

*Not for distribution.

Taking a signifier, making a signifier

This essay takes the following, and very brief, rehearsal of the categorical conditions of Western (global/geopolitical) art as a frame for considering Ali Ahadi's work in *Goh Ballet Academy: Shit Yes Academy* at the Ag Galerie. This frame takes as a relative truism Peter Osborne's diagnosis that "contemporary art" is post-conceptual, insofar as it is responsive (either affirmatively, critically, or negatively) to the legacy of Duchamp's readymades. These works catalyzed a shift from artistic production to artistic selection, a movement which became "globally" hegemonized through the minimal and conceptual reductions of the 1960s.¹ The proceeding essay argues that Ahadi's work practically tweaks this post-conceptual hegemony, enacting contingent proposals for how we might make, and attend, to art differently.

As a discursive institution, art *form-determines* the activity which takes place inside its boundaries.² The parameters for normative trajectories *as well as* (potential) revolutionary ruptures of art's histories, discourses, venues (museums, galleries, biennials), and practices are determined by the history of the category itself, and in the ways art's activities engage, react to, and negate this categorical history. Even gestures as radical as Duchamp's *Fountain*, which ultimately greased the move towards a century of "generic" artist-selectors,³ should be first understood as an attempted negation of the bourgeois "retinal" and productivist aesthetics of the 18th and 19th centuries as much as (an affirmative) testing of the limits of what might be conceded as "art."

Form-determination is not, strictly speaking, a deterministic form of determinism.⁴ Rather, art's categorical history and discursive conditions form-determine the *potential* for, and legibility of, negations such as Duchamp's. The usurpation of craft and aesthetics by selection (nomination) and ideas/concepts (information) was a process born out of a critical response to the former modalities of making and looking. And yet, the attempted negation of craft and bourgeois aesthetics through the assertion of generic selection did not fully negate these previous forms of making and thinking about art. At the very least, aesthetics, optics, and canonical forms such as painting and sculpture continued to residually lurk within art's boundaries.⁵ More plausible, as Marina Vishmidt has recently argued, was that the emergence of generic selection did not in fact negate the previous mode of Romantic aesthetic authorship (founded on a productivist aesthetics), but instead required this form as its (ongoing) foundation. In Vishmidt's formulation, authorship remains a dominant form-determinant of the art object, whether produced or

¹ See Osborne, Peter. *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. Verso, 2013, pp. 2-3, 19-20, 37-38, 46-51, 99, as crucial to Osborne's definition.

² See Fraser, Andrea. "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique." *Artforum*, vol. 44 no. 1, 2005, pp. 105-106.

³ See De Duve, Thierry. *Kant after Duchamp*. MIT Press, 1996, pp. 152-154, 194-195 as well as Osborne, pp. 45, 81-83

⁴ See De' Ath, Amy. "Gender and Social Reproduction." *Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*. Eds. Beverly Best, Werner Bonefield, Chris O'Kaine. Sage, 2018, p. 1544.

⁵ See Williams, Raymond. "Base and Superstructure in Cultural Marxist Theory." *New Left Review*, 1973, no. 82, pp. 10-12.

nominated, and habituated modes of aesthetic judgement become transposed onto judgements of concepts, references, and artistic selections.⁶ Working from this position, we may view the sporadic, form-determined negations of 20th Century avant-gardes *less* as negations and more as an *expansive remodeling* (like an addition to a house) of the activities which may qualify as, and thus be included, within art's discursive boundary. This expansion ironically requires an increasingly strident maintenance, and defense, of this boundary so that seemingly infinite, disparate activities may still register as "art".⁷

At a total level, *Goh Ballet Academy* presents a critically productive engagement of the above-sketched form-determinants of making and exhibiting of art. This reflection is grounded in large part in spatial, formal, and conceptual engagements with buildings. To begin at the end, or at least at the point of display (which we will find is not an end at all), let's consider the Ag Galerie itself. When presenting exhibitions, artists inherit the flight paths to which viewers have become accustomed through repeated trips to/through buildings exhibiting art. After entering the ground floor of the Ag Galerie, the common route is to pump upstairs, circle through the second floor gallery spaces, and flush back down to disperse across the ground floor, the outdoor courtyard, or to visit the bathroom. The upstairs of the Ag Galerie has become the habituated zone for seeing art, and the downstairs has become the habituated zone for seeing people, for socializing. This division is architecturally reinforced by the ground floor outdoor gathering space, and discursively reinforced by a medium-sized room named the Communal Room, which contains a meeting table and a full-height window looking out onto the courtyard.

Ahadi assumes this typical flow through the building's interior and uses it to force a friction between the ground and second floors. This friction is not immediately apparent, as visitors first (predictably) encounter medium-scale works adorning the walls of the second floor spaces. The works upstairs are framed with a dense, black lace stretched over all but one framed work, *Untitled (Shitgoldshit)*, a treatment which renders a repetitious set of permeable monochromes. In order to visually access the photographs and panels of texts inside the frames, viewers must peer through, or look past, the flat lace surfaces.

Similar to Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, the works upstairs coerce viewers into self-aware performances of voyeurism. However, rather than peering through a peep-hole in order to visually access an aesthetically composed interior scene, as is the case in *Étant Donnés*, the lace obscuring the upstairs works is most effectively visually penetrated by raking the gaze laterally across their surfaces. This sliding movement mechanically aligns this mode of looking with reading, a looking-action which is doubled in the content of works such as *Untitled (of the scatological)* and *Untitled (Dol)*. In these works, a fleshy pinkness emanates from beneath the laced frames, but as the visitor's eyes and body slide along, printed definitions of "shit" and the single letter "D" respectively emerge. As the letter "P" pronounced aloud in English is phonetically identical to the word "pee," so "D" pronounced in Farsi = "signifier." Through the act of raking-looking, the desirability of laced flesh becomes overwritten by textual descriptions

⁶ See Vishmidt, Marina. *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*. Brill, 2018, p. 225.

⁷ See Fraser, p. 105.

of an opposing quality, namely, shit. However, lest we hastily settle on a simple equivalence of raking-looking with reading, it should be noted that the row/column repetition of the printed page is absent in favor of a normative, “inherited” single line layout of discrete wall works. So while a viewer likely moves in a lateral reading motion across a given work, to move through the upstairs galleries is a process of bouncing, swirling or ricocheting from work to work and back again.

It's also important to stress that the mode of reading coaxed by the works on the second floor is not synonymous with hermeneutical reading, a process in which an image's or text's depths are plumbed in order to uncover a unifying "deep" meaning. Rather, the *discrepancy* between sliding and penetrating, reading and looking (and bouncing and swirling) set up the discursive and structural paradoxes underpinning the exhibition. To return to *Étant Donnés*: this work is a continuation of Duchamp's “anti-retinal” negation of bourgeois aesthetics precisely through its collapsing of “distinctive” modes of disinterested visual contemplation with “shameful” and violent acts of voyeurism. In *Étant Donnés*, the initial desire to look through the peep-hole is rendered paradoxical by the interior scene of a nude female form, possibly in repose, more likely the victim of violence. The laced works in *Goh Ballet Academy* present a related tension. Whatever desire may be stirred by glimpsing fleshy pink under lace is met with a definition of shit, or with film stills selected from Pasolini's *Salò* in which characters are being commanded to eat shit. The dichotomy of these encounters *seems* unilateral: the desire to look, to consume, or even to hermeneutically parse → the (representation of) shit. However, viewers flop from formal/aesthetic to textual encounters as they swirl through space, producing an affective confusion that remains in motion, rather than a positivistic argument such as “looking = shit”.

So, if not to “see” the works, nor to “read” the works, what viewing prescriptions might one obtain from a visit to *Goh Ballet Academy*? Or perhaps even more fundamentally, what sort of argument is advanced about the making and viewing of art?

I don't believe, on first pass, the upstairs works offer a resolved set of *prescriptive* arguments regarding the above question. Rather, what is advanced upstairs is negative: the visitor is met with discursive material and dichotomies (desire and shit, shit and gold, looking and reading, the sensible and the semiotic), which, through the process of being revealed by looking, establish a negative/pejorative articulation less of *looking itself*, and more of a consumptive/interpretive mode of viewership. Looking is not shit, but perhaps *contemplation is*. And just as Ahadi problematizes the typical “viewing route” through Ag Galerie by using rather than diverging from it, the dichotomies presented in the works upstairs reveal themselves through normative looking relations (the visual contemplation of discrete works), even if those relations are materially and discursively troubled. Downstairs, the frictions and negations which remain relatively contained within individual works (placed in conjunctive, relational chains) upstairs, become split-out, concretized, and *mobilized* beyond the artwork-viewer relation. And yet, ironically, it is the existence of the upstairs works which form the discursive foundation for the productive/prescriptive capacity of the downstairs works. The downstairs builds on a semiotic and art historical foundation laid upstairs. This splitting is perhaps most apparent in the Communal Room, which hosts two works side by side: *Untitled (One-way Mirror to the Communal Room)* and *Untitled (Private Eye Public Nose)*.

Untitled (Private Eye Public Nose) is a light box, approximately human scale, illuminating a satellite image of Tehran depicting the Ag Galerie and surrounding neighborhood. The central point of the image is dominated by the slate roof of a building much larger than any other in the frame: the Almas Karimkhan Complex, a gold and jewelry trading centre auspiciously located directly across the street from the gallery. The Complex's roof has already been formally encountered in the rusted cut steel of *Untitled (shitgoldshit)*, the lone interruption of the marching laced monochromes and, in a sense, the most visually/formally available work upstairs. In the Communal Room, the light box (and the second encounter of the Complex's roof) leans against a stub wall to the immediate right of a window looking out onto the outdoor courtyard. *Untitled (One-way Mirror to the Communal Room)* is in fact this window, whose glass has been swapped for, eponymously, one-way mirrored glass. Visitors to the courtyard experience a mirror, and visitors to the Communal Room experience a window.

The brightness of the light filtering through *Untitled (One-way Mirror to the Communal Room)* and emanating from *Untitled (Private Eye Public Nose)* is similar. As such, the light box, at least in terms of its luminosity in relation to the window, may be considered as a second window in the space. However, what is framed by these two "windows" is markedly different. The aerial map contained in the light box is "anti-retinal" in the sense that the image is an informatic, non-composed birds-eye image representing the spatial outlay of a particular part of Tehran. Contemplation of a work like *Untitled (Private Eye Public Nose)* takes place on ideational and semantic registers. Against this habituated post-conceptual looking modality (which already *challenges*, but does not negate, the concentrated looking associated with bourgeois aesthetic judgement), *Untitled (One-way Mirror to the Common Room)* presents a voyeuristic *distraction from Untitled (Private Eye Public Nose)*.

At the level of attention, *Untitled (Private Eye Public Nose)* simply cannot compete with *Untitled (One-way Mirror to the Communal Room)*. As visitors to the courtyard pass in and out of view, pausing to adjust their clothes or hair or take selfies in the mirror, the attention of the visitor to the Communal Room is repeatedly pulled *away* from considering the light box and *towards* the action in the window frame. On one register of looking, this pull is no matter: *Untitled (Private Eye Public Nose)* is not a work to be visually contemplated in the first place.⁸ *But at the level of attention itself*, the looking paradox set up in the Communal Room is significant. At an abstract level, visitors find themselves struggling between seduction in the form of voyeurism, which, as discussed in relation to Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, is itself not properly aesthetic in the bourgeois sense, and informatic/conceptual contemplation, which is *also* not properly aesthetic, but per Vishmidt, rests on foundational pillars of bourgeois aesthetics.

In relation to the upstairs works, the Communal Room presents an inversion of the assertion of language over seduction. Whereas a visitor upstairs is initially drawn to (apparently) laced flesh only to be met with language (or shit), a visitor to the Communal Room is met first with a work of language (a map), only to be pulled away by voyeurism. But rather than a simple inversion, new sets of considerations are elicited through the act of shuttling back and forth between different registers of attention *from within the looking relation*. Indeed, this shuttling back and forth from different drives and modalities of looking pushes the visitor *away* from an

⁸ See Beech, Dave. "On Critique: Looking and Writing." *Art Monthly*, no. 393, 2016, p. 2.

individuated mode of attentive contemplation and *towards* a fractured, distracted attendance to art.⁹ The fractured attention elicited in the Communal Room *exceeds* the struggle between image and text contained in the works upstairs. In other words, the push and pull between the light box and the window presents a situation of irrational non-choice in which the visitor is precluded from “properly” attending to either work.¹⁰

Again, we are following a generalized conception of typical visitor flow from the upstairs gallery space, downstairs to the Communal Room, outside to the courtyard, and then (perhaps) to the bathroom. An effect of this route is that, in addition to initially getting “stuck” oscillating between the two works in the Communal Room, visitors to the courtyard carry with them the understanding that the mirror in the courtyard is indeed a window. To *use* the mirror in the courtyard as a mirror is to implicitly (and contingently) make oneself visually available to whomever may be within the Communal Room. Considered from another angle, visitors to the courtyard may choose to interrupt to varying degrees the “contemplation” of *Untitled (Private Eye Public Nose)*. That is of course *if* there is a viewer in the Communal Room at all. This contingency, that to pose in front of the mirror *might* mean you are seen from inside, sets up a much more mediated, convoluted dynamic of looking and being looked at than with *Étant Donnés*, which plays more singularly with the Sartrean dilemma of hearing footsteps in the hallway as you peer through a keyhole.¹¹

The visitor to the Communal Room is (potentially) distracted, the visitor to the courtyard is (potentially) distracting, and most visitors will inhabit both positions as they move through the exhibition. On the ground floor, the dichotomies that viewers circulate through in the works upstairs become spatially and temporally exploded and variably inhabited by *the visitors themselves* rather than the artworks. In other words, bouncing and swirling around upstairs remains a component of individually attending to/moving between given works. Downstairs, the ricocheting of each visitor becomes immediately, materially productive in (per)formative ways, altering the works in real time. Like the institution of art itself, the potential contributions of the viewer to *Goh Ballet Academy* are form-determined by the works, their layout, and how one moves through the exhibition. *Untitled (One-Way Mirror to the Communal Room)* determines contingent instances of distraction (on both sides of the mediation), and yet the *qualities* of these distractions are produced *through the visitors*, not the artworks. This however attenuated, form-determined production on the part of the viewer presents an emergent argument on what making, and attending, to art might look like.

Dave Beech recently prescribed that contemporary art should send the viewer “back into the world” to read, research, and discuss.¹² This argument, indebted to the collective work of Art & Language, is less a Duchampian negation of aesthetics per se than it is a perforation of art’s categorical/discursive boundary. For Beech, we should spend less time looking at contemporary art, as though careful looking alone will reveal its unilateral truth/message to the viewer, whose

⁹ See Krauss, Rosalind. “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum.” October, 1990, vol. 54, pp. 12, 17, as well as Beech, Dave, and John Roberts. “Spectres of the Aesthetic.” *New Left Review*, no. 218, 1996, p. 126.

¹⁰ See Beech and Roberts, p. 126.

¹¹ See Sartre, Jean Paul, trans. Hazel E. Barnes. *Being and Nothingness*. Washington Square Press, 1993, p. 349.

¹² See Beech, p. 3.

focused looking places them primarily in the role of *receiver and judge*, and should instead spend time writing, researching, and thinking about it.

Beech's prescriptions fall on the side of the viewer of art, and what *constructive* capacities such a viewer may have *in excess of* the bourgeois fundamentals of art objects themselves. His argument regarding viewership does not simply displace the uncovering of the artwork's "truth" to some later stage in an expanded process of looking (and judging). Research and writing does not simply represent a second stage of the process of contemplation which occurs outside of the walls of an exhibition. Rather, discursively engaging a work of art becomes an act of intervention, an opportunity for the viewer of the work to productively contribute to its meaning in ways that need not be strictly fidelitous to the artist's own contents/intentions.

Ahadi's research and practice has arrived at a similar prescription. Rather than categorically defining the artist and viewer as distinctly separate automatons placed in a mediated relationship by the work of art (artist-artwork-viewer), Ahadi suggests that both artist and viewer be considered as visitors, and that the "art relation" be semantically understood as visitor-artwork-visitor. This reframing posits two significant revisions to the habituated art relation. First, and similarly to Beech, it points to the productive agency of the (viewer-)visitor in acting upon a work and contributing to its meaning. Secondly, by arguing for the use of the word "visit" for *both* the productive and receptive acts of engaging an artwork, Ahadi's relation implicitly affirms the likelihood of RE-visitation on both fronts as well. So, where the receptive visitor of a work of art may productively act and RE-act upon it, so may the (productive/artist) visitor.

The implications of this second point are significant in destabilizing notions of the direction in which information (or "genius", or "beauty") flows in the making and receiving of artworks. The habituated artist-artwork-viewer model emphasizes and valorizes the (initial) knowledge and intention of the artist, which is transmitted *through* the work and judged by the viewer through the process of making, exhibiting, and receiving art. However, with the acknowledgement of the artist as a (re-)visitor of their own work, and viewer as visitor/interrupter/intervener rather than judge, the initial communicative intention in the productive act is undermined by the possibility of a conceptual re-reading, re-working, re-production *on both sides of the mediation*.

To map these considerations back onto the ground floor: it is the very confusion of being *stuck between Untitled (Private Eye Public Nose)* and *Untitled (One-way Mirror to the Communal Room)*, and of the decision to (not) perform in front of the mirror in the courtyard which may be considered as *the* productive visitation of *Goh Ballet Academy*. This is semantically reinforced by *Untitled (Put to Work)*, a stretched lace screen diagonally cutting the courtyard into two separate spaces (front/back; retro/verso; image/viewer). This cutting barrier forces visitors to the courtyard to situate themselves across the lace sculpture, inhabiting only one zone/position at any given time, with no option but to see both the yard and/or one another through the permeable surface of the lace. While at a general level, *Untitled (Put to Work)* reproduces the visual experience visitors had upstairs, here visitors move from image to viewer and back again. This active but limited motility is secondarily bounded by *Untitled (The Territory of the Semiotics)*: a thin line of lace, suspended overhead, demarcating the perimeter of Ag Galerie and its courtyard. The stretched lace, bounding the total territory of the exhibition, mirrors the above claim that art is a bounded-yet-malleable discursive institution. In other words, semiotics bounds and

determines the activity within the exhibition, even as that activity contributes actively, contingently to the production of (new) meanings.

A visitation to the bathroom supports and complicates the above reading of productive visitation. Whereas *Untitled (One-way Mirror to the Communal Room)* and *Untitled (Put to Work)* present conditions in which visitors productively interfere in *each other's* (bourgeois) contemplation, *Untitled (It is Closer to You Than It Appears)* reasserts an individuated, cloistered viewing experience. In the bathroom, three mirrors are arranged so that the visitor's genitalia and its products become plainly visible through the act of using its facilities. To "use" the bathroom becomes explicitly, visually synonymous with the "production" of one's own excrement. A comparison may be drawn between engaging *Untitled (It is Closer to You Than It Appears)* and the acts of contemplation upstairs, which ultimately culminate in images or descriptions of shit. Upstairs, bourgeois contemplation is shit. But is contemplation taking place in the bathroom? Or is *It* appearing in the bathroom? The appearance of *It*, however conceived, is borne out of a semiotic confusion in which using is producing, even if that product is shit, or P.

In the bathroom, one can't help but consider the work of Piero Manzoni who, on the eve of the minimal and conceptual reductions, produced 30 cans of his own shit, deploying his signature as a guarantor of the value of each can as equivalent to the market price of gold. *Artist's Shit*, 1961 represents *the* cynical rehearsal of the net-effect of the historical avant-gardes: *anything* can be art provided a guarantee of discrete objecthood ratified by the artist's signature *and* the discursive judgement by art's institutional participants that yes, *this is art*. But something additional is afoot in the visitor-artwork-visitor relation in the bathroom. While it's true that the mirrors are nominated according to the same logic that any matter or object is currently made semantically available to art's discourses, they also serve as mirrors of a production normatively understood as use. At least in American English, we *take* pisses and shits, we don't *make* them. The conceptual conflation of use and production (again, on the part of the viewer/visitor) experienced in the bathroom gives rise to the possibility of new conceptions of action arising from a joke, from a shit, or from semantic confusion.

Duchamp "took" a urinal and "made" it art, which might lead some to question the very assertion that the semantic confusion presented in the bathroom posits any new modality for art which exceeds the 20th century paradigmatic shift from production to selection. Against this, I would argue that the confusion in the bathroom should be understood not as conflation/equivalence *but as confusion*: as the complication of the lightning-quick, reflex-like response of semantically sorting/idealizing our actions in the world. What takes place in the bathroom is not the rehearsal of a Duchampian polemic, not least because *It* is not artist's shit, and after *It's* flushed, you leave the bathroom. This is why Ahadi's formulation of the visitor-artwork-visitor relation is so crucial to complicating our now habituated post-conceptual paradigm. To be visiting *It* from all directions is to be constantly confusing, distracting, and redirecting *It*, leaving *It* and coming back to *It*.

Ahadi has speculated as to what it might mean to envision the visitor in his visitor-artwork-visitor relation as an "ESL", or English as a second language, visitor. Ahadi's formulation of an "ESL visitor" should be understood as one who *misuses* signs on an intentional register rather than simply misrecognizing them, though misuse *may* be greased by misrecognition. The misuse

of signs might destabilize meaning through new correlations (contemplation and shit), or might reframe the connotations of a given activity altogether (taking a shit is making a shit, visiting art is an activity of taking/making). In both instances, the intentional misuse of signs undermines their sanctity, their authority, and opens the possibility for the emergence of new, counterhegemonic meanings. We might liken this approach to the realism of estrangement of Russian Formalists such as Roman Jakobson, or of the discourse battles advocated by Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer in the late 1980s.¹³ To estrange habituated abstractions, to mutate signs, has the capacity to radically undermine hegemonic ideology at the level of its discursive (re)production.

It was in the spirit of this contingent, productive confusion that Ahadi first visited "Goh Ballet Academy": a building across the street from the coffee shop he frequents in Vancouver. An act of transliteration, which converted the building's name into "shit yes academy" in Persian, opened the door onto the set of semantic dichotomies present throughout the exhibition. To submit "Goh Ballet Academy" to an act of transliteration represents a productive move *not* towards effective communication or (ideological) understanding, but towards a conjunctive semiotic logic that conjured new productive material. In its most programmatic sense, we might understand the above-sketched contingent maneuvers as praxes of visitation, both in the act of making and attending to art. These propositions do not seek to negate the category art, or collapse it into everyday life, as the historical avant-gardes had proclaimed. Rather, they rattle those foundational pillars of authorship and judgement. They help us *begin* to imagine a material-discursive production which might resist economic condensation, motoring the field toward to-be-determined articulations of itself, its activity, and its desires.

¹³ See Jakobson, Roman. "On Realism in Art." *Language in Literature*. Eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy. Belknap, 1987, pp. 19-27, Hall, Stuart. "The Rediscover of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies." *Culture, Society, and the Media*. Eds. Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, Janet Woollacott. Routledge, 1982, pp. 52-86, Mercer, Kobena. "Black Art and the Burden of Representation." *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. Routledge, 1994, pp. 233-258.