspected, but all the same.

'Hey,' she calls, and again, 'Hey.'

He turns and they stand there, with only the wind between them, and the sound of the waves, that shushing sound they make, that is the sound of them depositing each tiny delivery of sand, and then the scraping sound, as they claw back the next.

He rubs at his eye and he laughs, a dry, rueful, half-hollow laugh.

'What's so funny?' she says, although clearly there's nothing funny.

He shrugs, as if in recognition of that fact.

And he says, 'What's so funny is that I've just worked it out.'

'What?'

'That big painting, the one in the video that you couldn't place.'

'Yes?'

‘The one with everyone fucking everyone else, in a big circle.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve just realised where he put it.’

THE END

SECTION TWO: Beyond Ekphrasis: The
Role and Function of Artworks in the
Novels of Don DeLillo

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

I. The first time I laid eyes...

The first time I laid eyes on a Damien Hirst was... Well, no. This isn't that kind of essay. If there is a narrative to be written of my relationship with the Young British Artists, their art and their particular cultural moment, then it is already there, implicitly, in my novel, *Randall, or The Painted Grape*. In that text I attempted to marry the excitement and engagement that I felt on emerging into adulthood in the London of the early 1990s and finding them and their art ready and waiting for me, with my later sense of disillusion and critical distancing, while giving full recognition to both views, both moments.

My primary model for this push-me-pull-you of evocation and critique, nostalgia and disavowal, was Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, from which I also took the make-up of my narrator-protagonist double act: the well-meaning dolt (Zeitblom/Vincent) who in writing the biography of his great friend (Leverkühn/Randall) is all too aware of the pathos of his situation: he wants to pay tribute to genius, while knowing his attempt will fall necessarily, pitifully, short. Finally from this novel came a model of how to treat, textually, the artist's work, in that Zeitblom describes and discusses Leverkühn's works not only as if they were real, but as if they were likely to be known to any reader cultured enough to reading his book, a book that was, for him, non-fiction.

The difference between Randall's and Leverkühn's art forms, however, gave rise to an idle thought; which is where the trajectory of this essay begins to unfold. The thought was this: that as Randall's artwork, as a Young British Artist, was broadly conceptual in nature, might not its treatment, and its status, in the novel be fundamentally different to – not Leverkühn's works precisely, for he was a composer, but for instance

the paintings of Gulley Jimson in Cary's *The Horse's Mouth*, or Claude Lantier in Zola's *The Masterpiece*? If conceptual art, in contrast to the traditional plastic arts, prioritises the critical idea of the work over its execution and final form, then any textual description of it will likewise differ in its approach, methods, effects and reception (See Lippard, 1973).

As a result of this might I not, through my description and discussion of Randall's artworks, be capable of bringing them that much more fully before the mind of the reader than if they were traditional paintings or sculpture? At the furthest extreme, following those works of conceptual art that exist as text only,¹ might not my description of a fictional (in critical terms, 'notional') artwork, especially when bolstered with the critical discussion that grew up around it, be *nothing less than* the artwork? The test of the novel then would be that the notional artworks described in it become real enough that the reader experiences them as they would a 'real' conceptual artwork in a traditional art encounter, in a gallery or wherever – or certainly as read about in a newspaper review, for instance, where they had not actually seen or encountered the piece.²

From this giddily hubristic thought I turned to the critical literature, to see how theories of the representation of art in fiction have changed in line with the historical developments in art, especially since modernism, and if they stretched as far as to allow my theory of artistic reification, whereby the *description* of an artwork *becomes* the artwork – or rather, the experience of reading that description becomes, for the reader, the *experience of* the artwork. This largely comes down to theories of ekphrasis, and

¹ E.g. works by Sol Lewitt, Richard Long, Joseph Kosuth etc, as discussed in Meyer (1972) and Godfrey (1998).

² As, for instance, Lessing in his *Laocoon*, includes the text of Jacopo Sadoletto's ekphrastic poem on the subject of the titular sculpture "[in] the place of an engraving" (Lessing, 1957: 207) – although the discontinuity of this remark with the positions taken in the rest of the essay has been remarked on, not least by Baxandall, for whom it is "best taken as a joke". (Baxandall, 2003: 110)

parts of this essay therefore might seem like a one-sided wrestling match with these various theories, to see if they do what I want them to do in terms of explicating the role and function of artwork in fiction – and interrogate them as to why they ignore novelistic ekphrasis.

The risk of such an endeavour is clear: that I might find myself trying to write from scratch a wholesale theory of ekphrasis, in a space that simply could not contain the extent and depth of argument needed to do so. My remedy came in specification. Of the novels about art and artists that I had read in parallel to my own writing, I found myself drawn particularly to those of Don DeLillo, which abound in art and artists of all types. In them there are: paintings (still life and abstract); photographs; screen prints; video artworks; films; performance artworks; landscape art; not to mention poetry, prose and music. The artworks are, variously: figurative and conceptual; temporal and atemporal; narrative and non-narrative. Some are presented once, in the ‘set piece description’ traditionally associated with ekphrasis, some recurrently. Sometimes the creating artist is a character in the book, sometimes not. Finally, some are actual (artworks that exist outside of the novel), some notional (invented by the author), and some hypothetical even within the world of the novel.

This essay, then, is the product of parallel readings: of looking at three recent novels by DeLillo (*The Body Artist*, *Falling Man* and *Point Omega*) with books treating theories of ekphrasis open beside them; and of looking at those critical writings (Krieger, Heffernan, W. Steiner et al) with DeLillo’s texts in mind.³ At times, then, what follows may seem like a polemical attack on existing theories of ekphrasis, and at others the beginnings of a study of DeLillo’s aesthetics. It has, however, neither the scope nor the intention to be fully either one of these things, but aims instead to suggest ways of

³ The rationale for focusing on just three of DeLillo’s novels, when so many others could, on the face of it, be equally pertinent to my argument (especially *Mao II* and *Underworld*) is largely to do with the length of the thesis, and the close reading needed to bring out my arguments; I hope to be able to expand my thoughts on the use of the artworks in the whole of DeLillo’s oeuvre in the future.

reading artworks in fiction – especially contemporary art, contemporary fiction – (and of *using* them: I write this essay very much as a novelist swapping one set of tools for another) that differ from those put forward by theories of ekphrasis, that traditionally have concentrated on older forms of art, and most often on poetry, not prose.

II The problem of ekphrasis

The question of the use, role and function of artworks in literature generally resolves, in the field of literary theory, to a single topic: that of ekphrasis, a term which finds its most cogent contemporary definition in James W. Heffernan's "verbal representation of a visual representation" (Heffernan, 1993: 3), but which, were it to accommodate all the various uses to which it has been put since antiquity, would surely be stretched to the point of formlessness.⁴

Despite the number and variety of its uses and definitions – and it is defined as much ostensibly as intentionally, as much by the canon it builds as by the rules according to which it builds it – one feature stands out: that it applies first and foremost to poetry.

Theories of ekphrasis, by and large, ignore the novel, ignore prose, no matter that they go back to the epic poetry of Virgil and Homer for some of their earliest and most fundamental examples, a form that has as much in common with the novel as we now understand it as with the lyric poems of Keats, Williams and Ashbery that give the theorists their more recent examples.

Of the most recent wave of writers about ekphrasis, Murray Krieger (1992), Willard Spiegelman (2005) and Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux (2008) concern themselves explicitly and specifically with poetry; Heffernan states, of his book, that

⁴ For an overview of the distinction between classical meanings of the term (where it was a rhetorical trope applied to any subject matter) and narrower modern meanings, that congregate around the inclusion of a work of art as subject of the ekphrastic description, see the entry on ekphrasis in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Hollander, 2013).

“except for its discussion of the ancient Greek novel, it has nothing to say about ekphrasis in fiction”, a silence that goes unexplained (Heffernan, 1993: 8), while Stephen Cheeke does “stretch the subject [in terms of] what we are actually prepared to think of ekphrastic writing” (Cheeke, 2009: 7) to include a short final chapter on prose ekphrasis, although this considers only non-fiction instances of art-writing.

Of the writers who do properly consider ekphrasis in the novel, Wendy Steiner gives a chapter on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* in her book *Pictures of Romance* (1988), and Margaret Anne Doody accepts it as a natural proposition in *The True Story of the Novel* (1998), a book not in the ‘Sister Arts’ tradition, but instead concerned with tracing a lineage from the modern novel back not just to the epic poem, but to a generally critically ignored ‘ancient novel’.

Perhaps as a result of this critical tendency to prioritise poetry, there is a second blind spot common to these theories of ekphrasis: that when they think of the *subject* of ekphrasis, i.e. that which the text tries to represent, they think most often of figurative visual art: of paintings, and of paintings of people, places or things.

Certainly, this caveat is more easily rebutted than the prejudice against prose, in that figurative art is by definition representational art; Heffernan, for one, insists upon it through his “verbal representation of a visual representation”. Nevertheless, others of the available theories can’t be said to exclude non-figurative, even non-visual art, yet still by and large they ignore the historical movement in the visual arts, broadly since the advent of modernism, away from representation to abstraction, and through that to conceptualism. This absence is even more striking when you consider that it is precisely that movement that throws into question some of the fundamental tenets of the ekphrastic tradition – specifically, the limits of what words and images can do.

Exceptions to this tendency include Wendy Steiner, again, in *The Colors of Rhetoric* (1982), and Spiegelman, who offers a “sampling of the very few ekphrastic

poems about Abstract Expressionist or non-representational painting made by American poets in the past fifty years.” (Spiegelman, 2005: 112) Indeed, Spiegelman offers a possible explanation of why there are so few poems about non-representational art: “Poets prefer paintings of people, landscapes, people within landscapes, or still lifes. (So do critics.) We look for works to look *at* in which we can see ourselves and to which we can pose questions of identity.” (Spiegelman, 2005: 129) It is my contention that non-representational art offers just as many opportunities for us to see ourselves and question our identities as representational art, and that we can do this (as readers and writers) equally through novelistic as poetic ekphrasis.

So while I am happy to take Heffernan’s definition as the starting point for this or any discussion of ekphrasis (not to ignore what went before, but that it offers a useful entry-point, whichever way you are facing) and while it is compelling for the fertile readings it produces of individual poems, he makes no convincing argument for the exclusion of ekphrases of non- or post-representational art. This would be fine if his theory confined itself strictly to that element of the artwork that does in fact represent in a purely pictorial sense, but many of his readings (such as those of poems by William Carlos Williams and John Ashbery) implicitly recognise that ekphrastic writing does far more than this, the simple showing in words what the picture shows in image. For example: the creation of the artwork, the viewer’s experience of seeing the work, and the discourse, art historical or otherwise, that surrounds it.

In fact, it is striking that most of the apparently diverse modern definitions of ekphrasis do fall under one of two subsets: those that take a narratological approach, and see ekphrasis primarily as *a specialised or heightened form of description* – and thus fundamentally a check to the narrative momentum – and are not much fussed what the description is of; and those that take an aesthetic approach, and see ekphrasis primarily as *concerned with an artwork*, in ways that, although they usually begin with a

description of it, quickly move into other, non-descriptive areas, including details of its manufacture or creation, hermeneutics, and expression or translation: speaking for the work, or a character depicted in it.⁵

Cheeke, although he explicitly takes Heffernan's narratologically-minded definition as his starting point, is open to more aesthetic approaches, talking in his introduction of the distinction between an "object or content-oriented approach" to aesthetics on the one hand, and an "affect-oriented" one on the other, the first "concentrating on what the work is *about* as distinct from what reaction the work produces in a viewer" (Cheeke, 2009: 3). I would argue that you can hardly have one without the other, that the representation of content is always *presented* through the filter of affect, and indeed Cheeke later writes that "the act of describing art is always an act of interpretation" (2009: 19).

There are two, linked, consequences of this concentration, in writings on ekphrasis, on poetry: firstly the tendency to accept the removal, or abstraction, of the artwork from its real-world context, either partially, through the trope of the gallery encounter, or more fully, lifting it out of the physical world for an idealised encounter in the timeless time and spaceless space of Malraux's 'Museum without walls' (into, in fact, Heffernan's 'Museum of Words'); and secondly the *paragonal* stance towards the artwork that the theories tend to find in the poetry, that sets up the two art forms as rivals, each trying to outdo the other, encroach on the other's turf.

The question of the encounter with the artwork is a pertinent one. The trajectory of ekphrastic poetry since its earliest beginnings has been intimately linked to the contexts in which people see or encounter art; in particular it has seen a great blossoming

⁵ The first of these two is, after all, is the original meaning of the term. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1996) has it as "an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary" and quotes the *Progymnasmata* of Hermogenes: "There are *ekphraseis* of faces and objects and places and ages and many other things."

in response to the democratisation of art that came with the age of public museums and galleries, in which ‘great’ art is available to all, and in which art-encounters, and the museum itself, co-opt, or inherit, elements of the sacred, albeit as commodified by Adorno and Horkheimer’s ‘Culture Industry’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). This improved access to art, together with the increased ease of its reproducibility, latterly expanded exponentially by the internet, has clearly affected all manner of ekphrastic writing.

Indeed, Heffernan cites this cultural development as part of the explanation for the evolution of ekphrasis from its original status as “incidental adjunct” to the classical epic to that of “self-sufficient whole” in the lyric poem (Heffernan, 1993: 137):

Essentially, the poem focusing on a single work of art – on the single moment captured by a single painting – is a late product of the long process by which serialized depiction and narrative painting gave way to the unitemporal record of a momentary perception (139)

This is a distinction which would make more sense if poetry were the only art form in which ekphrasis were possible, the only art form, in fact, to have evolved from the epic poetry where, in the aesthetic as opposed to rhetorical formulation of ekphrasis, it began.

Clearly, the novel has been exposed to the same social, cultural and artistic changes as has the poem; it is just as full of paintings, painters, museums and galleries – sometimes those paintings, and art works, are treated as ‘incidental adjuncts’, but other times not. In *The True Story of the Novel* Doody makes looking at pictures one of seven “tropes of the Novel” (Doody, 1998: 304), types of narrative moment that “focus meaning, allow meaning to flow through” (305) and which, through study, allow us to see the “deep rhetoric” (304) of the form.⁶ They are similar to Lacan’s *points de capiton*, ‘anchoring’ or ‘attachment’ points that act to ensure the minimum of slippage between

⁶ The others are: Breaking and Entering; Marshes, Shores and Muddy Margins; Tomb, Cave and Labyrinth; Eros; Dreams and Food; and The Goddess.

signifier and signified, i.e. that allow the maximum possible solidity and specificity of meaning. However, Doody's "tropic moments" are important not just diachronically, in the abstract space of the text, but in its synchronic, narratological extension, too. They are to be thought of as "ritual acts or observances" or "special places sought out in the journey of the pilgrim." (305) Ekphrasis is a significant example, for "in dealing with the visual icon and its meaning-ful-ness, a novel must succinctly express its own drive to meaning, and its own artifice." (388) The ekphrasis "mimes all mimesis and formalizes our love of 'form'." (396)

In Doody's examples, and more generally, the artwork in the novel can be a set piece, like an ekphrastic poem, either coming in the middle of the narrative (the frieze depicting scenes from the Trojan War at the Temple of Juno in the *Aeneid*), or acting as a prologue (*Point Omega*). It can have a function in the narrative, (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), it can be withheld for revelation (Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*). More generally, it can help integrate characters into a socio-cultural milieu, whether as artists, patrons or spectators, as in Zola's scenes in the Louvre and the Salon des Refusés in, respectively, *L'Assommoir* and *The Masterpiece*. As a set piece it can break out of the narrative to offer a mini-essay on art history or aesthetics (Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*).

The obvious difference between all these possible instances of ekphrasis in the novel and (most) instances of ekphrasis in poetry is that the ekphrastic moment in the novel is a small part of the whole: the artwork is one object of attention among many; it appears in the flow of the narrative stream, perhaps holding it up, perhaps bobbing along on it for a while, perhaps becoming submerged, only to reappear later.

In the ekphrastic poem, by contrast – and, again, by and large – the ekphrasis *is* the poem; the ekphrastic poem is wholly ekphrastic, there is nothing more of the poem outside of its ekphrasis than there is painting outside of the frame. It presents itself, like

the work encountered, as monad, and unity – in Murray Krieger’s approving phrase it “converts its chronological progression into simultaneity,” what he calls “a specially frozen moment of aesthetic time”, thus gainsaying the formalist dictate of Lessing, for whom, in the *Laocoon*, poetry is always temporal, the plastic arts atemporal (Krieger, 1992: 263-4).⁷ In this way the poem measures itself against the – naturally frozen – artwork in a manner that would seem to increase the tension of the paragonal stand-off (to which I will return): not only that the poem *can do* anything the painting can do just as well, in its own medium, but that it *is as* the painting is, too.

Wendy Steiner is less sanguine about the possibility of what she calls this “simultaneous synthesis” (W. Steiner, 1982: 40) of the temporal art object (poem, sentence, melody... she doesn’t specifically mention novel), calling the “still-moment” poem a “humble and conservative topos” which can only ever aspire a “limited and figurative [...] overcoming of temporality” (46). It is, in other words, a gesture towards the impossibility of what W.J.T. Mitchell (1997) calls *ekphrastic hope*, rather than its fulfilment; as such it makes ekphrasis a noble, if not necessarily worthwhile endeavour.⁸

The difference between the poem and the novel is not that one achieves, or attempts, synthesis and the other doesn’t, but that the novel more accurately mimics how we do create meaning in life, even in our art encounters: not in the splendid, isolated and transcendent moment, but incrementally, haphazardly, over time. Although there may be ‘still moments’ of ekphrasis in a novel, just as we may stand in front of a painting in a gallery for the requisite four seconds, or however long it is, nevertheless the ‘art encounter’ stretches out on either side of it – our ‘reading’ of the work is more extended,

⁷ Adorno defines the artwork-as-monad as “an immanent, crystallized process at a standstill” while also stressing that “the thesis of the monadological character of artworks is as true as it is problematic.” (Adorno, 2004: 237)

⁸ Mitchell defines a three-stage attitude towards the possibility of ekphrasis, i.e. of words successfully standing for images. They are ekphrastic indifference (it cannot be done), hope (it can be done) and fear (it can be done, but should not be). W. Steiner, therefore, would seem to be of the third camp, patting the poet on the head for even attempting what all right-thinking people know is impossible. (Mitchell, 1997: 152)

and less focused, than our ‘perception’ of it. This does not mean that the textual ekphrasis is any less a potential site of meaning, but that novelistic ekphrasis allows for the possibility of that meaning being deferred and dispersed, as it is in real-world art-encounters, of the pay-off coming later, if at all. As Doody has it:

The public display of cultural images stirs anxiety in us. Yet it may stir in us also a (perhaps unreasonable) deferred optimism about the possibility of eventual understanding – even though the encounter may thoroughly display our own (as well as the characters’) consistent inadequacy in interpretation. (Doody, 1998: 396)

For Doody, however, the appearance in the text of a novelistic ekphrasis does more than pause the flow of narrative time, as it does in traditional, poetry-oriented theories; it alters the manner of our reading, tuning it to a particular cultural wavelength, or mode of reception.⁹ Again, this is something that happens too in ekphrastic poems, but there the cultural pitch is a given, set in place more often than not by the poem’s title: we orient ourselves with regards to the poem as we would to a work in a gallery, we come to it with our aesthetic expectancy fully primed. In novelistic ekphrasis – and, again, this is something peculiar to this form of the mode, or device – the change, the gear-change, comes, for Doody, mid-narrative:

The reader’s own creativity receives a check at the point at which the internal work of art is introduced. What seemed to have been a private transaction of imagination between the novelist and myself is now borne upward to the public realm. We think of the external world. We remember (in novels old or new) public places for display of images: the church or temple, the artist’s studio. There is an external check on our own imagination, as we realize that all readers are required here to image the same thing. The overt icon stresses our group-sense, calls upon us to remember our shared history, legends, and meanings; we cannot stray as we are wont to do in the delicious field of private imaginings. (Doody, 1998: 398)

⁹ This is most fully explored in Krieger (1992), for whom ekphrasis is “a device intended to interrupt the temporality of discourse, to freeze it during its indulgence in spatial exploration.” (7)

This gear change in the reader's interaction with the novel, from privately-shared creative reverie *à deux* to public, cultured attention (we sit up straight, brace the book in our hands, just as, in a gallery, we shift our weight onto one foot and tilt our head just so), and the distinction between the decontextualised art-encounter prevalent in ekphrastic poems and the more embedded encounter in the novelistic narrative, are features that I will consider in the first of three readings of individual novels by Don DeLillo, starting with *Falling Man*.

In the second, on *Point Omega*, I will concentrate on the critical attitude taken in the ekphrastic encounter towards the art form more generally – rather than what is specifically represented in the work treated. Poetry-oriented theories of ekphrasis so often insist on a paragonal or confrontational relationship between verbal and visual art. Heffernan, following Mitchell, sees this relationships as gendered: “a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space” (Heffernan, 1993: 1).

To my mind, this characterisation does a disservice to the manner in which the novel treats the represented art work. It is a paradox that in addressing or praising the work the traditional ekphrastic poem places itself in opposition to it, even subjugates it (even when that is done by putting it on a pedestal) by means of placing it in a particular frame of reference and so, implicitly, containing and constraining it.

That representation has a political dimension (an MP, in representing his or her constituents, replaces and effaces them in the political process) is a central tenet of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which they state that “the capacity of representation is the measure of domination” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: 34). For them representation, as a form of mimesis, has degraded from an original innocence, in which the primitive shaman “imitates demons [...] in order to frighten

them or appease them” (9) to a sophisticated and repressive activity, which they characterise as false projection:

Mimesis imitates the environment, but false projection makes the environment like itself [...] Impulses which the subject will not admit as his own even though they are most assuredly so, are attributed to the object – the prospective victim.” (187)

The extreme example of this is the definition of ekphrasis that sees it as speaking for the painting, or a character or object within it, where ‘giving voice’ has all the controlling sense of Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*.

Doody, who does concern herself with ekphrasis in the novel, sees this hierarchical relationship there too: “The possibility that the work of the graphic artist is being compared to – and always subsumed by – the work of the novelist seems inherent in the trope” (Doody, 1998: 398). However, this is not the relationship that I see in DeLillo’s novels. Rather than measuring themselves against, interpreting and speaking for the art work, I would suggest that DeLillo’s novels *borrow, adapt and make use of* what they find in the art works they represent, and in so doing leave the originals intact, untouched, stable in their own context. Lessing suggests that, with regards to their differences under the universal laws of beauty, “poetry can come to the aid of painting [and] painting to the aid of poetry” (Lessing, 1957: vii-viii).

It is this spirit of collaboration (absent from the rest of Lessing’s essay, which is seen as giving birth to the paragonal interpretation of ekphrasis), expressed also in the *ut pictura poesis* of Horace, with its drawing of correspondences and analogies between the different forms, that I see in the relationship between novel and artwork, rather than the paragonal one of the ekphrastic poem – all the while keeping in mind that this ‘collaboration’ is necessarily a one-sided one, perhaps closer to benign co-option.

Michael Davidson points a possible way forward in his essay ‘Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem’ (quoted in Heffernan, 1993), where he differentiates between

the “classical” and “painterly” poem: the latter, rather than merely trying to imitate or copy the image, “activates strategies of composition equivalent to but not dependent on the painting itself. Instead of pausing at a reflective distance from the work of art, the poet reads the painting as a text, rather than a static object, or else reads the larger painterly aesthetic generated by the painting” (Heffernan, 1993: 2). This is a process that I see at work in *Point Omega*, where that reading starts from a mimetic position, attempting to represent in words what the work does in its own medium (here, a video installation), but then goes on to interrogate the work and borrow elements from it for its own narrative purposes. The ekphrasis continues, in sublimated form, in what follows; the experience of seeing – or of having seen – the artwork is repeatedly evoked, and in fact it returns at the end of the narrative.

The final chapter of this essay, on DeLillo’s *The Body Artist*, looks at another possible relationship between notional artwork and novel, where the novel as a whole is an evocation of a work that is nowhere fully represented in the text, but, by its end, is revealed as its true subject, and is brought before the mind as wholly as if the whole text had been an extensive ekphrasis of it, in all its dimensions: the creation of the artwork, the viewer’s experience of seeing the work, the discourse and meanings surrounding it.

This ‘reverse ekphrasis’, while nowhere attempted so fully in my own novel, I see as a close approximation of my original ‘hubristic’ gambit: that a conceptual artwork – or the experience of the reader’s encounter with it – can be made present through ekphrasis in a way that most closely fulfils Mitchell’s idea of ekphrastic hope.

III The artist in the novel – a diversion

Reading novels about artists it is striking, firstly how often artists and their art are depicted satirically, which can be an evasion of critical responsibility; and, secondly, and

more broadly, how often the work of art is presented as a corollary or symptom of the character of the artist that made them. Artists feature in novels not because they create art, but because they behave badly. (“Tell me this. What kind of painter is allowed to behave more unspeakably, figurative or abstract?” DeLillo, 2007: 13)

This habit of seeding artworks in the narrative merely as evidence of the character of the artist, a spore or trace that allows us to make inferences about him or her, is countered by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* (2004), where he says: “Artworks are not *Thematic Apperception Tests* of their makers” and argues for a psychology of art that would “decipher the artwork not just being like the artist but as being unlike as well, as labor on a reality resisting the artist.” (Adorno: 2004: 11) My readings of DeLillo’s novels will be made with this application in mind.

Concern over the subjugation of the work of art to the personality of the artist of course has parallels in literary theory, from T.S. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1955) to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ (2010), but my argument with it is rather to do with the opportunity it squanders to connect seriously with the art in question. While Doody disparages the idea of the artist-character speaking or standing for the author, or for creativity in general, as “false Romanticism”, she does approve of the reader reading through the specific artwork to the form and all art in general: “It seems more important to notice the extent to which the idea of the paintings, the hard overt graphic *form*, makes us concentrate on the formal.” (Doody, 1998: 398)

As George Steiner says in the first part of *Real Presences*: “All serious art, music and literature is a *critical act*” (G. Steiner, 1991: 11) and while it would be foolish to suggest that all novels that feature artworks should engage critically with those works and the aesthetic theories they embody, this is at least a place to develop a serious debate about aesthetics outside of the academic and art-critical sphere.

CHAPTER TWO: Falling Man

Falling Man (2007) addresses two particular questions relating to artworks: the situating of the viewing character's encounter with the work within the narrative world of the novel; and the ethics and etiquette of representation, especially when the artwork deals with traumatic events – in *Falling Man*, the attack on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001, which it takes as its subject.

Falling Man is not so full of art, artists and artworks as others of DeLillo's novels. Its two significant instances are: a selection of works hung in the Upper East Side apartment of Nina, the elderly mother of Lianne, one half of the novel's central couple; and a performance artist, known as Falling Man, who throws himself unannounced off structures in New York, held only by a rope and harness, bringing to mind the people who threw themselves to their deaths from the towers after the planes hit. Lianne happens across two of his performances and, in the book's final section, set three years after 9/11, reads his obituary in the newspaper.

Thus the art-encounters in the novel occur within two very different contexts: the daily encounter with the owned artwork in the private sphere; and the shock intrusion of the artwork into public life: art as domestic (domesticated) presence, that may be sought out and engaged at will, and art that forces itself into your consciousness, insisting on its significance above and beyond the constant bombardment of sense data in the contemporary metropolis.

Of the works in Nina's apartment DeLillo specifies only three, all gifts to her from her lover, the German art dealer Martin Ridnour. Firstly, a collection of antique passport photos of persons unknown, that are interesting only really in that they echo the profiles of the dead of 9/11 that became such an important part of the coverage of the event, and which Lianne reads in the newspaper (DeLillo, 2007: 68), and also in that

they have an uncertain status *as* artworks (“aged documents, stamped and faded, history measured in inches, and also beautiful” (FM, 46)).¹⁰ Secondly, and more centrally, a pair of still lives by Italian artist Giorgio Morandi – which allows us to qualify the nature of that first, domestic art-encounter: not just the daily engagement with the owned artwork, but with ‘significant’ owned artworks by a ‘major’ international artist.

The function of these two paintings in the novel, or one of them in particular, is made clear when Martin stands before them, and exclaims:

"I'm looking at these objects, kitchen objects but removed from the kitchen, free of the kitchen, the house, everything practical and functioning. And I must be back in another time zone. I must be even more disoriented than usual after a long flight," he said, pausing. "Because I keep seeing the towers in this still life."

Lianne joined him at the wall. The painting in question showed seven or eight objects, the taller ones set against a brushy slate background. The other items were huddled boxes and biscuit tins, grouped before a darker background. The full array, in unfixed perspective and mostly muted colors, carried an odd spare power.

They looked together.

Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to.

"What do you see?" he said.

She saw what he saw. She saw the towers. (FM: 49)

Martin reads the painting as a symbolic representation of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, a symbolism all the more moving for its being necessarily unintended (Morandi died in 1964) and for its discovery in the quiet, resolutely private and non-political genre of the still life.

Importantly, though, the paintings are introduced only gradually into the novel, in stages, before this reading of them occurs. Firstly, there is an early, general reference to the art in the apartment (“Her mother’s apartment was not far from Fifth Avenue, with art on

¹⁰ Further references to *Falling Man* in this chapter will be given as page numbers only, with the label FM.

the walls, painstakingly spaced, and small bronze pieces on table and bookshelves.” (FM: 8)). Soon after, the Morandi paintings are mentioned by Lianne as something that she loves about her mother’s apartment, and described, the description seeming to carry within it the seeds of her and Martin’s later reading of it. She says that “there was something in the brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name”:

Natura Morta. The Italian term for still life seemed stronger than it had to be, somewhat ominous even, but these were matters she hadn’t talked about with her mother. Let the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment. (FM: 12)

Here DeLillo is setting up the paintings as a site for meaning, specifically an “ominous” one. He is using in his ekphrasis – and the later one, with its “dark and somber”, its “smoky marks and smudges” – specific words, and introducing concepts, which can be applied, or which reverberate, elsewhere in the novel. Even the specification that the paintings are hung on the apartment’s north wall carries an echo of the attack itself. There is the common designation of the two towers as north and south, and the word is there in the second sentence of the novel (“He was walking north through rubble and mud” (FM: 3)); and two pages on it is specifically attached to the fall of the second tower: “He heard the sound of the second fall, or felt it in the trembling air, the north tower coming down.” (FM: 5).

The book opens in the immediate, chaotic aftermath of the attack, yet it is only really in the description of the paintings that the towers become present – are represented – as they would have been, in most people’s experience, prior to the attack, and would continue to be, in memory, after it: as a more or less distant and discrete yet integral element in the New York skyline. Arguably, it is their appearance in the paintings, too, that allows us to see the towers symbolised elsewhere in the novel, for instance in the twin stacks of poker chips built by Keith Neudecker’s poker buddy Terry for the winner and

loser of their high-low games: “He did not want columns so high they might topple. He did not want columns that looked alike.” (FM: 128)¹¹

This seeding of meaning in an artwork prior to its appearance and eventual exegesis – the creation of immanence, or, to use DeLillo’s word, latency – is something I will return to in my discussion of *The Body Artist*. In terms of my current argument, however, what is worth noting is the extension of the treatment of the artwork before and after the description of it: its foreshadowing (“a forewarning, the way you know something before you perceive it directly” – this is Lianne identifying the Falling Man before she has seen him, from the reactions of the crowds watching him (FM: 160)) and its echoing reverberations, and also that this is something unavailable to any theory which concentrates on the ekphrasis as bounded set-piece, the single, simple ekphrastic poem or moment; that sees ekphrasis as something that only happens in the frozen moment of narrative stasis.

However, while this gradual drawing out of the works’ meaning, from invisibility into the clear light of articulated commentary, suits the narrative strategy of the novel, it also maps an understanding of how we tend to interact with artworks in general. Art is not taken in at a single, comprehensive viewing, made with recourse to a fully articulated set of aesthetic principles, and an art-historical knowledge assimilated and ready for application. The phenomenological processes of ‘retention’ and ‘protention’ that Wendy Steiner discusses in *The Colors of Rhetoric*, that allow us to retain and predict elements in a sequence (i.e. the internal structure of the temporal artwork), extend beyond our

¹¹ High-low is a version of poker where the winner’s pot is shared between the players with the best and worst hands, rather than going in its entirety to the best hand. Given that half the members of the weekly poker game were killed in the World Trade Centre attack this is a pointed and multivalent, though wonderfully unstressed analogy, proof that it is not just artworks that DeLillo uses for inserting prompts for reading and decoding the themes of his books, that ekphrasis forms part of a wider strategy of signification and construction.

encounter with that artwork, in both directions; the artwork itself is part of a larger cultural sequence, within which it floats.¹²

Nor is the work a single, unified and self-sufficient monad, eternal and unchanging – no matter that these conditions may be sold us as the ideal encounter, as if every time we looked at an artwork we stepped out of the flow of time and life into the rarefied non-space of the ‘Museum without walls’. Nevertheless, these are the conditions implied by the traditional ekphrastic poem: the painting is a knowable unity; the poem, another discrete unity, addresses it.¹³

In our real-life art-encounters the work is an object extended in time, and one that blurs into our consciousness through more channels than just direct sense impressions. Not just our perceptions, but also our cognitive and cultural profiles change over time – and not just develop in linear, Enlightenment-style fashion, but fluctuate, mutate, degrade. That Lianne, and Martin, and Nina, return at intervals throughout the novel to the Morandi still lives, and find different things there each time, is symptomatic of this.

In *The Sight of Death* (2006), art historian T.J. Clark documents four months spent looking, almost every day, at a pair of Poussin paintings at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The book gives the lie to the idea that an artwork, as it is apprehended, is eternal and immutable. The maiden depicted on Keats’ Grecian Urn may be forever fair in the poem’s conception of her, but not in our apprehension of her, should we by chance find ourselves looking on her, and it, in some museum. She will change, not just over the centuries, but day by day, just as the Poussins change, according to the light, and to Clark’s

¹² See W. Steiner, 1982: 36.

¹³ Krieger, in his paper ‘Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry’, stipulates this as a condition of the successfully ‘poetic’ poem: “through all sorts of repetitions, echoes, complexes of internal relations, it converts its chronological progression into simultaneity.” (Krieger, 1992: 263) There is an interesting comparison to be made here to the ‘looped narrative’, of which both *Falling Man* and *Point Omega* are, in different ways, examples. I would suggest that, rather than offering itself up as a spatial unity, as in Krieger’s formulation, the looped narrative retains its temporality, but traps the reader inside it, sending her or him back into the story, with no exit offered.

perception of them, to his mood, to what he has been, for instance, reading, thinking, seeing, eating; they offer up different aspects, different details, to the eye of the viewer.

Clark's readings, which come in diary form, minimally worked up from notes, avoid the *ex cathedra* sermonising of the polished monograph – although Clark does acknowledge that the project itself was made possible by research funding that allowed him to devote himself to this kind of passive, disinterested looking; the block of looking was an interregnum during which 'real life' was held at bay. As such, it could be seen as an extended set-piece, divorced from the 'narrative' of his life, making the book possibly the longest piece of ekphrastic prose we have. Nevertheless, Clark does make it clear that our habit of lifting our encounters with artworks out of the flow of time is erroneous:

Many of us, maybe all of us, look at some image repeatedly, but it seems we do not write that repetition, or think it, once written, worth reading by others. Maybe we deeply want to believe that images happen, essentially or sufficiently, all at once. [...] Maybe we fear that the work we depend on images to do for us – the work of immobilizing, and therefore making tolerable – will be undone if we throw the image back into the flow of time. [...] It strikes me as a poor apology for writing pictures to death, which is what most writing on art inevitably ends up doing, to have always embedded in the *form* of the narrative the (false) suggestion that once upon a time, back there and in the present, at the end and the beginning, the picture lived everlastingly here and now. (Clark, 2006: 8-9)

That "everlastingly here and now" is what Malraux's 'Museum without walls' promises us; it is assumed by ekphrastic poems down the ages: Auden in the Musée des Beaux Arts, Williams before his Brueghels. By contrast, Clark's ongoing, interrupted, repetitive rumination – his throwing of the image "back into the flow of time" – is repeated in the structure of DeLillo's book, which in its fractured, repetitive, circling trajectory returns again and again to certain paintings, certain moments, certain trains of thought.

The gesture honours not just our true relationship with artworks, but also the inarticulacy of our response to an event such as 9/11. The characters don't know what to think, so they try out thoughts; they test thoughts as spoken sentences (as Clark tests his

aesthetic hypotheses by scribbling them down as diary entries); they go back to look at the Morandis, as if to see if they can offer any further hints towards an answer. Ekphrastic writing here is a means of thinking – contingent, provisional, exploratory – where too often the ekphrasis, the verbal representation, is accompanied by (is underpinned by) the finished result of thought about the visual representation, which then goes to justify the verbal one. Each presupposes the other.

The lie of ekphrasis is that it equates the supposed atemporal stasis of the text with the supposed atemporal state of the artwork, but in doing so it traps the one within the other.¹⁴ The ekphrasis pauses the already supposedly static (but, in reality, mutable, (d)evolving, degradable) artwork, takes time out to perform its hermeneutical, its epistemological, its surgical work – silently and at its own leisurely, masterly pace – and then, unpauing the moment, unleashes its ‘objective’, considered and clarified, but always rhetorical, description on the work, as if the product of a single, imperious *oeillade*, as if the narrative extension of the art-encounter and of the text were the same.

It suggests, too, that the job of understanding the work is done, simply by virtue of the fact that the job of writing about it has been begun. (And it lies by having an ending. A painting, a photograph, a sculpture has no terminus, no sign-off, no *envoi*; it offers no gesture to the effect that you may now be done with it; something echoed by the looped, unescapable narratives of *Falling Man* and *Point Omega*.) The ekphrasis, in its textual performance, uses temporality as an unopposable weapon.

In this, it works rather like the character in Nicholson Baker’s novel *The Fermata* (1994) who has the ability to stop time and yet still operate, himself, within the paused world – an ability he uses mostly to undress women, gaze upon them and manipulate

¹⁴ “[The lyric poem] pretends to represent one now-point in its speaker’s consciousness. It is supposedly a single present, a suspended moment in the flow of time which is unified despite whatever temporal dimension it inevitably has.” (W. Steiner, 1982: 48)

their realities, always returning things (more or less) to how they were when he sets time going again. On a couple of occasions he stops time in order to write a pornographic story which he then plants such that a woman will discover it as if by chance, and then watches her reaction. It's not the undressing that I mind – traditionally analogous, after all, to the basic hermeneutical act we all perform on any artwork when we look at it and think about it (although I would hope that act is, *contra* Heffernan, gender-neutral, and available to all) – so much as the writing of the story, and the time taken to get it right. Only the most obvious moral of Baker's story is that our human interactions are only equitable so long as we all pass through time at the same rate. Similarly our art-encounters – our attempts to impose our readings and descriptions upon the works we meet in the world – are only equitable so long as we acknowledge that they, too, exist in time, change when a cloud passes in front of the sun, no less than over four centuries of incremental material deterioration, and that they are not the same at the end of a glance – or a poem – as they were at its beginning.

Clark goes each day to his Poussins; Nina hangs her Morandis on the wall. This action (so natural to the novelistic ekphrasis, so often unacknowledged by the poetical one) adds a dimension to the art-encounter. To display an artwork in your home is to put it under your control, have it at your disposal. Yet it is also (depending on where you hang it, and how you live your life) to set it as a trap for yourself, to ensure its repeated incursion into your field of perception, have it work upon you in snatches and glances, over time, rather than in one enforced block of serious, Cultural Industry-sanctioned looking. Randall in my novel comes to detest museums and galleries, and wants his pictures removed from them. He wants them to be looked at not according the rules of gallery-going, with all the four-second-glance, fact-card-oriented reductionism that that implies, but day after day. This is his thought, recalled by his friend, Vincent, and his widow, Justine (no matter that they depart from my view in this essay of the changeableness of the artwork):

‘They offered, I don’t know, a daily encounter in which the looker sets his or her interpretation, as they form it on that particular day, against the painting, which of course does not change.’

Vincent kept his gaze fixed out of the window. ‘Which is the only way to truly test the work of art. The look, contingent, impermanent, against the work, unchanging, intractable. You get it right one day, but that victory will be as nothing tomorrow.’ (Randall: 174-175)

In *Falling Man*, following her mother’s death, Lianne insists on shipping the two Morandi paintings back to Martin. Nevertheless she is later compelled to visit an exhibition of his work at a gallery, where she sees one that is a “variation” of one of her mother’s. Again, there is “something hidden in the painting”, but this time it is not the towers that the bottles and jars symbolise: “Nina’s living room was there, memory and motion. The objects in the painting faded into the figures behind them, the woman smoking in the chair, the standing man.” Then, looking at some accompanying drawings: “She was passing beyond pleasure into some kind of assimilation. She was trying to absorb what she saw, take it home, wrap it around her, sleep in it. There was so much to see. Turn it into living tissues, who you are.” (All FM: 210)

The work still contains, or suggests, or points to, meanings, but this time they are not out there, beyond it, in the world, but rather caught within the specific history of the encounters between it and the viewer. If at first the viewer mirrors the work, reflecting back the meanings found there, then soon enough the work comes to mirror the viewer.¹⁵ It reminds you of the times you’ve spent looking at it; the layers of possible signification fall

¹⁵ In her lecture ‘Embodied Visions: What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art?’ (transcribed in *Living, Thinking, Looking*, 2012), Siri Hustvedt argues that “looking at visual art always involves a form of mirroring” (338), in that we reflect back at the work what we find in our perception of it, just as an infant, in D. W. Winnicott’s theory of child development, unconsciously mimics the expression it sees on its mother’s face. When the work is an image of a human face, so the researchers tell us, we absorb the psychological content of its expression, however fleetingly glimpsed; when the work is a non-human representation, or abstract, Hustvedt suggests, the mirroring is a result of our “witnessing what remains of another person’s creative act”. (339)

away until it points not outwards, towards something or other in the world, but back, into the act of looking itself, of perceiving and interpreting.

The work becomes, like a mandala in meditation, not an end, but a means of contemplation. (It was only ever thus, but the seductive power of the signification that takes place in the meaning/looking/reading of the art-encounter, that persuades us that the meaning we find in it comes from it, or its creator, rather than from us, blinds us to the fact.)

This falling away or purification of the use of art is there earlier in the novel, too, where the manner of the end of looking is suggested by Lianne's mother, Nina. She says, of the Morandis: "I think these pictures are what I'll look at when I've stopped looking at everything else." (FM: 111) And then: "After a while I won't need the paintings to look at. The paintings will be excess. I'll look at the wall" (FM: 112) It's not that the paintings will have run out of meaning, will have lost their ability to signify (as words do for the Alzheimer's sufferers that Lianne works with, encouraging them to write down their memories), but that Nina, at the end of her life, will have no more need of their prompting. A painting on our wall becomes invisible not because we don't see it, but because we don't need to. This idea of a finite signifying life-span of an artwork is something the novel can embrace, and which the ekphrastic poem rarely does, and often specifically denies.

If Morandi's paintings are necessarily an unwitting, and therefore 'innocent', response to 9/11, then the performance art of the titular Falling Man is anything but. He is seen by Lianne twice during the novel: the first time after he has made his jump and is already in situ, dangling motionless above the street, regarded by a crowd outside Grand Central Station; the second time just before he is about to do make his jump, near a more remote section of elevated railway.

As John N. Duvall explains, in his essay ‘Witnessing Trauma: *Falling Man* and Performance Art’ (Olster, 2011: 152-168), DeLillo’s *Falling Man* is both a direct reference to the many people who threw themselves to their deaths from the World Trade Centre in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, and to the iconic and controversial photograph by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew of a man falling, with seeming grace or serenity, framed against the vertical stripes of the towers, and finally (probably: Duvall makes no claim as to whether DeLillo was aware of him) to a real-life artist, Kerry Skarbakka, whose staged ‘falls’ from buildings, directly inspired by the attacks, were meticulously planned and photographed, the harness and ropes being digitally removed from the images afterwards. As such, they are not such ‘pure’ examples of performance art as DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, real name David Janiak, whose jumps are neither announced, nor recorded (except spontaneously, by bystanders), but seem intended to address people as directly as possible, cutting through the etiquette of the Culture Industry to force an unmediated reaction. Which is what he gets, the accidental audience “shouting up at him, outraged at the spectacle, the puppetry of human desperation”. (FM: 33)

DeLillo is clearly interested in the art-encounter as socialised event, and the dangers that can accompany this. The figure of Janiak throws into question the ethics of artistic representation: to what extent it is permissible in general to represent human suffering, and whether this is exploitative, an ‘invasion of privacy’; the right of the artist to unilaterally address specific subjects of collective trauma; and time as a factor – the oft-repeated complaint that it is ‘too soon’ to make these representations.

The possible reasons for raising these issues are manifold. Firstly, DeLillo would have known his novel will provoke these very questions. Secondly, the reception of artistic reactions to 9/11 is germane to the theme of his novel (or one of the,): the effect of 9/11 on New York and the American psyche. But thirdly, and most importantly for

this essay, it interrogates the way that art functions. After all, as we have seen, you don't need new art to address new events. Morandi's paintings of bottles and jars are perfectly adequate signifiers, for the cultured Martin and Lianne at least.

To represent such a transgressive art-intervention in prose is necessarily to move beyond the static confines of ekphrasis, for here the calm, dignified position of the textual response is inapplicable. There is no paused, privileged 'moment outside time' for the viewer/poet to weigh up the work and carefully, deliberately apostrophise it. It commands an immediate, visceral response. When Janiak jumps, Lianne's reaction is physical, not intellectual. The prose, in trying to fix the event, must rewind and redescribe, go over its own tracks:

Lianne felt her body go limp. But the fall was not the worst of it. The jolting end of the fall left him upside-down, secured to the harness, twenty feet above the pavement. The jolt, the sort of midair impact and bounce, the recoil, and now the stillness, arms at his sides, one leg bent at the knee. [...] He remained motionless, with the train still running in a blur in her mind and the echoing deluge of sound falling about him, blood rushing to his head, away from hers. (FM: 168)

In later chapters I will show how DeLillo concentrates on temporal artworks that tend paradoxically towards the atemporal (a radically slowed down film, a performance that abstracts and loops gestures) but here the work coalesces around a split-second moment that necessarily exists only in time, and, once past, cannot be recaptured. (What follows it, the uncanny sight of the man hanging in mid-air, is nothing more than the concretisation of the impossibility of capturing the precise moment when the falling stops.) Janiak's intention is to not be seen until he is falling. He wants to provoke surprise, panic and horror, to grab and drag the eye with unwarranted movement. Then, before that shock can be registered and processed, his fall is suddenly, unexpectedly arrested, and there is a second shock. The non-terminal terminus represents – for its coming too soon, *is as*

shocking as – the fatal impact that is implied and avoided, pointed to but never arrived at. He is saved, as the others weren't.

Shock is an extreme response to art, but not an inappropriate one, and it throws into question Wordsworth's formula for poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [...] recollected in tranquillity" (In Leitch et al, 2010: 573). This applies above all to ekphrasis, which recasts the emotional action of looking in the (falsely) tranquil act of writing, but in doing so cannot do justice to those elements of emotion which, physiologically, belong not to the mind but to the body, and as such are necessarily time-bound. Nor must the art be temporal to evoke temporal response. The image of the art-encounter as a serene, static, atemporal stand-off between subject and object is a fiction that doesn't need the histrionics of the so-called Stendhal Syndrome to show it up.

The little stuttering rewind of the ekphrasis quoted above – as the text tries to honour Lianne's attempt to process what she is seeing – is a micrological repetition of the recursive structure of the book as a whole, in its attempt to show how we deal with shock, by a constant shuttling backwards and forwards between the present moment and the moment of trauma, and then back again to a present which, necessarily, has moved on incrementally from where we left it. It mirrors, too, the retinal activity of the eye faced with an artwork: not the single, stately, comprehensive *oeillade*, but the jumpy, non-linear, to-and-fro of the scanning, browsing consciousness.

This attempt to show the heightened emotionality of the art-encounter is, it must be said, small. Lianne panics, but the text does not. If there was ever a prose style uniquely unsuited to panic it is DeLillo's. Even in the sections of the novel that chronicle the chaotic after-minutes of the attacks, even in the paragraph in the final chapter which actually narrates the impact of one of the planes, slipping mid-line from the character of one of the hijackers sitting in the galley of the plane as it crosses the last hundreds of metres to the tower, to Keith Neudecker, inside the tower, thrown from his chair by the impact – even

here there is no attempt to approach in words the knowledge, or feeling, what it must have been like, in there.

The question of the rights and wrongs of representation does fold back into this question of the more general nature of representation. DeLillo does not describe people jumping out of the World Trade Centre. Instead, he describes someone performing a representation of this. As above, there are different possible reasons for this, but one of them might be related to Plato's ideas of representation outlined in *The Republic*. In Book X Plato compares an artist unfavourably to both a carpenter and God as a creator of objects "at the third remove from reality". (Plato, 1987: 425) This removal from reality echoes the earlier Allegory of the Cave (in Book VI), in which unphilosophical mortals are compared to prisoners in a cave who happily take the shadows of objects on the wall as those objects' true incarnations. Plato suggests that no one who has emerged from the cave to see the real world and – eventually – the sun (the knowledge of the good) would willingly go back to a life of looking at shadows in caves. Yet, if we conflate these two allegories, it would be possible to recast the return to the cave, and the work of the painter, in a more positive light. What if the truth, the knowledge of the world as it is, is so traumatic that it is best seen at a remove – as, after all, viewers of eclipses look at the sun through filters to avoid serious retinal damage?

Seen in this way, the artist's self-distancing from 'reality', his or her setting up of representations as go-betweens, or filters, of the truth they wish to engage, is not a failure of philosophical nerve or capacity, but rather a clear-eyed taking into account of our native manner of seeing the world. The stereo vision afforded by two eyes means that we are peculiarly built for the process of triangulation, of judging distances, of positioning ourselves with regards to more than one thing: the sun, an object and its shadow; a representation and its possible referents.

To make representations rather than objects (let alone things-in-themselves) is to defuse the potency of objects and events, but at the same time to bring them into sharper focus. The choice to philosophise through art (through representations of representations) rather than through philosophy (approaching the form itself) is to submit to the idea that *sophistication*, in all its shades of meanings, is the mark of the developed human intellect. DeLillo – and all ekphrasis – turns away from direct representation to represent those representations, performing a kind of calculus on the act of representation itself.

It needn't be just an event as traumatic as 9/11 (though this gives an excellent example) that it is preferable to watch in the play of shadows on the wall of the cave, rather than out in the too-bright day. Not just because of the pain and damage that unmediated contact with the vision of the truth of the world might cause, but more generally because it is in the gain and loss of seeing the world through art, through filters of representation and signification, through the picking up and processing of traces, the judging of distances, bringing into focus, that humanity reveals itself.

CHAPTER THREE: Point Omega

Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* (2010) is a short novel which in its central narrative sections depicts the month-long stay in the Sonoran desert of two characters, an experimental film maker, Jim Finley, and an older academic, Richard Elster, whom Finley hopes to film, for a documentary film, talking about his time working as a "defense intellectual" during the second Iraq War. (DeLillo, 2010: 28)^{16,17} They are joined by Elster's daughter, Jessie, who is then apparently abducted and possibly murdered by a man she had been seeing in New York. The section ends with Finley driving Elster back out of the desert to civilisation, with the threat of violence from the same man hanging over him.

This 83-page narrative (the desert) is framed by two shorter, dated sections (12 and 16 pages respectively) describing an unnamed man's viewing, in an art gallery, of Douglas Gordon's installation *24 Hour Psycho* (the gallery), in which Hitchcock's iconic film is projected, without sound, at a radically slowed rate of two frames per second, rather than the usual 24. In the gallery sections the installation is not named, and the original film just once; instead the work is described in terms of the actors' and characters' names.¹⁸

The functions of the artwork, as presented in the two gallery sections, are multiple, and various, not least because there are specific narrative elements in the second gallery section that refer back to and complete our understanding of events that took place in the desert. The functions that I will discuss in this chapter are: narrative (the artwork's function in the plot of the novel); formal-narratological (how it informs

¹⁶ Further references to *Point Omega* in this chapter will be given as page numbers only, with the label PO.

¹⁷ Finley's putative film is clearly indebted to Errol Morris's 2003 documentary *The Fog of War*, which is built around interviews with former US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. My thanks to Dr Catherine Morley for pointing out this connection.

¹⁸ The installation is discussed and named in the desert section. DeLillo does credit Gordon in an acknowledgement at the end of the novel, saying that the videowork was installed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the summer of 2006

the *nature* of the narrative); thematic; and critical/analytic (how it is used to comment on the form and content of the artwork itself).

In terms of the first gallery section, the primary function of the representation of the artwork is to demonstrate – in a broadly ekphrastic manner – and then abstract its formal play with regards to temporality and pacing, which is then refracted into the narrative strategies of the writing, both in that section and, more importantly, projected into the main, desert narrative. In other words, DeLillo reads Gordon’s work as itself a meta-commentary on the nature of the cinematic medium, which reading is then used to inform the narrative approach of the novel itself. Where in *Falling Man* the ekphrases of the Morandi still lives concentrate on the paintings’ content (the objects depicted in them), and encourage us to find echoes of them elsewhere in the work, here the reading is at a structural and syntactic, not descriptive level. As such, because the point of the ekphrasis is not primarily to ‘re-represent’ that which the original work represents, but to borrow, activate and explore its techniques, there is less sense of a paragonal, competitive relationship between them. There is no sense that one art form can do what the other does, better, or as well, but that there are deep correspondences that can be brought out and examined; it is not to compare and judge end results, but processes.

Writing on the poems that T.J. Clark incorporates into the critical prose of *The Sight of Death*, David Kinloch says that: “The dimension of prosody and stanza breaks offers a plastic equivalent to the practices and effects Clark recognises in Poussin’s work so it should not surprise us that Clark begins to write poems in his attempts to get closer to the French master.” (Kinloch, 2010: 25) That “get closer” is instructive. The paragonal tendency of ekphrasis theorists such as Heffernan insists upon opposition, gaze and above all distance. Ekphrasis can however be as much about collaboration, proximity and empathy; not to speak *for* the mute artwork, but to speak *like* it.

W. Steiner writes:

For there can be no final consensus about whether and how the two arts [painting and literature] resemble each other, but only a growth in our awareness of the process of comparing them, of metaphoric generation and regeneration.” (Steiner, 1982: 2)

Although this process – the inter-artistic comparison, and the critical investigation of that comparison – is evident in the gallery section of DeLillo’s novel, there it is refracted through the consciousness of the reflector-character, in the moment of his experiencing the artwork, and as such is implicit, even ‘natural’, in the most basic mimetic sense, if we accept that the very act of contemplating an artwork involves an element of imitation: as in Hustvedt’s adaptation of Winnicott’s mirroring, we must re-think the artwork’s thoughts, enact its structural strategies, in order to process its possible meanings. However, this mimetic, or sympathetic, response becomes more striking when we move out of the gallery into the desert, when the work and its viewer are no longer present.

Thus a passage such as the following, taken from the first gallery section, is a response to the formal process of Gordon’s work, but is also to a certain extent governed by it, because the imitation is part of the representation:

The slightest camera movement was a profound shift in space and time but the camera was not moving now. Anthony Perkins is turning his head. It was like whole numbers. The man could count the gradations in the movement of Anthony Perkins’ head. Anthony Perkins turns his head in five incremental movements rather than one continuous motion. It was like bricks in a wall, clearly countable, not like the flight of an arrow or a bird. Then again it was not like or unlike anything. Anthony Perkins’ head swivelling over time on his long thin neck. (PO: 5)

So this is an ekphrasis, in a fuller sense than merely that of a representation of a representation, in that it does not simply attempt to replicate the appearance (visual

content) of the artwork, but also isolates and works through elements of its internal composition. As such it leans towards the conception of mimesis outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which privileges affinity over replication, and in which the subject does not presume to present itself in a superior hierarchical position with regards to the perceived object: “Mimesis imitates the environment, but false projection makes the environment like itself. For mimesis the outside world is a model which the inner world must try to conform to.” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997: 187)

The challenge to normal perceptions of temporality laid down by Gordon’s work is taken up, in DeLillo’s prose,¹⁹ through a variety of means: description (“the man standing alone moved a hand toward his face, repeating, ever so slowly, the action of a figure on the screen” (PO: 3)); repetition; the inability to settle on a tense; the expansion or dilation of discourse time that enables the narrative to move freely between external events and the character’s mental response to those events in something that might be called ‘real time’ (as in the passage quoted above, when the man is watching Perkins move his head);²⁰ and, at the syntactic level, the use – characteristic for DeLillo – of short declarative sentences that suggests a possible parallel, in narratological terms, between the sentence and the cinematic frame. This last informs the deconstructive critique of cinema (to which I will return) that suggests the narrative – the story – of the film can only be inferred by the reader/viewer by ignoring, or filling in, the gaps that exist between the isolated moment of each frame.

To this extent, Gordon’s work is presented in the opening section such that it can be read as an interpretive model, or schema, for the novel that follows, no matter that they exist in entirely different media. Obviously, any analysis of *24 Hour Psycho* is not

¹⁹ This is not to say that DeLillo is being dramatically, and substantively, inspired by Gordon here. DeLillo wrote like this before *Point Omega*. It is a curious and perhaps underexplored aspect of mimesis that one might best imitate something that one is already like.

²⁰ ‘Discourse time’ used in Genette’s formulation, in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Genette, 1990)

traceable directly to DeLillo, but belongs to the gallery viewer. Nevertheless, my argument runs that any ‘reading’ of the videowork that is fed into the mechanics of the prose is done so both in the gallery and the desert section, where Finley’s first-person narration is markedly similar to what had come before. Thus it is tempting to take any indications in the gallery section of how Gordon’s piece can and should be viewed as directives for the reader of the novel as a whole.

The nature of the film permitted total concentration and also depended on it. The film’s merciless pacing had not meaning without a corresponding watchfulness. [...] The less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw. This was the point. To see what’s here, finally to look and to know you’re looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the smallest registers of motion. (PO: 5)

It takes close attention to see what is happening in front of you. It takes work, pious effort, to see what you are looking at. He was mesmerized by this, the depths that were possible in the slowing of motion, the things to see, the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing. (PO: 13)

These narrative strategies, then, are demonstrated in the prose of the gallery section, but they continue, and are developed, in the desert, under sometimes differing circumstances. The temporal distension continues: “‘Time slows down when I’m here,’” Elster says (PO: 23). Time is “geologic” (PO: 19), “enormous” (PO: 44), “enormously old. Not day by day. This is deep time, epochal time.” (PO: 72)

With this distortion comes a disorientation: when things happen this slowly, it becomes difficult to know, or remember, the order in which they happened. Thus Finley, as narrator, makes no attempt to rationalise the chronology of his narration. The desert section begins on day ten of Finley’s visit to Elster; then we are at day twelve; then twenty-two. Events, conversations, are not pinned to any definite moment. Just as the man in the gallery (who has been coming there five days straight) watches “a scene he recalled from earlier in the week, or maybe only yesterday, impossible to sort out the

days and viewings” (PO: 11), so for Finley “There were no mornings or afternoons. It was one seamless day, every day, until the sun began to arc and fade, mountains emerging from their silhouettes.” (PO: 36) There is a sense that time, in the desert, has become spatial, rather than linear. Moments are points in a landscape that can be revisited, like points in a conversation, or can return unbidden, like frames in a looped film.

It should be made clear that these prose narrative strategies are taken not from film, but from a conceptual artwork that itself performs a deconstructive critique of film. That film is an important reference point for DeLillo is evident from novels such as *Americana* and *The Names*, both of which feature film-makers as prominent characters, while the influence of film on DeLillo’s work has been much discussed by critics,²¹ and the author himself, although it is worth pointing out that while DeLillo’s prose and narrative strategies can be described as cinematic, he also sees cinema (and its domestic mutation, television) as having a negative social impact.²²

For the purposes of this essay, however, the ‘cinematic’ nature of DeLillo’s books is relevant only insofar as we can point to ways in which DeLillo might use artworks in his books to encourage us to take a formal and aesthetic view on cinema, and the cinematic. One such example is a monologue by experimental film maker Frank Volterra in *The Names*, in which he says that “figures in open space have always been what film is all about” and compares the desert to “the movie screen, the strip of film”, going on to describe his location in terms of its potential cinematic framing: “And those tower houses, they’re perfect, they give me my vertical.” (DeLillo, 1982: 198-9).

Volterra’s manifesto/pitch for a film not made but mooted could be said to perform the

²¹ See, for example: Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (2000); Peter Boxall, ‘DeLillo and media culture’ in Duvall, 2008 (43-52). Randy Laist, *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels* (2010).

²² “In my work, film and television are often linked with disaster. Because this is one of the energies that charges the culture. TV has a sort of panting lust for bad news and calamity as long as it is visual.” DeLillo, interview: ‘The Art of Fiction’. *The Paris Review*. No. 128, Fall 1993.

function of ekphrasis without recourse to description (representation). In describing the plot, technical features and possible meanings of his non-existent film *Volterra* gives it conceptual existence, bringing it close to the level of ekphrastic visibility enjoyed by, for instance, Keats' Grecian urn in his canonical poem. (The complexity of the levels of representation and conceptualisation present in such a 'notional ekphrasis' is something I will return to in the final chapter of this essay, on *The Body Artist*.²³)

Finley in *Point Omega* describes the film he wants to make of Elster in similarly hypothetical terms to those of *Volterra*. However, his formulations go beyond *Volterra*'s, and beyond the analogical ekphrasis present in the depiction, in the gallery section, of *24 Hour Psycho*, in that they suggest that not only might the present prose narrative – the desert section – be *like* that hypothetical cinematic one, it *is* the film:

“No plush armchair with warm lighting and books on a shelf in the background. Just a man and a wall,” I told him. “The man stands there and relates the complete experience. [...] There's no offscreen voice asking questions. There's no interspersed combat footage or comments from others, on-camera or off. [...] Any pauses, they're your pauses, I keep shooting.” (PO: 21)

Finley's film never gets made, and never will be made, yet the sections on the book in which Elster does talk about his time at the heart of the military establishment (and equally in which he deflects questions about this) give us not only something of the content what the film would contain, but – if you accept the (slow-mo) cinematic nature of DeLillo's prose – something of the feel of what it would be like to watch it. Given a certain kind of approach, the kind of approach encouraged by the conceptual-aesthetic

²³ It is interesting to note, in terms of the natural conjunction of ekphrasis and the genre of *künstlerroman*, that artists, outside of their socio-economic role as promoters and interpreters of their own work, are far more likely to think or talk about their current (unfinished) and future (unstarted) work than any existing work – where an artwork is most usually thought of as 'existing' when it is finished; i.e. that, where artists are to be treated in fiction or poetry, their own ekphrases – their representations-to-self of their work – are more likely to be of unrealised, hypothetical artworks, than actual ones. And furthermore – and, again, I will return to this in the next chapter – those ekphrastic elements that mark the artist's approach or progress towards a future artwork could well have no substantive link to the eventual artwork as it might be depicted; i.e. the verbal representation elides any actual descriptive representation.

primer of the gallery section, the act of reading (these parts of) the novel results in an unconventional ekphrasis, in which the film is not so much represented as evoked, the holographic image of a non-existent original.

Thus far we have been considering just one function of the presentation of the artwork in the opening section of *Point Omega* – that of modelling narratological strategies that the rest of the novel then takes up. I consider it first because it is the most immediately apparent function, in that it informs the writing of its own presentation, as well as that which follows. Another way in which the presentation of the artwork influences the narrative to come, but which holds off its effect until later in that narrative, is in its treatment of violence.

In my discussion thus far, Gordon's choice of Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film *Psycho* for the subject of his meta-cinematic exercise has been of no consequence. Gordon could have slowed down any film, and DeLillo could have used it in exactly the same way. However, the central theme of Hitchcock's film – the horror of extreme, irrational, unprovoked violence – is entirely germane to DeLillo's novel.²⁴ Its relevance to Gordon's work, *24 Hour Psycho*, is another matter: suffice it to say that it is crucial to Gordon's process that the film to be treated is well-known and, while different films would have produced different works, the choice of *Psycho* throws up thoughts of the workings of suspense and the aestheticisation of violence.

The man in the gallery, having seen the famous shower scene (the murder of Marion Crane) earlier in the week, is "eager" (PO: 9) to see it again, although any blood-lust is artfully transferred – as Hitchcock doubtless would have intended – onto the

²⁴ Another major theme of Hitchcock's film, the voyeuristic nature of cinema, is alluded to in *Point Omega*, in scenes in which Finley covertly and overtly watches Jessie in the cabin, just as Norman Bates spies on Marion Crane, but I don't consider this central to the workings of the novel.

images that are intercut with the frenzied knife attack, that both deflect our attention from and highlight the violence:

Curtain rings, that's what he recalled most clearly, the rings on the shower curtain spinning on the rod when the curtain is torn loose, a moment lost at normal speed, four rings spinning slowly over the fallen figure of Janet Leigh, a stray poem above the hellish death. (PO: 9)

The repeated allusions to the scene, and to the killing of Detective Arbogast, play no specific role in the gallery section, beyond highlighting, as I said, the very human desire to linger over the most frightful images, but their role does extend into the desert, where there is no violence (at first), but instead the slow circling of the issue of the Iraq war and the disjunction between the US view of it – both in government and in public – and the experience on the ground.²⁵

Elster, as an “interdisciplinary” (PO: 35) adviser to the US military command at the Pentagon, had been complicit in the Iraq war, helping those that made the decisions to see their actions in abstract, theoretical terms, rather than as “flesh and blood individuals” (PO: 33). Likewise, his essay on the meanings of the word ‘rendition’, that ignored the “larger context” and the “crime and guilt” (PO: 34) that Finley sees in the use of torture, is symptomatic of a refusal to acknowledge the general human mess and individual personal disaster of war for those involved.

During these discussions, the violence of *Psycho* may cast its shadow over proceedings, but it is not until later in the central narrative, in the last of its four numbered sections, that it crashes explicitly into the narrative. And it is here that the second of my functions of the treatment of the artwork (the thematic) merges with the third (its straightforward narrative function). Jessie's disappearance from the isolated

²⁵ DeLillo: “Think about the images most often repeated. The Rodney King videotape or the Challenger disaster or Ruby shooting Oswald. These are the images that connect us the way Betty Grable used to connect us in her white swimsuit, looking back at us over her shoulder in the famous pinup.” ‘The Art of Fiction’ (1993), as before.

cabin is treated at first as serious but non-suspicious, but then Elster starts to worry about a man she had been seeing in New York, and from whom she was in some way escaping by coming to the desert. Then, an uncertain number of days later, a knife is found in a ravine in the area. Though it is left inconclusive as to whether this is the murder weapon – or indeed whether Jessie is even dead – the reader can't help but note that this is the same weapon used by Norman Bates, as mentioned in the gallery section.

The disappearance and presumed death (presumed not least by the characters) of his daughter leaves Elster “frail and beaten [...] inconsolably human.” (PO: 96) It is as if the unconscionable, unearned deprivation and violence of her death is a form of karmic retribution for Elster's collusion in the deaths of the Iraq war, on both the mass and individual scale: “All the man's grand themes funnelled down to the local grief,” reflects Finley: “one body, out there somewhere, or not.” (PO: 98)

The desert section ends with Finley receiving a silent call on his cellphone (anonymous: the screen shows only “BLOCKED CALLER” (PO: 99), just as it did for similar anonymous calls to the apartment Jessie shared with her mother), and his prediction that these calls will continue once he arrives back at his apartment in the city: that he, through nothing more than his highly contingent link to Jessie, is a potential target. Or something more than this: that everyone is target, just as every Iraqi civilian was during the war.

That this plot device – that suggests but never quite resolves into the clichéd figure of the marauding, random serial killer – is not in itself primary to the book's functioning, but hovers about it, should come as no surprise to readers of DeLillo. His fiction – from the novel *Mao II* to the short story ‘Baader-Meinhof’ – often contrasts events at a public or global level with those at a private one, inviting us to find ways of reading the mechanics of terror into our own lives, our personal relationships. This makes *Point Omega* one of the more subtle of the post-9/11 novels, by linking our fears

of terrorism not to a specific religious-political-historical moment, but to the deeper psychological fears awoken by the classic horror film genre: in which the innocent victim, after all, is somehow always guilty of *something*.

To this extent *Point Omega* could be seen as an expansion of ‘Baader-Meinhof’, DeLillo’s story of 2002: both works feature an encounter at an art gallery; both galleries are exhibiting works that deal in violence and death; in both cases the nature of that violence follows the viewers out of the gallery into their daily lives and goes on to characterise their interactions there. In ‘Baader-Meinhof’ the terror is shown, but in strangely diluted form: the man who accosts the woman in the gallery goes back to her flat, tries to coerce her into having sex, and then – we can infer – masturbates on her bed while she hides in the bathroom. While nothing more dramatic happens than this, their interactions are strikingly similar to those in the second, closing gallery section of *Point Omega*. Again the anonymous man is watching the film, when he is approached by a woman who, though unnamed, we know from a reference in the desert section to be Jessie, allowing the reader finally to make the connection that the anonymous man in the two gallery sections is the feared killer of the desert section. In contrast to ‘Baader-Meinhof’ it is she who approaches him, although it is he who asks her for her phone number. Their subsequent relationship is not shown; it is alluded to by Jessie’s mother, but we can assume it is similar, at least, to the ominous interaction in the flat of ‘Baader-Meinhof’. ‘Dennis’ (as the man in the gallery/Jessie’s killer *might* be called) and ‘Bob’ (the name the man in ‘Baader-Meinhof’ gives, though he says it’s not his real name) are both “scary bland”, as ‘Dennis’ describes Anthony Perkins, twice, in the second gallery section of the novel. (PO: 101, 115)

It is in this way that DeLillo uses the violence of *Psycho*, as refracted through the temporal dislocation of *24 Hour Psycho*, to produce a thematic resonance in his novel that barely exists at the level of narrative. Of course, the crucial factor in DeLillo’s use of

the Gordon/Hitchcock artworks is that the Hitchcock original is so well known as to be iconic (as with the Morandi still lives in *Falling Man*). The killings of Crane and Arbogast don't need to be presented in full because the viewer/reader will already have a mental image of them – not least because in Hitchcock's original they aren't fully shown either: cutting and montage does the job of suggesting the violence that the censorship of the day wouldn't have allowed to be shown explicitly.

In this way DeLillo is able to make present the horror of Jessie's presumed death, without recourse to showing the violence. Jessie's fate is treated as of no consequence, except insofar as it provokes a moral reaction in Elster that was lacking from his understanding of war and violence during and after his involvement in Iraq. It is the reverberations of DeLillo's treatment of Gordon/Hitchcock's works, elsewhere in the novel, in its framing sections, in fact, that produce our understanding of his personal fate, as an indirect victim of violence – and also, it is implied, Finley's fate, and, through him, that of us all.

These three functions of the artwork (narrative, formal-narratological and thematic) are accompanied by a fourth, that allows DeLillo to critically interrogate the artwork(s) it/themselves. This involves, firstly, as I have suggested, a critical reading of *Psycho*, that DeLillo (via the reflector-character of the gallery section) reads into Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, a reading that amounts to a deconstructive attack on the nature of film as a narrative medium. It is this that I would like now to consider.

Gordon's slowing down of Hitchcock's film to what is essentially a series of still photographs disrupts the persistence of vision that in normal viewings allows us to construe it as a seamless narrative. It could be argued that this represents an attack on theories of stable identity, thus moving the film quite out of the realm of morality.

In a process akin to deconstruction Gordon insists on the quite literal gaps that exist at the most fundamental level in the make-up of Hitchcock's (and indeed any)

movie.²⁶ He *defuses* the narrative (removes the fuse that runs through it), unlinking the 109-minute chain of cause and effect that the director and editor had so carefully mesmerized us into imagining, and so dispelling any notion of a character named Norman Bates who murders another character named Marion Crane.²⁷ From the second gallery section:

He could not recall on which day he'd watched a particular scene or how many times he'd watched certain scenes. Could they be called scenes, becalmed as they were, the raw makings of gesture, the long arc of hand to face? (PO: 101-102)

It is not just that repeated viewings of violent scenes, whether normal speed or slowed down, desensitize the viewer, but that Gordon's theoretical trick of stripping the movie of its narrative line denies the viewer the catharsis, and absolves them of the moral revulsion, that come with a normal-speed viewing of it.

Implicit in this second turn to the deconstructive gesture is the idea that this reading, such as it is, is presented through or alongside the thoughts of a character who apparently turns out to be a psychotic killer. And it is not the original film that has done this (contra the familiar scare stories that violent films cause violence in those that watch them), but the deconstructive art installation. The man's – 'Dennis''s – reactions to the installation may be unnerving from the start, but it is in the second gallery section, after the desert narrative (in which we have seen their consequences) that they worsen, especially after his meeting with Jessie. He sees her, in fact, just as he sees the artwork. Compare: "The woman seemed to slide along the wall invisibly, in little fixed increments" (PO: 104) to the passage quoted earlier: "Anthony Perkins turns his head in

²⁶ In essence, my readings here are ones that I follow, variously, through: an author, a character, an artist, a film-maker – though not necessarily all of them at all times. All of them, naturally, are fallible, and may distort any meaning supposedly picked up from the next agent down the line. Furthermore, the links in the chain are not necessarily essential. Steps can be skipped, just as, in Plato's analogy of the table, the painter might not be copying the carpenter's table at all, but, skipping that stage, communing directly with the form of the table.

²⁷ "[C]ause and effect so drastically drawn apart" is how the man watching the video phrases it, PO: 14)

five incremental movements rather than one continuous motion” (PO: 5). His reaction to her approach to him is as anxious as that of Bates to Crane in the movie:

[She] was speaking to him. He was confused by this. [...] This hadn't happened before, not here. And he tried to adjust to the other thing that hadn't happened, that was sort of never supposed to happen. Being spoken to. This woman standing somehow next to him was changing every rule of separation. (PO: 105)

The barrier between ‘Dennis’ and the film is explicitly blurred, a border open in both directions, as in Hustvedt’s formula of the art encounter:

[The] situation intensified the process, being here, watching and thinking, for hours, standing and watching, thinking into the film, into himself. Or was the film thinking into him, spilling through him like some kind of runaway brain fluid? (PO: 109)

Finally, after Jessie has left the gallery, and he has followed her out and persuaded her to give him her phone number, and returned the gallery, and as the novel as a whole comes to an end, the identification between ‘Dennis’ and Bates intensifies:

It makes him think of his own mother, how could it not, before she passed on, two of them contained in a small flat being consumed by rising towers. [...] The man separates himself from the wall and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates. (PO: 116)

This narrative structure, by which the end of the novel loops back to deposit the reader back into its central section, is reminiscent of the geometry of a Klein bottle or Möbius strip.

Falling Man ends with a similar twist, segueing from the character of one of the terrorists (also treated in codas to the novel’s two previous sections), as he sits in the plane, waiting for impact – via the impact itself, in one through-written paragraph – to Keith in his office in the World Trade Centre, and his escape out onto the street, and thence (there is an overlap, like the overlap on a homemade paper loop, where you tape

the two ends together) to the very beginning of the novel. As with the plastic arts, there is no terminus, no sign-off, no *envoi*. Again, DeLillo is questioning our presumptions of duration, finitude and temporality across various art forms. A painting can change over time, a film can be stretched until it approaches unendingness and so stasis, a narrative can be recursive, without exit.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Body Artist

The Body Artist (2001) is Don DeLillo's first book after the mammoth *Underworld* and, with *Point Omega*, his shortest. Like many of his novels it has an artist at its centre, but, unlike most of them – and as pointed out by Mark Osteen in 'DeLillo's Dedalian Artists' (Duvall, 2008: 137-150) – she is an artist who is creatively successful, simply in terms of actually finishing a work. The only other comparable figure in his oeuvre is Klara Sax in *Underworld* (another woman) with her Land Art reconditioned bombers in the desert. David Janiak in *Falling Man* is certainly creatively successful; however we never know him intimately, but only from a distance, through Lianne's experience of his performances, necessarily partial and circumstantial, and through his newspaper obituary.

The artist in *The Body Artist* is Lauren Hartke, and although the novel's title marks her out as its central subject, its presentation of her art is ambiguous and allusive; as I hope to argue here, it is possible to read the book not so much as a character study of a person who happens to be an artist, with their 'artisticness' merely an excuse for interesting, outlandish and unspeakable behaviour, but rather as an extended 'reverse ekphrasis' of an artwork that is evoked, or made present for the reader, despite being nowhere (or barely) described in the text of the novel.

This makes the book a fuller (though earlier) iteration of the process I outlined in the last chapter with regards to Finley's proposed film of Elster in *Point Omega*. There the unresolved conversations about the film – and those *not* about the film – as filtered through the book's quasi-, or ultra-, or post-cinematic prose, itself informed by the deconstructive attack on filmic conventions found in *24 Hour Psycho*, make the hypothetical, never-to-be-realised film present within the reading experience very much in the manner that an artwork is made present in a traditional 'notional ekphrasis'.

Yet both books extend the idea of notional ekphrasis, by projecting the aesthetic points made with regards to the artwork (in the passages that might be considered traditionally ekphrastic) onto or into the work as a whole, in the manner that Ashbery's poem 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' (in Ashbery, 1987) departs from Parmigianino's painting, such that the strictly ekphrastic passages act as a prism, refracting, clarifying and magnifying the aesthetic elements so that they affect the whole of the text.

As such, and as with *Point Omega*, the narrative structure of *The Body Artist* has a major bearing on our understanding of the relationship between the character of the artist and the artwork. In *Point Omega* the opening and closing gallery sections were the prism that refracted a deconstructive reading of Hitchcock's film onto the central desert section. *The Body Artist*, by contrast, is built around two crucial events that are absent from the text, with the lacunae being marked, or filled, by non-narrative forms imported from outside the main narrative mode of novel. These events are the suicide of Lauren Hartke's husband, film-maker Rey Robles, which is represented (or, you might say, covered) by a newspaper obituary, and the performance of a new artwork by Hartke, entitled *Body Time*, which is covered (or represented) by a newspaper or magazine feature.

That these two absences, or (narratorial) aberrations, or (authorial) abrogations, are central to an understanding of the novel is emphasised by their symmetrical locations in its construction. The death/obituary comes between the first and second chapters, and the performance/write-up between the penultimate and final chapters. As extraneous, interpolated texts, they do not disrupt the numbering of the chapters (the narrator, or narrating consciousness, of the chapters, you might say, knows them not), and this renders their status decidedly ambiguous. Like Derrida's parergon, or an element in a collage, they are both inside and outside the narrative, at once a part of the story and an insertion into it from a higher operational (diegetic) level. They might be newspaper

cuttings that DeLillo, or Hartke, or the narrator, has left pressed between the pages of the book, as a memento; or they might be a veil, or a bandage, or shroud, applied to or placed over the parts of the story that are too difficult, or proximate, to write. In both cases, journalism, that supposedly neutral and objective form, is used to simultaneously narrate and suppress that which the intimacy of literature cannot.

The reader's uncertainty as to the status of these different discourses within the general economy of the novel puts him or her into an almost spatial relationship to the book. The two pieces of journalism appear as kinds of optical illusion, holograms floating above the standard novelistic chapters, as if to cover or hide something – and yet: they cover nothing, for they are inserts, they come *between* the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next. They are in the novel, and of it, and they are above it, and not of it.

There is a useful comparison to be made here to the obituary of David Janiak in *Falling Man*, which Lianne is described as reading in the newspaper (DeLillo, 2007: 218-224). There the article is fully incorporated into the narrative structure: we read it through Lianne's eyes; the information is presented in either direct or indirect quotation (unprocessed or processed, it is not always clear) and comes interpolated with the third person description of her reading.

This structure of absence, with the accompanying gesture of *covering*, that only belatedly admits what it is that it is covering, is very much built into the reading experience in *The Body Artist*. That something is passed over, and that the imported discourse (the obituary, the review) is a mark of that passing over, only becomes clear after the event: it is only once you have finished reading the obituary, and the review, that it becomes clear how each of them not only references and discusses, but *stands for* the event it describes.

The book's opening chapter depicts a normal breakfast routine between Hartke and her husband in their rented house on the north-eastern US coast. It functions rather as a prologue, introducing the characters and possible themes, but offering no hints as to where the drama of the story will lie. This is followed immediately by the impersonal shock of the obituary, after which Chapter 2 sees Hartke returning home from Robles's funeral. However, it is not until later in the novel that we learn that the breakfast of Chapter 1 was in fact the last time the two of them were together: he left the house immediately after it to drive to New York, where he shot himself, in the apartment of his first wife. This precisely controlled, and precisely reticent structure recalls the interplay between the (dated) gallery and (numbered) desert sections of *Point Omega*.

This trajectory – that does not proceed incrementally and demonstrably, eyes forward, from ignorance to consciousness, but rather tips abruptly, even peremptorily, from one to the other, sending the reader's gaze twisting back to make sense of what came earlier – this trajectory is repeated towards the end of the book, when we are given, again without forewarning, the second journalistic incursion or interjection or covering: the magazine feature on Hartke's performance. It is written by a journalist friend of the artist, Mariella Chapman, and takes the form of an interview with Hartke, while also including elements of a review of the work itself.

“Hartke's piece,” she writes, “begins with an ancient Japanese woman on a bare stage, gesturing in the stylized manner of Noh drama, and it ends seventy-five minutes later with a naked man, emaciated and aphasic, trying desperately to tell us something.” (DeLillo, 2001: 105)²⁸ She later goes on:

Through much of the piece there is a sound accompaniment, the anonymous robotic voice of a telephone answering machine delivering a standard

²⁸ Further references to *The Body Artist* in this chapter will be given as page numbers only, with the label BA.

announcement. This is played relentlessly and begins to weave itself into the visual texture of the performance.

The voice infiltrates the middle section in particular. Here is a woman in executive attire, carrying a briefcase, who checks the time on her wristwatch and tries to hail a taxi. She glides rather formally (perhaps inspired by the elderly Japanese) from one action to the other. She does this many times, countless times. Then she does it again, half-pirouetting in very slow motion. You may find yourself looking and listening in hypnotic fascination, feeling physically and mentally suspended, or you may cast a glance at your own watch and go slouching down the aisle and into the night. (BA, 106)

This, and a few other paragraphs, are all the ekphrastic description of the work that we get. And yet the experience of the work for the reader is far richer than this would suggest. The reason for this is that much of what comes before it – and especially the five chapters that follow the death/obituary of Robles – is made up of the raw materials and preparation for the work itself: both the specific exercises and general artistic orientation that Hartke subjects herself to, and her encounters with the people, situations and artefacts that go to populate the finished work.

Crucially, it is only at the point of reading the feature (i.e. at the non-point of performance; at the point in the narrative where the performance should be, but is not) that we become aware of this fact. As with Robles's suicide, the revelation, and the reconstitution, is retrospective, and instantaneous, and complete. Just as there was nothing in the short lead-up to Robles's suicide to prepare us for it, so there is nothing in the intervening chapters to prepare us for the fact of the work. Hartke's exercises, when she is doing them, seem routine and ritual, rather than purposed, performance-oriented rehearsals; likewise, her encounters with the people she will go on to imitate in *Body Time* do not seem particularly charged or significant. She does not seem to treat them artistically, as an artist would.

But also: of course they are. It is just that DeLillo is not in the business of showing us the creation of an artwork, piece by piece, as in the instructions for building a

Lego kit or piece of Ikea furniture, so that we can watch it be assembled; or rather, he does provide us with the pieces, but without the knowledge of what they are and how to use them. Indeed, he presents them with a different ostensible purpose, so that when the synthesis occurs – when we realise what we have in our hands – the revelation is transformative. At the point of reading the feature article, or of reading through it, the shape of the book as a whole seems to change.

This links back to the spatial tendency of the book discussed earlier, where the disjunction between the two levels of discourse of the novel (‘novelistic’ and ‘journalistic’) encourage the reader to negotiate the book as it were in three dimensions, measuring the positions of those discourses relative to each other, and to him or herself.

In *The Sight of Death* T.J. Clark argues that the spatial relations inside and outside a painting – by which the painting actively places the viewer in a particular viewing position with regards to it, and a particular distance – and the effects that these relations create, go beyond simple questions of perspective to include “how the positions and distances are or are not modes of seeing, modes of understanding, intertwined with the events and objects they apply to.” Clark writes:

If I say the accounts of *how* are crude and schematic, I have in mind particularly the fiction that it is all done with “perspective,” explicitly plotted or discreetly implied. This is hopelessly wrong. Part of the appeal of perspective to painters, surely, lies in the way the bare linear structure involved sets up the promise, or illusion, of systematic determination – all the better for painting to play its coercive and generative games with. (Clark, 2006: 141)

There is a similar trigonometric work, and similar play or trickery, involved in *The Body Artist*. First the novel leads the reader into thinking it is about two characters, about a marriage, only to reveal that in fact it will be about grief. (It repositions the reader with regards to itself.) But then it performs the same trick again. (That repositioning was not a final, definitive gesture, but a gambit in the book’s “coercive and generative game”.)

Everything in the novel that the reader took to be for and about grief turns out to have been matter for art. We read the journalistic review/feature, and we recombine the ekphrastically-presented theatrical elements of *Body Time* given there with those earlier, novelistically-presented elements that, we now realise, went into its creation, and the whole is transfigured according to our understanding of Hartke's artistic process. We do not experience the actual performance, but we experience what Adorno would call its 'truth content', as clearly as if we had seen it, or – to follow Mitchell's 'ekphrastic hope' – had read the perfect ekphrastic description of it.

That this is a quite original and illuminating approach to the representation of extra-literary artworks in prose is the main thrust of this chapter, but a little more needs to be said about the process of concealment, or misdirection (Clark's "coercive and generative game"), that allows the moment of revelation – when we 'get', or 'grasp', or 'see' the unseen and, indeed, inexistent work – to work on us as it would in a genuine art-encounter. This is partly a simple function of narrative procedure – the fact of the artwork is withheld by the author – but it also germane to the nature of our encounters with art.

The reason we do not see Hartke's behaviour in the five central chapters of the book as *artistic* behaviours, is that we see them as *mourning* behaviours. Everything that she does is immediately and uncomplicatedly explicable by the simple fact that she is grieving. The book presents itself, from Chapter 2 onwards, as a novel about grief. Even the explicit labelling of Hartke as an artist in the book's title is taken from the terse final line of that interpolated, or overlaid, obituary: "He is survived by his third wife, Lauren Hartke, the body artist." (BA, 29)

The novel's sleight of hand, then, requires the information we receive through and about Hartke to be immediately usable towards one end – our perception of Hartke as a character in a particular situation: a woman in mourning – while also being stored up

for a second use – our eventual perception of *Body Time* as an artwork and, simultaneously, our revised perception of the novel as an extended reversed or inverted notional ekphrasis.²⁹ As before, this is a process that DeLillo has already schooled us in, in that once we learn that Robles is dead, we recast or recall the first chapter through the prism of that fact.

Clearly, this sleight of hand, by which the matter of the novel plays towards one and then another meaning, is bound up in the nature of Hartke's art. (It would be different if Hartke were a painter, or a sculptor – though perhaps not entirely; all art is partly conceptual, after all. If it weren't, ekphrasis would be reduced to an account of the arrangement of pigment on a canvas, of material in space.)

The Oxford *Grove Art Online* defines Body Art as a

movement in performance art that took shape in the 1960s and 1970s in which artists use their own bodies or those of their audience as the basis for their work. Body art performances have frequently involved transgression and occasionally violence, and they have often entailed extreme acts of endurance on the part of the artists. (Williams, 2013)

Chapman in her feature makes recognisable allusions to canonical examples of the form, including Chris Burden's *Shoot*, Shigeo Kubota's *Vagina Painting*, Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy*, and works by Ron Athey and Marina Abramović and Ulay.³⁰ The fact that Body Art is not really a particularly contemporary form of artistic practice adds to the uncertainty of our reception of and response to Hartke. (Equally, the Land Art practiced by Klara Sax in *Underworld* – in a section dated 1992 – is more a product of the 1960s and 1970s than anything then or now current in US artistic practice.)

²⁹ “The novel that at last reveals itself as fully born – reveals itself finally that is, when we arrive at the very end – is a narrative that has incorporated and been formed by the images it has represented.” (Doody, 1998: 390)

³⁰ See Williams's entry (2013) in *Grove Art Online*, as before.

Going by Chapman's write-up, Hartke's art seems to take the form of her self-transformation into a series of characters, during which she takes on their physical characteristics, sometimes with the help of costumes and prosthetics. Chapman contrasts her to other unnamed but recognisable body artists who act on or with their own bodies with often explicit violence: "She is acting, always in the process of becoming another or exploring some root identity." (BA, 105) Nevertheless, there is something about the physical transformation that seems to resist rationalisation, to invite thoughts that something unnatural is happening. "Hartke makes her body do things I've only seen in animated cartoons" Chapman writes at one point (BA, 108); and: "I saw two of the three performances and I have no idea how Hartke alters her body and voice." To which Hartke responds: "The body has never been my enemy [...] I taught it to do things other bodies could not." (BA, 105)

The content of the performance is mime, in which Hartke performs a slow series of repetitive gestures in the guise of a particular character. These are the Japanese woman, "gesturing in the stylized manner of Noh drama" (BA, 105); a female executive who repeatedly checks her wristwatch and hails a cab; and finally the naked man, who wanders about in a darkened room, speaking to himself – his words coming on a taped soundtrack, to which Hartke lip-synchs. Two other elements go up to make the work: a recorded electronic voicemail message, and a video projection of an image of a road, with occasional traffic going along it.

In terms of our ability to formulate this work in a manner approaching or analogous to that traditionally ascribed to ekphrasis – for it to be what I am calling a *reverse ekphrasis* – it is important that these elements are all familiar from the earlier parts of the novel (although, as before, our encounters with them were presented as anything but building blocks towards an eventual artwork). The video is taken from a live web feed from outside a town in Finland that Hartke watches obsessively. The

robotic voicemail message (“*Please / leave / a mess/age af/ter / the / tone*”, BA 67) is, although Chapman doesn’t know it, taken from her own automated message service, which Hartke rings up repeatedly to listen to.

The Japanese woman is a woman Hartke sees in town: “a white-haired woman, Japanese, alone on a stone path in front of her house. She held a garden hose and stood weightless under lowering skies, so flat and still she might be gift wrap, and she watered a border of scarlet phlox, a soft spay arching from the nozzle.” (BA, 35-6) The executive checking her watch we don’t see as a character, only as a gesture that Hartke has already incorporated into her exercise routines.

Absolutely central to the novel, however, is *Body Time*’s naked man, whose original is ‘Mr Tuttle’, a strange, aphasic, autistic man who appears inexplicably in the house perhaps a week after Hartke’s return from the funeral. Although unable to establish who he is, how he comes to be there or even *how long* he has been there, she lets him stay. His conversation is at first echolalic in the standard sense (i.e. mechanically repeating phrases back at an interlocutor) but over time this develops to include phrases said by Robles and Hartke over the preceding months, and also to feature uncanny mimicry of them both, but all this “without a visible sense of the effect he was having”. (BA, 50)

The alternative conceivable explanations for this – that Mr Tuttle was hidden in the house all along, or that he is in some way supernatural – are left equally possible, and equally unproven, although the novel does at least seem to rule out the idea that he is a figment of Hartke’s imagination. The super- or preternatural element of the novel (which, as I said, is at the very least suggested in the weirdness of Hartke’s own art – although Chapman’s descriptions of the physical unfeasibility of her performance could equally be symptomatic of journalistic whimsy or hyperbole) extends to Mr Tuttle seeming to ‘repeat’ a phrase of Hartke’s that she doesn’t say until later, and to a segment

in which Hartke herself imagines a scene – an encounter with the owner of their rented house – which does in fact occur in the book’s final chapter.

The supernatural, or inexplicable, or miraculous is a recurring theme in DeLillo, though it is often linked to a critique of belief as credulity, as in the story ‘The Angel Esmeralda’ (DeLillo, 2011)³¹ in which people gather to see the face of murdered girl appear in a billboard poster when it is lit by the headlights of passing trains. There, as in, for instance, the most photographed barn in America in his earlier novel *White Noise*, DeLillo seems to offer a deflationary, rational explanation for the phenomenon that the public at large chooses to ignore. Here, though – above all in Hartke’s premonition of the later encounter with the house owner – we seem to be presented with the supernatural as evidential, unignorable fact.

The importance to my present argument of the supernatural, or the inexplicable, or the irreducible-to-rationality, is that its presence, or even the suggestion of its presence, is DeLillo’s way of putting a brake on my idea that the novel as a whole equates to an (impossible and ideal) reverse ekphrasis. If Mitchell’s ekphrastic hope would have it that reading the novel is somehow, magically, equivalent to ‘seeing’ the performance, to ‘being there’ in the room, then the muted and – if not substantiated then certainly circumstantially supported – insistence on the supernatural in Hartke’s performance resists this, as if to suggest that even the people who *were* there didn’t quite know, or couldn’t quite believe, what it was that they saw.

In theoretical terms, this equates to the third part of Mitchell’s progression of ekphrastic indifference, hope and fear: “the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than (as in the first, “indifferent” phase of ekphrasis) a natural fact that can be relied on.” (Mitchell, 1997: 154) It is as if that, in setting up the whole book to give us the

³¹ The story was first published in 1994, and later incorporated into the final pages of *Underworld*.

impression of actually seeing Hartke's performance – or of *having seen* it, of being availed of the same experience as was given to those who saw it – DeLillo is reminding us of the impossibility of this. And this gesture of modesty, or self-deprecation, only goes to highlight how close the book approaches that impossible ideal; as if the falling short is, here, the 'natural fact', outside of DeLillo's control; that it would have worked, if only things weren't constructed just so.^{32,33}

The figure of Mr Tuttle, then, is emblematic of the dual operation of the novel, that sees Hartke processing and exploring her grief, and at the same time working towards an artistic expression that, however, should not be taken as an expression *of* that grief. “How simple it would be if I could say this is a piece that comes directly out of what happened to Rey”, she says, in the interview, when Chapman puts this to her. “But I can't. Be nice if I could say this is the drama of men and women versus death. I want to say that but I can't. It's too small and secluded and complicated and I can't and I can't and I can't.” (BA, 108-9)

Body Time, Hartke's piece of performance/body art, is not about Robles, or Mr Tuttle, or the Japanese woman, so much as about the searching out, as Chapman suggests, of a “root identity”. If its creation is linked to Robles's death, it might be said to be a search for a new way of being in the world. The book is full of gestures and gestures repeated, pushed to their limit, turned into ritual, broken down to their barest essence and stretched out to their longest, slowest extension. This is similar to, but different from the slowing down that happens in *24 Hour Psycho*. That work makes sly

³² Clark in *The Sight of Death* (2006) dwells on the elements of Poussin's paintings that don't make sense (their instances of “inconsistency” and “optical glitch” (157), “ambivalent geometry” (158)): sheep and cattle that cast too perfect reflections; a herdsman with no reflection; a bull whose reflection is hidden behind a small hillock he is in fact in front of; an “impossible lean-to, with shadows folding and unfolding every which way” (132) This building in of paradox is, he says, often there as a foil to the more central statement: “Anyone can invent an impossible lean-to [...] paradox is one thing painting is good at. But the interest of painting is in answering paradox.” (132)

³³ Clark also says, and perhaps this has just as much bearing on my thesis – and may even approach DeLillo's own likely take on it – that “the *real* problem [is] knowing when an interpretation should stop – when pressing it further would be too neat, tiresome, convoluted, or all three.” (Clark, 2006: 132)

use of the mechanics of cinema to turn what we falsely perceive, when run at normal speed, as the natural narrative flow of existence (“the natural fact”), into a series of transparently artificial stills. In reducing narrative to a series of camp poses it allies itself with the traditional atemporal aesthetics of the image. The work allows us to consider each of the many thousand still images contained in the movie and consider: is *this* the pregnant (Lessing) or decisive (Cartier-Bresson) moment, that most fully suggests a narrative beyond the situation it presents?

By contrast, the gesture in *Body Time* approaches, but, like Zeno’s arrow, never quite reaches stasis. Hartke’s gestures are abstracted, and looped – they are each taken outside the flow of lived or narrated time as decisively as is the pose, or the photograph, while still of course having, in each iteration, an extension in time. In her performance the gesture becomes the basic unit of our operation, as human beings, in time and space, the physical equivalent of a phoneme or grapheme. Hartke seems to be interested in what our most basic units of action in the world say about us, just as Poussin’s *Landscape with a Man Killed by Snake*, is, in Clark’s words:

about a moment of seeing, certainly; but just as much about touch and balance, about the physical conditions of human movement (and immobilization). Running, lolling, leaning forward, reaching out to others, flicking one’s fingers, pulling on a [fishing] net, struggling against an enemy’s choking pressure – these are all its subjects, all of them informing the sight of death. (Clark, 2006: 237)

(Gestures are there, too, in *Falling Man*: in the repeated wrist exercises prescribed to Keith by his physiotherapist, and perhaps in the repeated gesture of Janiak of throwing himself towards but not to his death. And DeLillo’s dialogue, too, is gestural. As much as David Mamet in the theatre he accentuates the formalism of the vernacular, where expression is most efficiently reduced to cliché.)

But there is a difference in tenor to the gestures made and repeated in the first chapter of *The Body Artist*, before Robles’ death, and those that come after. In the first

chapter, Hartke groans when she bends to reach inside the refrigerator, but only as a way of identifying with him, cementing their relationship: “She was too trim and limber to feel the strain and was only echoing Rey, identifyingly, groaning his groan, but in a manner so seamless and deep it was her discomfort too” (BA, 9)

After the suicide, the incidence of repeated gesture increases, often as part of Hartke’s body art exercises, though also extending beyond the specific theatrical routines and cleansing rituals to an ambient awareness of her own body and its functioning:

Her body felt different to her in ways she did not understand. Tight, framed, she didn’t know exactly. Slightly foreign and unfamiliar. Different, thinner, didn’t matter.

In the first days back she got out of the car once and nearly collapsed – not the major breakdown of every significant function but a small helpless sinking toward the ground, a kind of forgetting how to stand. (both BA, 33)

These descriptive close-ups allow us, when the time comes, to visualise *Body Time* as a performance with far greater clarity than the description in Chapman’s feature would otherwise allow us. We fold into our appreciation of it an understanding of how Hartke moves, and of the reasons *why* she moves like this, and of her reflections on the world that are expressed through those movements; we understand these not as reflections *tout court*, but as evidence of a kind of mental trigonometry, where what she sees is translated into thought and thence into expression. Seen in retrospect, these mental gestures become the transformative actions of the artist, and inform our understanding of the art: “she became aware that she was describing what he [Mr Tuttle] said to some third person in her mind” (BA, 63); and again: “she found herself describing the scene, mentally, to someone who may have been Mariella, or not, as if he [Mr Tuttle, again] were a piece of found art and they needed, between them, to settle the question of his usability.” (BA, 81)

Likewise, the ‘miraculous’ reincarnation or channelling of Robles in the person of Mr Tuttle – or the willingness of Hartke to see the one in the other – is analogous to the experience of encountering art, of investing privileged forms of matter or behaviour or sound with properties beyond those attributable to their empirical presentation. In offering us an art work in this way, DeLillo is modelling a possible theory of artistic reception, one that shows what we bring to the encounter with art, what we are given during it, and the surprisingly various manners in which that giving occurs.

In his essay ‘Criticism as Retrieval’ (in which criticism stands for “the process of coming to understand a particular work of art”, applicable across all the arts) Richard Wollheim defines criticism as:

the reconstruction of the creative process, where the creative process must in turn be thought of as something not stopping short of, but terminating on, the work of art itself. The creative process reconstructed, or retrieval complete, the work is then open to understanding. (Wollheim, 1980: 185)³⁴

Wollheim posits his theory in opposition to those who see scrutiny as the central act of criticism, to which he responds that:

Understanding is reached through description, but through profound description, or description profounder than scrutiny can provide, and such description may be expected to include such issues as how much of the character of the work is by design, how much has come about through change of intention, and what were the ambitions that went to its making but were not realized in the final product. (Wollheim, 1980: 192)

Here, description is description-to-self, the thinking into an artwork that is such a part of the aesthetic encounter, in which the work is represented, and recreated, by the reader/viewer, to him or herself, at any level of perception more active than simply looking: at the level of scrutiny. (As suggested in my chapter on *Point Omega*, in

³⁴ Note, though, that in the book to which this is a supplementary essay Wollheim offers the paradoxical assertion that: “The spectator will always understand more than the artist intended, and the artist will always have intended more than any single spectator understands.” (Wollheim, 1980: 119)

encountering an artwork we do more than passively take it in; we imitate it, re-thinking its thoughts, re-enacting its structural strategies.)

To read *The Body Artist* according to this ‘retrieval’ theory it is striking how delicately the text presents those elements that might be thought to show the design, intention and ambition of Hartke during the time of her creative process. None of these qualities is shown directly; rather we are offered events and cognitions that go towards an eventual appreciation of her design and intentions, but – as before – this can come only once the fact of the artwork is finally established.

Wollheim’s theory chimes with sections of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* in which he says that perception of the artwork is impossible without some knowledge of what it is that one is seeing. Adorno’s most concrete example is that of complex music, in which, as with W. Steiner’s retention and protention:

there is a constantly varying threshold between what is primarily perceived and what is determined by the reflexive perception of consciousness. The understanding of the meaning of a fleeting musical passage often depends on the intellectual comprehension of its function in a whole that is not present; the purportedly immediate experience itself depends on what goes beyond pure immediacy. (Adorno, 2004: 429)

To apply this analogy to my reading of *The Body Artist*, we would have to say that the *inimmediacy* of the reader’s experience of the novel is redoubled by its tactic of delaying or misdirecting our comprehension, in the moment, of its most important ‘fleeting passages’ (which here would be, for example, the description of the Japanese woman, or of Mr Tuttle). The function of those passages is withheld until we reach the description of the (absent) performance of *Body Time*, into which sudden chasm, we could say, all our understanding, all our criticism pours, remaking the ‘whole’ of the novel even as it creates, instantly and completely, the second, holographic ‘whole’ of Hartke’s performance.

This process is similar to a more general theory of aesthetics described by Adorno:

If [artworks] are not timelessly self-same, but rather become what they are because their own meaning is a process of becoming, they summon forth forms of spirit – commentary and critique, for example – through which this process is fulfilled. These forms remain weak, however, so long as they do not reach the truth content of the works. They only become capable of this by being honed to aesthetics. The truth content of an artwork requires philosophy.” (Adorno, 2004: 433)

By analogy, a reverse ekphrasis such as *The Body Artist* works by giving the reader a commentary and critique, which then implies the artwork that would produce them. *The Body Artist* is concerned with presenting us with the truth content of *Body Time* – or with collaborating with us in its creation. The work itself (*Body Time*) is a product of the truth content, rather than vice versa. DeLillo does not speak *for* Hartke or her work, but he presents the raw material which allows us to make that interpretation ourselves. Thus it escapes what Stephen Cheeke calls “the conventional paradox of ekphrasis” which consists in a “violation of the silence of the artwork, speaking up for the piece and saying what [its] silence means.” (Cheeke, 2009: 166)

It is fruitful to compare this reticence (the reticence of the hologram) to another short novel that treats the creative process that goes into a single work: Gabriel Josipovici’s *The Big Glass* (1991). Here the text is made up of the “freewheeling commentary” written by the artist Harsent (and transcribed by a friend) during the creation of the eponymous work, (Josipovici, 1991: 17) and as such is explicitly engaged in discussions of design, intention and ambition (as per Wollheim), together with descriptions of the work-in-progress itself.

There are two essential differences between this and *The Body Artist*. Firstly, Harsent and the Big Glass are clearly modelled on Marcel Duchamp and his *The Bride*

Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even (Large Glass), and so the work of visualising the finished work is already half-done. And secondly, and more fundamentally for my argument, the work is explicitly posited from the outset; it is assembled in the mind of the reader just as it is assembled in the studio of the artist, right up until the catastrophic moment when, as with Duchamp's piece, part of the glass became cracked during transit.

Thus *The Big Glass* (like the *Green Box* that Duchamp produced to accompany his work) hovers between ekphrasis and critique, its ekphrastic elements accompanied by clear and manifest exegesis, but it lacks that crucial factor that makes *The Body Artist*, in my reading, a reverse ekphrasis: that it is the mimesis not of the artwork itself, but of the *perception* of the artwork, its encounter; not Heffernan's "verbal representation of a visual representation", but a verbal representation of an aesthetic experience (representation, reception and criticism combined) as complete as any posited in Mitchell's ekphrastic hope.

Central to this, in the case of *The Body Artist*, is the quasi-spatial manipulation of the reader/viewer by the novel, as suggested by Clark, putting him or her in a particular position with regards to it and its truth content, and building towards the moment when the embedded or hidden artwork (the artwork that the reader does not realise has been being built in front of him/her all along) is revealed as such, and the truth content of the novel is transmuted into the full aesthetic understanding of the suddenly, miraculously 'seen' artwork.

This reading of *The Body Artist* as a reverse ekphrasis is obviously open to criticism from those that stick to the narrow definition of ekphrasis as a "verbal representation of a visual representation". Even accepting my contention that the novel expands on the truth content of the work (its meaning, creative process etc), which traditional ekphrasis tends to minimise as part of its operation, there is nevertheless the clear distinction that

ekphrasis traditionally concentrates on the non-temporal, and *Body Time*, as a piece of performance or body art, is unavoidably temporal.

Against this I would argue that the usual antipathy of ekphrasis towards temporal art is not in its temporality per se, for why must a described object stand still? but in its narrative content. The *ut pictura poesis* tradition insists on the poem speaking the story that has been silenced – through being stilled – in the painting. It is the muteness, or *narrative* stillness, of the artwork described, rather than its physical stasis, that is central to the ekphrastic enterprise.

In *Body Time* there is little or no story, only the presentation of being, or the deconstruction of ordinary life to a series of gestures, just as in *24 Hour Psycho* there is no story, only the dismantling of story to a series of ‘stills’. *Body Time* is a work that one must stand in front of, as one stands in front of a painting. As a piece of mime, it recalls the mime in the Mallarmé poem cited by Derrida in his ‘The Double Session’, that “illustrates only the idea, not any actual action.” (quoted in Derrida, 1991: 172)

And the response of the writer to the work’s muteness is certainly not to speak for it, but rather to mimic that muteness. For, after all, even if we take the extreme stance of ekphrastic hope and say that reading *The Body Artist* is equivalent to seeing *Body Time*, then still we would not say that we fully ‘understand’ the characters that Hartke impersonates or evokes; rather we fully see and appreciate – and ‘understand’ – her attempt to embody and present them.

Thus, we could say that the furthest we would push the idea of the reverse ekphrasis as fulfilment of Mitchell’s idea of ekphrastic hope is that it answers Adorno’s assertion that “[the] task of aesthetics is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended.” (Adorno, 2004: 157)

Or rather, we could say that Adorno's call for incomprehensibility in the modern artwork creates the conditions for a reverse ekphrasis. A reverse ekphrasis, in contrast to its traditional form, is aesthetic rather than mimetic, it mimes mimesis, rather than performing it, where mime is the act of evoking something, enacting its absence, rather than attempting to embody or represent it.

References

Works by Don DeLillo – in order of first publication

Americana. (1971). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

The Names. (1989). London: Picador. First published: (1982). New York: Vintage.

White Noise. (1985). New York: Viking.

Mao II. (1991). New York: Viking.

‘The Angel Esmeralda’. (2011). In *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories* (pp. 73-102).
London: Picador. First published: (1994). *Esquire*, May.

Underworld. (1997). New York: Scribner.

The Body Artist. (2001). London: Picador.

‘Baader-Meinhof’. (2011). In *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories* (pp. 105-118).
London: Picador. First published: (2002). *The New Yorker*, April 1.

Falling Man. (2008). London: Picador. First published: (2007). New York: Scribner.

Point Omega. (2009). London: Picador.

Secondary Works

Boxall, P. (2008). ‘DeLillo and Media Culture’. In J. Duvall (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (pp. 43-52). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DeLillo, D. (1993). ‘The Art of Fiction’. *The Paris Review*, 128, Fall 1993. Retrieved online from: www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1887/the-art-of-fiction-no-135-don-delillo, 24 July 2013.

- Duvall, J. N. (2011). 'Witnessing Trauma: *Falling Man* and Performance Art'. In S. Olster (Ed.), *Don DeLillo: Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man* (pp. 152-168). London: Continuum.
- Laist, R. (2010). *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Osteen, M. (2000). *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Osteen, M. (2008). 'DeLillo's Dedalian Artists'. In J. N. Duvall (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (pp. 137-150). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Other Works Cited and Referenced

- Adorno, T. (2004). *Aesthetic Theory* (R. Hullot-Kentor, Trans.). London: Continuum. First published as *Aesthetische Theorie*. (1970). Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T & Horkheimer, M. (1997). *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (J. Cumming, Trans.). London: Verso. First published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. (1947). Amsterdam: Querido.
- Ashbery, J. (1987). *Selected Poems*. London: Paladin.
- Baker, N. (1994). *The Fermata*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Balzac, H. (2001). *The Unknown Masterpiece* (R. Howard, Trans.). New York: New York Review of Books. First published as 'Maître Frenhofer' in *L'Artiste*, 1831.
- Barnes, J. (1989). *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Baxandall, M. (2003). *Words For Pictures: Seven Papers on Renaissance Art and Criticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Cary, J. (1944). *The Horse's Mouth*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Cheeke, S. (2009). *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Clark, T.J. (2006). *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1991). 'The Double Session' (B. Johnson, Trans.). In Kamuf, P. (Ed.), *Between The Blinds: A Derrida Reader* (pp. 172-199). Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf. First published as 'La Double Séance' in *La Dissémination*. (1972). Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Doody, M. A. (1998). *The True Story of the Novel*. London: Fontana Press.
- Ekphrasis. (1996). In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eliot, T.S. (1953). 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. In J. Hayward (Ed.), *Selected Prose* (pp. 21-30). First published 1919.
- Fowler, D. P. (1991). 'Narrate and Describe: The Problem of Ekphrasis'. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 81, pp. 25-35.
- Genette, G. (1990). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press. First published as *Figures I-III*. (1969-1979). Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Godfrey, T. (1998). *Conceptual Art*. London: Phaidon.
- Goldie, P. & Schellekens, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hagstrum, J. (1958). *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Heffernan, J. A. W. (1993). *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- Hirst, D. & Burn, G. (2001). *On the Way to Work*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Hollander, J. 'Ecphrasis'. In M. Kelly (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics. Oxford Art Online*: Oxford University Press. Web. Retrieved from www.oxfordartonline.com, 10 July 2013.

- Hustvedt, S. (2012). 'Embodied Visions: What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art?'.
In *Living, Thinking, Looking* (pp. 336-354). London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Josipovici, G. (1991). *The Big Glass*. Manchester: Carcanet.
- Keats, J. (2007). *Selected Poems*. London: Penguin.
- Kinloch, David. (2010). 'The Poet in the Art Gallery: Accounting for Ekphrasis'.
International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing, 7 (1), pp.
19-29.
- Krieger, M. (1992). *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Baltimore: John
Hopkins University Press.
- Lessing, G. E. (1957). *Laocoon: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting* (E. Frothingham,
Trans.). New York: Noonday Press. First published as *Laokoon oder Über die
Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*. (1766).
- Lippard, L. (1973). *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966-1972*.
London: Studio Vista.
- Loizeaux, E. B. (2008). *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press.
- Mann, T. (1949). *Doctor Faustus* (H. T. Lowe-Porter, Trans.). London: Secker &
Warburg. First published as *Doktor Faustus* (1947). Stockholm: Bermann-Fisher.
- Meyer, U. (Ed.). (1972). *Conceptual Art*. New York: Dutton.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (1997). *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Muir, G. (2009). *Lucky Kunst: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*. London: Aurum.
- Plato. (1987). *The Republic* (D. Lee, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Shaw, G. B. S. (1916). *Pygmalion*. New York: Bretano.
- Spiegelman, W. (2005). *How Poets See The World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spitzer, L. (1955). 'The "Ode on a Grecian Urn," or Content vs. Metagrammar'.
Comparative Literature, 7 (3), pp. 203-225.

- Steiner, G. (1991). *Real Presences*. London: Faber.
- Steiner, W. (1982). *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Steiner, W. (1988). *Pictures of Romance: Form against Context in Painting and Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thompson, D. (2008). *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art and Auction Houses*. London: Aurum.
- Thornton, S. (2008). *Seven Days in the Art World*. London: Granta.
- Virgil. (1991). *The Aeneid* (D. West, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Wilde, O. (1890). *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Philadelphia: Lippincotts Monthly Magazine.
- Williams, T. 'Body art'. *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*: Oxford University Press. Web. Retrieved from www.oxfordartonline.com, 15 June 2013.
- Williams, W. C. (1988). *Collected Poems Vol II 1939-1962*. London: Carcanet.
- Wimsatt, W. K. & Beardsley, M. C. (2010). 'The Intentional Fallacy'. In V. B. Leitch et al (Eds.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (pp. 1232-1246). New York: Norton. First published 1946.
- Wollheim, R. (1980). *Art and its Objects: with six supplementary essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wordsworth, W. (2010). 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*'. In V. B. Leitch et al (Eds.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (pp. 556-578). New York: Norton. First published 1800.
- Zola, E. (2008). *The Masterpiece* (Walton, T. & Pearson R., Trans.). Oxford: Oxford World Classics. First published as *L'Oeuvre*. (1886). Paris: Charpentier
- Zola, E. (1970). *L'Assommoir* (L. Tancock, Trans.). London: Penguin. First published 1876. Paris: Charpentier.