Transpositions: Painting and the Phenomenological Fragments of the Unrecognizable

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Abstract

For Anselm Kiefer, his painting shows that, that something exists “shows that there is also nothingness.” The moment of visibility is also the moment of our exposure in/with/through nothing (in a gerundive sense) elemental in the happening of the visible. Painting bears ways of exposing the becoming of the visible and ultimately of consciousness, both sensible and intellectual, in/through/with emptying and nothing, i.e., in the happening of the seer and the seen, in that coming into being of existing, we are exposed to the insight that “there is also nothingness.” The paper offers a series of transpositions, a series of ways of experiencing visibility and vision found in looking at specific images and paintings. The transpositions expose us to blindness, emptying, gaps, and loss in the happening of the visible, which, in displacing the certainty of rational subjective seeing/consciousness, lead to the quickening of vision and the visible anew.

Keywords

Painting celebrates no other enigma than that of visibility.

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY1

Sensitivity to being’s emptiness within the plenitude of presence needs constantly to be nurtured by a fine-tuned, and sophisticated attentiveness to visuality.

VERONIQUE FÓTI²

Oh the ascent of clouds, of words,
Entrusted to the shard mounds of fire.

INGEBORG BACHMANN³

1 Preface

In 2023 I had the opportunity of giving the André Schuwer lecture at the meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.⁴ While the invitation was a delightful surprise, the task ahead was simply humbling. The prospect of speaking in front of an audience of specialists, my teachers, and my philosophical friends was certainly a privilege but also a challenge, a challenge to attempt to give back and contribute to the generous conversations that had led me to be in the place to receive such an invitation. The idea of giving the lecture brought me back to many generous conversations and to many places, with colleagues, among them the many instances of learning over the last 25 years at the Collegium Phaenomenologicum, the place where I also came to know André Schuwer (although not personally) through the many loving stories, anecdotes, and moments in philosophical dialogue when

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⁴ The idea for the paper came in part from my ongoing dialogue with the deep vision and understanding of painting of David Kangas, a thinker who despite his untimely passing still accompanies my thought. Particularly in response to his last piece, which was left unfinished, “The Eye of the Painter // The Eye of Death.” (Begun 1/17/2013). Work unpublished.
his thoughts and the excellence of his translations appeared to animate us onward.

The invitation to give the lecture occasioned my return to central themes and issues in my work in a manner that led me back to its ground in a new way. Painting, phenomenology and hermeneutics, and in particular Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of painting’s phenomenological and philosophical significance in its own right, became the issues that engulfed me for the next five months. These had been pillars of my work on aesthetic thought and decolonial aesthetics, a work that seeks to engage pre-reflexive, affective, embodying, and memorial dimensions that underlie and inform philosophical thought. I now had the chance to return to a core point, to the question of a thinking that may arise in/through/with the coming into being of the visible, in a kind of simultaneous originary arising of consciousness, things, and worlds. In the paper I was interested in following through the challenge Merleau-Ponty leaves us in his work. Reading Merleau-Ponty one comes to face openings for thinking no longer grounded primarily in metaphysics, in subjective synthetic consciousness, nor in pure transcendental consciousness. As is well known, and dramatically evident in the date of composition of “Eye and Mind” (1960), Merleau-Ponty’s work not only addresses painting in the Phenomenology of Perception (1942), but in his last work, too, he turns to painting at a point of radical exploration and creativity. The visible’s invisible, incarnate thought, flesh, gap, the point zero of vision, and the chiasm in the very asymmetrical specular arising of seer and seen, such moments leave open paths for thinking yet to come, ways of thinking at the limit of and inseparable from the very happening of self, consciousness, and worlds. My return to these questions and themes was then further kindled and set beyond expectations. Experiencing Anselm Kiefer’s exhibit at the Palazzo Ducale in Venice transposed what I had been studying and thinking, as well as my own visual insights as a painter. The show brought one down to the dynamic happening of originary consciousness, as it elicited a displacement of subjectivity, of the visible, and of the senses, leaving one exposed to gathering sense and world anew. In the lecture I sought to bring the audience back into such nascent happenings, and in a manner that would give a sense and bring one to undergo a thinking arising in, with, and through such originary movement. In this article I attempt the same.

2 Introduction

On the occasion of the 2018 exhibit “Für Andrea Emo,” Anselm Kiefer states that he dedicated the show to the Italian philosopher because of his fascination in discovering in Emo’s philosophical thought “the spiritual and intellectual
superstructure” of his painting.\textsuperscript{5} Kiefer indicates that he finds in Emo’s work that which has always informed his painting, but he had never formulated. The painter repeats Andrea Emo’s insight, that something exists “shows that there is also nothingness.”\textsuperscript{6} The moment of visibility is also the moment of our exposure in/with/through nothing. Nothing elemental to the visible. Painting does not merely copy reality, that which is and appears, nor does it limit itself to making visible the elements of and the coming into visibility of that which appears. For Kiefer painting affords us insight into the shining of beings, the appearing of the world and beings in happenings that figure their undoing or emptying in the very appearing. As we will see, the inverse is also the case, in that in the emptying happens the visible. Painting bears ways of exposing the becoming of the visible, and ultimately of consciousness both sensible and intellectual, in/through/with emptying and nothing, i.e., in the happening of the seer and the seen, in that, in the coming into being of existing, we are exposed to the insight that “there is also nothingness.” Nothing … no-thing, no things or their logic of presence, no essences, no categories or pure intuitions, no a priori synthesis by a subject, no pure transcendental structures, no linguistic sheltering … all of which traditionally may ultimately offer meaning, sense, or direction, and that may claim to justify, define, determine, or fully grasp the happening of visibility, consciousness, worlds in their happening on their way.\textsuperscript{7}

Speaking of emptiness (the Japanese Ku) Kiefer states in a conversation with Klaus Dermutz, “I have written a lot about empty space … I mean seeing without a conceptual framework, perception without intention. You see an analogy to the beginning of the world, where everything is still immaterial … energy that has not yet manifested itself. That’s how concept, images, crystallization points form as one [things] develops, as if in a fluid that has been poured out and continues to spread. And these crystallization points, these coagulations will forever maintain a relation to this initial empty space.”\textsuperscript{8} At issue in painting is a return to an originary movement, which cannot be conceptually or

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid.
\item I should note that because we are seeking to stay with the happening, or differencing movement towards visibility, the differencing movement we will take up cannot be understood from a point of differentiated beings, or in terms of a teleologically destined differentiation. This is a point Daniela Vallega-Neu makes about Merleau-Ponty’s sense of the configuring of consciousness in Daniela Vallega-Neu, \textit{The Bodily Dimension in Thinking} (Albany: SUNY press, 2012), 70.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
even visually represented. Empty space not as something or the lack of something, but elemental emptying in the dynamic happening of the visible and of the seeing of the visible. Should we not then speak in gerundive, of emptying and nothing in the being underway of appearing? In the being on the way of seeing and seen, of perceptual consciousness? And would not such a turn open a path towards engaging the arising of intellectual consciousness and that which is being understood through the pre-reflexive?

My aim in the following pages is to begin to introduce how painting exposes us to emptying and nothing in the happening of visibility, in the happenings of vision (or seeing, the seer) and of the visible (or the seen). I should underscore that in following this path I am interested in engaging that embodying happening that, for Merleau-Ponty, originates conceptual philosophical thought, styles of understanding that are not circumscribed by either objectifying perceptual consciousness or objectifying intellectual consciousness. Therefore, in looking at paintings and images I am seeking to expose the reader to dynamic non-conceptual and non-representational dimensions articulated in visual works. This entails engaging emptying and nothing through physicality, through embodying, through carnal coagulating and crystallizations that happen in the act of painting and in the experience of seeing and remaining with the happening of paintings.

My approach in the following discussion is to look at a series of paintings in order to share ways of seeing and of understanding the visible or the coming into being or appearing of the visible and vision (seer and seen). I do this by engaging in five transpositions, five instances or ways of seeing; five distinct encounters with visibility, vision, and the visible in their happening through images and paintings. In each case we will explore the way certain images and paintings bring us back to emptying and nothing in the originary happening of visibility, vision, and the visible. The emphasis is in learning to see again, rather than in engaging painting through a conceptual lens (ex. asking about “what” is painting in general, or seeking to determine its value and/or meaning) or as a mimetic art.

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9 See footnote seven.
10 I am thinking here of the way Merleau-Ponty takes up perceptual and intellectual consciousness as continuous and differentiated by a kind of sublimation, in what I would call an intensifying of the arising of the visible.
11 In addition, the transpositions should indicate that I am not looking for a general sense of painting.
12 Throughout the work leading up to this lecture I have kept a close dialogue with Merleau-Ponty’s work, with particular interest in his later work where he introduces chiasmic differencing, hollowing in the specular reversibility of visibility, the seeing body’s
3 Transposition I

3.1 Zero Point

The picture shows seeing, seeing happening already amid the world. The world around opens, envelopes the seen and the see-er. Specifically, an envelope is evident, the elements that envelope vision: stone, water, sky, air, and light. Light appears not only as it bounces off the surface of things but through reflecting that produces the blue of the ocean, the evanescence of sky. Light that also appears along the dense atmospheric haze on the top left of the picture, and light captured in the air passing through the humid atmosphere. Light passing and caught ephemerally in mid-air in the play between ocean spray and sky.

At the same time, the point of view from which all is seen is embodied. The view is situated, rather than being a 360-degree view, the movement is limited blind point or zero point, and the way the invisible happens as non-Urpräsentierbar. In a working note from February 1959, Merleau-Ponty writes, "The 'invisible world': it is given originally as non-Urpräsentierbar, as the other is in his body given originally as absent – as a divergence, as a transcendence ..." (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 180). Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Le visible et l'invisible (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 234.
to the specific physicality of body and eye. Such embodied view is neither universal nor is it a view from outside the world of appearing and being seen. Such view, such an appearing of the visible figures a point zero, a blindness inherent in the visible's appearing. While the engulfing world is visible, the embodied point of view of the camera or eye, from which and through which all is seen, remains unrepresentable. Seeing cannot be seen. Even if one were to take a picture of the eye watching, this would once again expose the point from which such picture is taken as a blind spot, and this in an infinite regress of images arisen through a point zero, through a blindness, a not seeing, nothing in seeing. In short, seeing and the appearing of the world happen simultaneously with a kind of blindness.

What is most strange is that the image we have been discussing does expose us as seers to a blind spot in our very seeing the world, or in the very arising to visibility of world and seer. The image, without representing it, exposes us to the unrepresentable and to the blind spot, an elemental nothing inherent in the appearing of the visible.

3.2 The Eye's Quickening
In taking the picture I have been discussing (fig. 1), I was merely attempting to photograph the seascape, the land, the wildflowers from a still point. I was approaching the world as I saw it with the naked eye, as a thing, a phenomenon already configured with a stable form. I was attempting to take a picture of nature. Close attentiveness to the image reveals that it interrupts such expectations. In looking at this image the eye does not have a single vision upon which to rest the eye. Indeed, the eye will not rest. The seeming clarity and determinate form of the foreground is nowhere else repeated. In attempting to see the whole the eye must travel continuously back and forth between a determinate world in the foreground and the ambiguity of an impossible horizon, a line that the eye must continue to determine. The eye will not rest as the world appears in a dynamic movement between determinate thing and indeterminate happening. Light, air, water, the spray of the sea, the density of air, in the appearing of the world, move. Only in the fitting of the foreground with that dynamic background may the appearing be found, and such fitting will continue to require the eye's adjustment. In the appearing of the world the seen and the seer continue to be reconfigured in a fathomless infinite happening. The flower, the world, the visible, appear in a dynamic going in and out of determinate form. The visible as a whole appears in constant becoming as breathing, rhythm, pulp, pulsation, texture, surface, depth, and living flesh.
In seeing, in the eye, vision cannot merely remain fixed towards things already determined. In this second image (fig. 2), I was merely taking a picture of foliage. However, the camera reveals the visible without the operation of an adjustment that will allow the naked eye to see an integrated world. The image exposes us to the happening of the visible, to a seeing that must continue to happen through adjustment in order to bring the visible into unity. In other words, in order to see the foliage the eye must continuously learn to see again. In staying with the images we are discussing, the eye is robbed of its objectivity, since the eye must follow in/with/through the rhythm of the world becoming, the dance of light and flesh, a rhythm even experienced in such a “still” image as this one. The appearing of thing and light is a matter of continuous resonance and vibration, a dance that requires a continuous reconfiguration of the seen and the seer’s body and eye. One is exposed to such dynamics in the first image as the eye must travel between foreground and background in coming to see the whole as one, the whole is only visible through learning to see again and again. A constant happening in the ambiguity of the arising of the visible made evident by the image’s exposing us to foreground and background, to the perpetual play of determinate and indeterminate visibility. In the second image, only by a continuous adjustment will foliage and light be held into the determinate presence of things. Indeed, the gathering of light and foliage into one ultimately proves impossible, as the eye is caught by the ambiguity of the visible’s resonance.
In being attentive to the arising of the visible in such infinite ambiguity, one finds that seeing is no longer a matter of merely perceiving, or of an objective seer. Seeing happens in continuous transposition, through constantly learning to see again in/with/through the nascent visible world. To see is to be learning to see again. This I believe is what Paul Klee sees when he asks in 1924, in his famous lecture “On Modern Art,” “who as an artist would not want to dwell there? In the womb of nature, in the primal ground of creation, which holds the secret key to everything that is?”

4 Transposition II – The Travesty of the Image

Images are constitutive of the way one sees and finds the world, constitutive of sense experiences, constitutive in the appearing of the world. Not only do we see the world through images, but images hold the world together. Indeed, even in the case of someone who does not see, the world holds as one through the correspondence of senses and body with the world being sustained in perception. In the case of visibility – the perception of things and their spatiality – the perception of the world only happens as a secondary moment of visibility, once the sensible impressions that strike the eye have passed through the optical nerve, then images are composed through the operation of various sections of the brain working together. Notable is that in the constituting of the visible and its seeming smoothness, already in the very passage from eye to brain the optical nerve plays a fundamental role and figures a blindness, a point zero.

Graphic images interrupt the seeming continuity between images and the appearing of the world. Graphic images do not simply appear as part of the perception of the world, they appear as interpolations that interrupt the smooth continuity between seeing and what is seen. It is as if vision doubled and, in that doubling, seeing became displaced from its natural happening. Graphic images do not merely copy that which is seen but they effect a necessary deformation of the world. As we are reminded in Plato’s *Sophist*, a three-storey high sculpture of Socrates should not be a repetition of the proportionality of his actual body, for this would produce a being with enormous feet and a pin head. Mimesis requires deformation for the sake of capturing the visible.

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Moreover, graphic images are difficult in their appearing, since, in general, such images are not something that appears for itself (the image appears showing something else, that which it is not), nor are they what they seem to be, that is, that which is represented. In these two ways images are by virtue of not-being (something). One could say that images happen as ambiguous seeming. Indeed, graphic images happen by way of distorting “natural” perception. In seeming and not being and in the deformation of vision the image interrupts profane everyday perception. The image relates not by repetition of the visible but by a disruption, a disruption that may lead to a new understanding of the visible. This is what Paul Klee means when he states that “Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible.” In this sense images happen literally as metaphors, as transformations not only of what we see but of how we see.

It is such a transformative opening disruption that operates in the two images we discussed above. The blind point in seeing and the infinite becoming of the eye in/with/through the seen disrupt the everyday oblivious way of seeing the world. In both images, vision, and specifically how one sees, are disrupted. This is because the images interpolate vision and visibility, disrupting the work of consciousness or subjectivation in its situated self-understanding. The image figures a rip in the fabric of the everyday. Moreover, such rip affects seeing, as seeing and seen are exposed to the blind point and ambiguity in the happening of visibility, an interruption that bears the gapping, hollowing, and emptying in visibility’s dynamic dis-appearing.

The image makes vision visible by disrupting everyday seeing, and in the interruption eye and mind find themselves on the way to a reconfiguration. The image sinks eye and mind into the movement of nascent consciousness, world, beings. The eye, blind to itself in seeing, the eye finding configuration in the visible happening, in an incarnate seeing in/with/through nothing … this is the register of visibility that opens with images, with the interpolation of images, such as paintings. Not the invisible structure answering to the visible, but incarnate emptying; nothing in the arising of visibility, vision, and consciousness.

5 Transposition III – Emptying, the Gaze

The two paintings by Manet hang next to each other at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich: “The Luncheon” from 1868 and “The Boat” from 1874. The two paintings are not merely separated by several years, but they offer two distinct ways of seeing. That is, each exposes us to a specific way of seeing the world. “The Luncheon” presents the image of the character of the youth standing in the
foreground. The composition follows the rules of perspective and traditional chiaroscuro. The reproduction of volume and depth is so extreme that the peeled orange and the knife at the edge of the table seem to be suspended of themselves. Light falls dramatically on the youth in a manner reminiscent of Caravaggio's dramatic scenes. The velvet on the youth's black coat, the difference in texture between it and the tie, the shirt, and his trousers express physically the youth's particular sensibilities. The painting represents to us something about the youth's mind and his affective way of being in the world. In short, the image is representational and mimetic in this sense, it represents a character found in a specific world.

At issue in the second picture, “The Boat,” is not someone or something to be represented. Rather, the painting exposes one to the happening of vision and visibility. Close attentiveness to the image reveals that what holds the focal center of the panting is not the painter but the painter's gaze. Moreover,

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15 This transposition in seeing, from presentation to being exposed in/with/through the strangeness of the visible brings us back to Paul Klee's sense of panting, when he states his creative credo: “Art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible,” “Kunst gibt nicht
the gaze does not refer to one gaze but to at least two moments. The painter is looking at his canvas and beyond the picture, at a view we will never be able to see. Meanwhile the woman sitting inside the boat is looking at the painter. She remains anonymous to the gaze of the painter and yet, it is her gaze that situates the painter's gaze, as compositionally her gaze forces the viewer to return to the painter rather than following the painter's gaze off into oblivion. The painter's gaze happens then between the anonymity of the woman's gaze and the invisibility of that which the painter sees. Furthermore, the return to the painter's gaze is incomplete, in that the eyes of the woman happen in a kind of parallax, in a kind of doubling of perspectives, one of her eyes directed towards the painter, the other towards the viewer of the painting. The figure is looking at the painter as well as looking at the viewer. Thus, the focal center of the picture, the painter's gaze happens in a kind of dis-appropriation, riddled by a seeing that remains dispersed, beyond the possibility of reducing the painter's

gaze to a single vision. Indeed, the viewer's gaze is now inscribed, caught, in an infinite play of reflections, as is the painter's gaze.

The play of gazes in “The Boat” figures infinite differencing, and in such “seeing,” vision, seeing, and that which is seen, visibility, are situated by irre-cuperable loss in their differencing. At the center of the picture one does not encounter a single gaze, a single vision, a single point of view or orientation. The plurality of views cannot be synthesized into one seeing. At the center of the image there is no single subject, no-thing, no-single vision, no-subjective originary seeing or eye. Nor could one say that there is a “negative space” or an absence of a thing that is apparent at the center of the picture. The painter's gaze is only delivered in absence; not an it, but a happening, in a dynamic tension, in/through/with that which is not a gaze, an eye, a subjective consciousness, but the ephemeral playing out of visibility in disappropriation. Indeed, looking at the painting in light of the disappropriating, one finds an emptying and through this nothing in its focal point, nothing in the dynamic reverberating happening of the image. This nothing refers us back to the blind point in seeing and being seen, the point of view is never not blind and infinitely dispersing. This blind infinity in the play of different seeing bodies places nothing neither inside nor outside eye and mind, but with the very happening of visibility, bodies, and minds. Gazing should put us on edge then, since the viewers’ gaze/s, one's gaze/s, bear now the strangeness, the emptying in seeing, an emptying and nothing that cut through to vision, subject, consciousness, and thought.

6 Transposition IV – Incarnate Visions: Dabbing, Overlapping, Juxtaposing, and Gapping

The emptying of the gaze is not an abstract matter or a matter of objective observation. It is not a matter of a logical play. As Merleau-Ponty reminds us in *Eye and Mind* by citing Paul Valéry, painters take their bodies with them. Indeed, at least no one who has a sense of painting, would imagine painting with the mind alone.16 But this is because painting happens as living flesh, the understanding or exposure with visibility that happens with painting is always embodied for maker and for viewer.

Turning once again to the opening that happens in painting as found in Manet's “The Boat,” at issue is visibility. The difference between Manet's two works is a difference in ways of happening of visibility. “The Luncheon”

16 EM, 123; OS, 16.
presents a world that appears in terms of things, perspective, and in terms of a seeing expected to receive such objective reality through perception. “The Boat” introduces a visibility that has not yet been inscribed to the presence of things, their logic, and appearance as already constituted entities, or essences. Nor are there fully determined things available to an already constituted or self-evident spectator. As we just saw, the spectator is also suspended into the gazing. In such suspension the seeing of the spectator cannot be equated with an already constituted seeing mechanism meant to grasp visible things. Indeed, the painting exposes us to a seeing that is impossible if one looks at the world in terms of looking at things. The exposure that happens in “The Boat” puts in front of us seeing, or, one could say, that one is exposed now to dimensions of seeing that remain concealed for as long as one’s gaze is transfixed by the presence of things.

Manet’s brush stroke, the amount of paint, and the handling of color in “The Boat” would leave much to be desired if it were a matter of objective representation. Gone are the smoothness and continuity of the careful mixing of color, the subtle pallet that mixing black with yellow and blue produces the texture and tint of the youth’s velvet coat. In making vision visible, in “The Boat,” opposite colors are placed next to each other creating light through encroachment. In the picture yellow and blue are juxtaposed, and the intermediate ranges are red and orange (note the edge of the boat’s roof and the line on the hat). This shift into the use of opposite colors in order to create light and space exposes seeing, as colors resonate, and as the relation must and can only find resolution in the viewer’s eye. Indeed, this manner of juxtaposing colors will create colors that are never physically put down but that only happen in the play of light as reflection on the subsurface of the canvas, much as overtone will appear in certain musical executions of traditional harmonic structures. At the same time, one faces a surface and materials that no longer permit the continuation of a supposition of smoothness and continuity in seeing. Visibility becomes through the accumulation of distinct strokes, distinct graphic disseminating signatures. Seeing and the seen happen through the physicality of dabs of unmixed color, quick strokes, smudgings. The marks and gestures overlap, often cancelling each other out, bringing density, opacity, mute dark passages to bear in the arising of the visible and the happening of light. How one sees becomes an issue, not because of a lack of technique or method, nor because of the lack of an apparatus that would render visibility proper, smooth, scaled,

17 Unlike the idea of perspectivism, in which the same subjective visual mechanism shifts position, here it is the manner of seeing that undergoes transformation. The image exposes us to distinct ways of seeing.
and continuous. Rather, seeing happens through/in/with the destruction and the cancelling out of the visible, a “brutality” inherent in the happening of visibility, a brutality in the arising of visibility shared in the becoming of seeing, of eye, of body, of consciousness, of worlds.

The radicality of the exposure to seeing in painting strikes when one looks again at such well-known works as Cézanne’s “Mont Saint-Victoire” series, which occupied him to the end of his life (in this case Mont Saint-Victoire, c.1902–1906). The play of opposite or opposed colors is used to configure the image. Cézanne uses color, not line, to create space. If the color strikes vision bringing it into the atmosphere of the image, this embodied dimension of painting is only more obvious when one looks attentively at the surface of the painting. What seem to be figures turn out to be accumulations of overlapping strokes, jabs, cutting and stabbing gestures. Dabbing, stabblings, hitting, beating the canvas surface, a rhythm of distinct gestures through which one encounters Mont Saint-Victoire, the landscape, the town, and human dwellings among the
dark trees. The colors shimmer, the superposing and overlapping thick strokes create new colors at the limit of vision, a shimmering and seeing in density and opacity which brings the eye to darker ground and out again with the luminous explosions of colors (violets and greens). Light hovers over the color’s somewhat permeable density and transparency, light hovering above the surface. At the same time, gaps, breaks are evident between the color marks. A surface suffused with gapping-emptying. Not because something is missing from the picture but because the seeing happens in/through/with emptying and gapping. Indeed, the vibrating that would distinguish Cézanne’s famous apples, his sky and mountains, the vision Cezanne may teach us, happens in the tension between the paint left from the gestures and the gaps that the marking leaves. The point is that these elements in Cézanne’s painting are not mere problems or tricks of painting. Visibility happens in painting through the force of articulate materiality with gapping, emptying, as seeing is itself exposed to its happening in/with/through the movement of coming into visibility that in the gapping shows nothing: this is how one sees the world once seeing moves beyond the gaze transfixed by presence.

This becomes all the more evident in looking closely at the way the world appears in a painting such as Cézanne’s “The Bathers” (1900–1906). In this case seeing is a matter of gaps, overlapping, encroachments, opacity and hollowing on the edges as well as at the heart of the composed bodies. Moreover, these
gestures are not visual but haptic. The materiality of the paint as well as the gapping invite touch. Vision happens through dynamic embodying physicality, in terms of a vision that sees in feeling, and an eye becoming seeing out of embodying physicality’s sensibilities. Seeing becomes the happening of tremulous flesh, suffused in gaps, emptying, opacity, in encroachments and overlapping, in gesturing such as scraping, cutting, puncturing, slapping; gestures that happen in seeing, in the embodying arising of the visible and the sensed in the wake of nothing.

Transposition V – Going Down: Embodying Emptying.
Anselm Kiefer’s Exhibit at the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, 2022, “These Writings, When Burned, Will Finally Cast Some Light (Andrea Emo)”

Figure 7 Anselm Kiefer, Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po’ di luce (2020–2021), Sala della Quarantia Civil Nuova (Emulsion, acrylic, oil, shellac, cauterized wood, charcoal, burnt books, and metal wire on canvas), 560×620×500 cm
Image, Gagosian Gallery
Note: The author expresses his gratitude to Gagosian Gallery for making images from the exhibit available and also for guidance in publishing close ups by him.
7.1 Entering through Displacements and Disappropriation

In the anteroom a monumental painting encroaches on the hall’s space. One’s body loses its footing in the enjambment of the massive painting and the hall’s limited dimensions. The painting’s dimensions make it almost impossible to view the whole work. Attempts made to video the painting will produce fragments held together by motion. The painting as object can barely be photographed, as one must press against what seems a wall pressing against one’s back. As is the case in this particular painting, Kiefer’s paintings present scenes, landscapes, buildings, images which work much more as symbols than mimetic representations. Furthermore, as Kiefer himself tells us, the titles only come in the aftermath of the act and process of painting. The force of the paintings is material and symbolic.

Figure 8 Anselm Kiefer, Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po’ di luce (2020–2021), Sala della Quarantia Civil Nuova. Left side painting (Emulsion, acrylic, oil, shellac, steel, zinc, metal wire, fabric, earth, straw, rope, paper, shoes, and charcoal on canvas), 840×1520 cm; Right side painting (Emulsion, acrylic, oil, shellac, metal wire, and charcoal on canvas), 840×760 cm. Image Gagosian Gallery
As Hans Richter has noted, an encounter with Anselm Kiefer’s work is a shock. The shock happens in encountering the work’s ruination of visible presence and of subjective objectifying reflexivity as a place of self-evident perception and judgement. The displacement happens as the works themselves have been configured through performing the ruination of the visible and of meaning through perpetual negation, covering over, and destruction. It is this ruination that plays out and opens one to that nothing that Kiefer finds inseparable from the visible, visibility, the very happening of existence.

In his personal notebook for the “für Andrea Emo” exhibit, Kiefer quotes the Italian philosopher, “Andrea Emo: The deed is the destruction of pictures, their death, their sleep, the(ir) burial place they require in order to rise again.” For Kiefer emptying nothing is at the heart of his process, specifically through the ruination of the visible. Through pouring lead, defacing the painted surface, covering the surfaces over with ash, natural materials, ceramic, with the exposure of the surface to natural phenomena and the constant disintegration of the paintings (literally their falling to pieces while being shown), through the perpetual destruction of the visible, visibility happens anew. A visibility that in its happening shows nothing. Kiefer writes in the same personal notebook, “reality becomes truth, that is to say picture, since one sees it in nothingness and as nothing.” Kiefer’s process is brutal not only in its physicality but in that the destruction happens with a relinquishing of the future. He writes, referring to himself in the second person, “Du,” “You have to be able to do without the future if you want to be the new, the future, yourself.” Painting for Kiefer can be nothing more or less than the doing, an anonymous act. Painting as process is a negation of the very act of painting and seeing, as loss figures the visible in its loss. Kiefer writes, “Only an iconoclast can be a good artist. It is the simultaneity of an action and its negation. Existence is not simple appearance … but the absolute genuine presence of non-existence itself.”

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20 Ibid., 25.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 11.
The brutality and the emptying of Kiefer’s paintings happens on the surface, a kind of flesh shared by maker and viewer. The surface confronts the eye without appeal to ocular pleasure. Kiefer neither paints to “fool the eye” nor to please it. The surface results from Kiefer’s raw painting, from blunt physicality, rather than through compositional ocular calculation. The surface builds with the overlapping of layers, through continuous covering over and sedimentation. The encrusted surfaces build through the accumulation of natural materials, flowers, wheat, plants, pieces of tree branches. Through the way surfaces are often left for long periods of time exposed to the natural elements, left to waste.

The material density also results from the paint’s continuous covering over. Paint and materials covered over by ashes (fig. 10). Paint and materials covered through tons of molten lead pouring. The pouring itself often reignites the visible by leading the surface to liquify once again (fig. 11). With the new liquid stages colors explode through or disappear under the molten lead.
Figure 10  Anselm Kiefer, Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce (2020–2021), Sala della Quarantia Civil Nuova
Close up image by author

Figure 11  Anselm Kiefer, Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po' di luce (2020–2021), Sala della Quarantia Civil Nuova
Close up image by author
At the same time, the encrusted surfaces are often treated with a machete, as Kiefer rhythmically hatches at the paintings’ surface, removing layers, digging into flesh. This is not a constructing, nor a building of the visible. Hacking, scraping, pouring, figure a destroying in/with/through which visibility happens anew. The surface, materiality bears a lived density quickened by further destruction, covering over, blinding saturation.

And one thinks, perhaps in those words inscribed on the surface of the painting, written into anonymity by Andrea Emo – perhaps one could find a foothold, a ground in those words. “Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po’ di luce” (“These writings, when burned, will finally cast some light”). The inscription repeats the gesture of the paintings, only negating the visible, representation, meaning ... affirming nothing, even
relinquishing the future: perhaps then may something happen ... perhaps once the writing has burned.23

With their inscription in the painting, the words themselves sink into the surface, into that brutal frontality that has brought seeing to emptying visibility through the paintings’ materiality. Now the happening, the time of the writing, also becomes a matter of that surface, an inscription that sinks one’s thoughts, one’s words into the pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic space of embodying-seeing-nothing. Here words find the fathomless silence of embodying perception.

Words sink into the unrecognizable, into archaic memorial fathomless elementals, a silent emptying that ruins the present through dispossession. Memory is now memorial, embodied, contained in the brutal materiality of the work, in silence. A silence the seeing share in seeing the painting, in becoming vision through seeing the paintings, a seeing in/through/with its loss.

![Figure 13](image_url)

**Figure 13** Anselm Kiefer, *Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po’ di luce* (2020–2021), Sala della Quarantia Civil Nuova
Close up image by author

23 “Questi scritti quando verranno bruciati daranno finalmente un po’ di luce (Andrea Emo).”
In the loss of everyday vision and visibility, in the loss of the ordering of profane space and time, in the undoing of the separation of the senses, with words recovered into fathomless immemorial bodies, a time-space has opened, a dynamic place of transposing. A place of passage in exposure and transformation opens in the negation of visibility as presence, in the disruption of seeing as a matter of determined reality, directed by fact and a subjective seeing consciousness.

Under the spell of such ruination of visibility and subjectivity one enters the main hall, “the hall of scrutiny.” A scrutiny no longer adjudicated to the judgement of reason, nor to the binary logic of things and factual presence and
absence. Indeed, as we just saw, we have entered the hall of scrutiny through ruination, the ruination of the primacy of presence and subjectivity, the ruination of ideality and objectification beyond the happening of the visible in loss, covering over, gaps-emptying, hollowing, interruption, gapping. “Scrutiny” now echoes its etymological sense, scrutinium from scrutari (to search), and scrutata, which means “rubbish.” Scrutiny, in light of our first encounter with Kiefer in the last section, here figures its literal meaning, namely, looking and searching through rubbish, amid the discarded, the useless, ruination.

Wherever one may imagine entering the hall one is always already amid the work, steeped in an immense seemingly infinite suspension, being held beyond objective presence. Vision in the room happens as a matter of embodying physicality, sentient flesh. The work cannot be seen in its entirety by the eye nor may it be comprehended by the mind as an objective fact. No image can be made of this interpolation. Seeing is no longer an ocular matter but a happening in/with/through embodying emptying physicality.

Indeed, as I sought these words, I could only find them in somnolence, in a contemplation bereft of clear images, free of the objectifying eye and its objective world. Writing became a matter of sinking into embodying memorial dimensions, as resonances arouse from physicality to orient and reveal memory and paths for writing to happen. Writing could only happen, and can have sense now, in remaining attentive in/through/with a memorial embodying dynamic, in a kind of oneiric movement. This movement happens in going down to find vision and visibility anew in the undergoing of embodying empty physicality.

The hall happens now as a matrix, like a womb-abyss (goffre-matrice), an enormous boat in the uncertainty of a crossing.24 Seeing happens in an emptying dynamic, literally in a kind of freeing leisure, in openness. This dynamic space-time, this place, holds neither inside nor outside, this is no-thing, no particular space-emptying, nothing. Here people will perambulate, or should I say somnambulate, among the immense walls, their eyes often fixed on telephone screens, attempting to recover an objective glimpse of that which cannot be seen, nor be objectively grasped.

Seeing becomes in the diffused light that engulfs visibility in the hall. A light of ghostly vision, of ghostly seeing, a light that in shining obsures, challenges

seeing. Light reflectors illuminate the walls from above, signs of internment rather than objective spotlights. Below the brutal surface; above, reflections and dense light. Seeing is held here, seeing is directed, happening in the flesh with/in/through ruination. The surface of the wall-size-canvas recalls one to embodying opaque, dense, muted, physicality – pulsating, reminding us of entrails, organ surfaces, veining. This call, this affront, exposes the seer in/through/with the blind bodily dimension that underlies vision, the visible and the eye. A seeing cradled in the corresponding play of sensing, a bodily seeing beyond the ocular, seeing happening as perceiving being (gerundive). The elements at play in such seeing are the stench of burnt books, the texture of crystalized liquids, paint, led, the smell of fresh resins, the coagulated remnants which densely populate the surfaces of the canvases. Ashes, the last alchemical
element, as Kiefer likes to point out when speaking of his most proximate materials ... ashes on the fingertips, haptic evidence of physicality at its limit.

Inhabited by and inhabiting this place, vision and physicality sink into a non-temporality, perhaps at the edge of oneiric time, a time without time? (Fig. 16) In the suspension an infinite sense of temporality arises – an embodying happening that figures seeing through/in/with the brutal surface of the paintings, the brutal surface of seen and seeing, silence, emptying, and nothing. Neither inside nor outside, seeing nothing, the surface, the eye, seeing and that which is seen, hold one’s attentiveness, bringing consciousness to memorial resonance. With/in/through the blind point of embodying happening, a time-space, places open, empty and yet fecund: An unfathomable past most proximate in physicality’s silence, a future ruinous in its coming to a point of originary emptying.

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![Figure 16](Image Gagosian Gallery)

**Figure 16** Anselm Kiefer, Questi scritti, quando verranno bruciati, daranno finalmente un po’ di luce (2020–2021), Sala della Quarantia Civil Nuova. (Emulsion, acrylic, oil, shellac, led, and metal wire on canvas), 840×950 cm
Image Gagosian Gallery
And yet, the paintings’ happenings release consciousness, eye and mind, vision and visibility. They happen as emptying interpolations, as moments of exposure in the opening of seeing and consciousness in the leisure of ruination, this is the poietic power of emptying. Exposed in/with/through nothing, incarnate consciousness finds a time-space towards reconfigurations, transpositions, a quickening in emptying. With seeing and thinking exposed in/with/through the emptying of the visible. In the dispossessing through the ruination of the visible world and of subjective seeing – in the turn from ocular seeing to embodying vision, one finds exposure, openings to affective, embodied, and memorial dimensions of being in distinct happenings. A releasing draft opens consciousness to unthinkable transpositions, to openings onto sensibilities that would remain untouched for the most part by seeing wedded to presence and to subjective rationality as grounds for seeing. Kiefer’s paintings expose one to the pre-rational and pre-linguistic dimensions of visibility, seeing, and consciousness. The time-space, the places that open, figure dispossession and transposition. Seeing to feel, one begins to see anew in/with/through the unthinkable and involuntary. In the draft of Kiefer’s paintings trauma, loss, disappearing, erasure, and joy infuse the visible in the arising anew of worlds, beings, consciousness.25

This return figures a silent emptying that ruins the present and effects rational thought’s dispossession. Memory is now memorial, embodying, involuntary, contained in the brutal materiality and empty physicality of the work, in the memorial silence of seeing and being seen. Memory and the eye touch in the resonance of the embodying release, memory and eye touch in the wake of nothing. For Kiefer this is not a point of nihilist negation but a moment of the arising to visibility in destruction. In the personal notebook he keeps in preparing the exhibit “Für Andrea Emo,” he writes, “partially chipping the pigment from the canvas, which adhering to the lead produced an abstract structure that then, together with the tattered canvas, suddenly produced a picture of destruction and resurrection [dann auf einmal ein Bild ergab; aus Vernichtung und Wiederauferstehung].”27 To take the last term “resurrection” (Wiederauferstehung) in a traditional way that emphasizes an eschatology or transcendental horizon would miss the point of the statement. Wiederauferstehung, coming to stand again, the arising again of the visible that


26 In the phrase “in the wake,” “wake” refers to the old Norse “vaka,” a hole or opening in the ice.

27 FAE, 25.
happens in/with/through ruination happens in ruination. Resurrection is without redemption or justification, without inherent or transcendental meaning. Encountering the world through painting, learning to see again in/through/with painting, figures proximity to the originary happening of the visible. This would mean staying with the ruinous happening of the visible and visibility, coming to engage the happening of vision, visibility, eye, and mind without recourse to anything beyond the very happening of visibility in the wake of nothing.

28 This is why, speaking of Andrea Emo in his diary for the Venice exhibit Kiefer says that unlike in Goethe’s Faust Part II, in Emo “there is no ‘redemption’ anymore.” Anselm Kiefer, “Questi scritti quando verranno bruciati daranno finalmente un po’ di luce (Andrea Emo),” Palazzo Ducale Venice, Catalogue (MUVE, Fondazione Musei Civici Venezia, 2022), 47. “Redemption” from the Latin redimere, re-emere, “to buy back.”