Gut feeling

Essay On Doubt, Art and Ethics

Renée van Oploo, 2025

ABSTRACT This essay takes the form of a fictional dialogue in an electronics shop, where the purchase of a vacuum cleaner gradually turns into a reflection on quality, doubt, ethics and artistic practice. What begins as a practical encounter between customer and shop assistant shifts into a conversation in which the roles of customer, shop assistant and artist move in and out of focus. The dialogue unfolds through two alter egos, an ethicist and an artist, which allow me to articulate how hesitation, ambiguity and moral tension shape attention within artistic practices. The essay explores the dilemmas of artistic practice when confronted with the cultural industry and the pressures of capitalist logic, where efficiency, consumption and value tend to dominate. Rather than resolving these tensions, the essay leaves them open, showing how meaning can emerge through the act of allowing a measure of doubt.

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Part one: Quality

It is February 2025, the day is clear and cold, yet already touched by the early warmth of the sun on your skin. It is Wednesday. You visit the local electronics shop. The interior has a predictable layout, with orange as the dominant colour.[1] Above the entrance, several security cameras are hanging. Posters with slogans printed in capitals are visible everywhere. You are welcomed by the following statement:

> SPARKLING HOUSEKEEPING – THOROUGH ADVICE, FLAWLESS INSTALLATION AND SHARP DEALS!

You read:

> **SPARKLING HOUSEKEEPING! – THOROUGH ADVICE!! FLAWLESS INSTALLATION!!! SHARP DEALS!!!!!!**

The shop assistant behind the till greets you but makes no immediate move to assist. The shop is otherwise empty. At the back, the television screens change images at lightning speed. Bright flashes of blue, green, orange and red flicker past, alternating commercials. Your gaze falls on the steel shelves. You scan the blenders, food processors, Bluetooth speakers, headphones, air fryers, laptops, phones, and so on. The air carries the smell of plastic, of electricity.

You reach into your jacket pocket: two scraps of paper, one a receipt, the other a shopping list. Two coins. A card wallet. Your phone. You take it out, switch it on, switch it off, switch it on again. You swipe away notifications and check the time: 9:07.

You wonder whether you need something else. Somewhere in your body the memory lingers, like a word on the tip of your tongue, but it remains unspoken. A radio station is playing, one you do not recognise. A voice with a southern accent speaks softly. He explains the previous song, mutters something unintelligible, then goes on to introduce the next one.

[1]It is the kind of electronics shop that still survives in smaller towns. In the Netherlands the chain is called Expert.

‘How much a dollar really cost?
The question is detrimental, paralyzin’ my thoughts
Parasites in my stomach keep me with a gut feeling, y’all’

You recognise the song. It is Kendrick Lamar, music you do not usually hear in public places. Your fingers glide over the batteries as you move along. You look at the different models of e-readers. You read the prices, first the cheapest, then the most expensive.

Tell me, how much a dollar cost?’

Recently you listened, briefly but with full attention, to Kendrick Lamar, prompted by an article about his diss battle with Drake. What struck you was not only the personal attack, but the way criticism was shaped as a moral stance. Lamar positioned himself as a guardian of the genre and portrayed Drake as someone who undermines it through complacency and opportunism. What resonated with you professionally was the idea that moral conviction does not lie solely in the content of words, but in tone, rhythm, form, in how something is said. As if integrity is not a fixed quality, but something that must be activated anew each time. In this, Lamar made no concessions.

‘My selfishness is what got me here, who the fuck I’m kiddin’?
So I’ma tell you like I told the last bum
Crumbs and pennies, I need all of mines’

Your gaze slides over the shelf of vacuum cleaners. One stands out for its colour: a Miele C3 Gala Edition in curry yellow. The shade is peculiar, leaning towards green but lacking any freshness. It is the most expensive model in its category.

The shop assistant approaches you and says, “The weather is strange. It is cold, but it does not feel like winter.”

You look up and smile. ‘This type of weather creates a sort of expectation.’

‘How can I help you today?’

‘I am looking for a vacuum cleaner, my current one is broken.’ You do not need to explain yourself.

A short silence follows.
The shop assistant notices your gaze resting on the curry-yellow Miele. His eyes linger for a moment on a few animal hairs on your coat, perhaps from a cat or a dog. ‘I can highly recommend the Miele. This model is convenient, especially if you have pets. It comes with a special nozzle that makes it easier to pick up hairs, dust and such things.’

You turn back to the shelf. Your eyes glide from model to model. Some promise deep cleaning, others advertise advanced suction power or a minimalist design. Function over form, form over function.

‘Of course, you could also perfectly well go for a cheaper model,’ says the shop assistant. ‘I have a cheap vacuum cleaner myself, though sometimes I notice it struggles. But perhaps that is also because I use it for more than ordinary household waste.’

You look at the price, though you do not have a specific amount in mind.

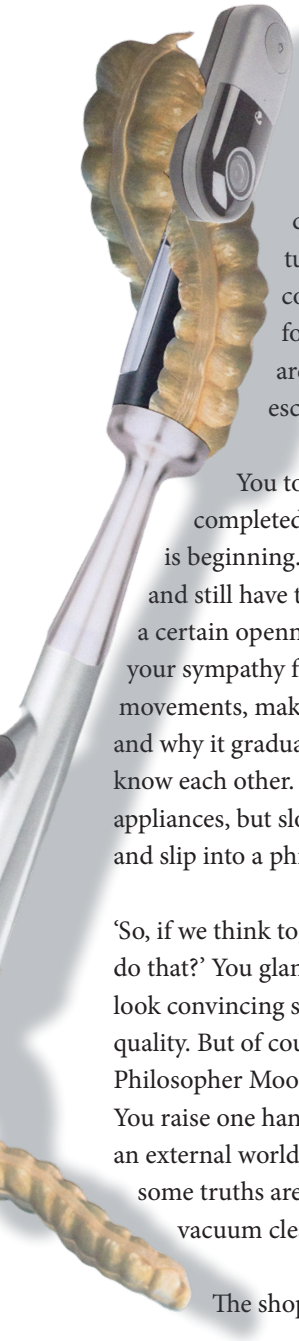
‘What if I told you that a vacuum cleaner is never just a vacuum cleaner?’

You frown. ‘And what else could a vacuum cleaner be?’

The shop assistant continues: ‘A device for ordering your living environment.’

‘I am definitely someone who likes order,’ you muse, trying to grasp what the shop assistant means by more than a vacuum cleaner. ‘But as long as the device is switched off, nothing happens. Then it just sits there, gathering dust instead of sucking it up. Perhaps that is ironic, or perhaps that is exactly your point.’

You take in the shop assistant: reddish, shoulder-length hair tied in a low ponytail, perhaps around thirty years old. The smile is barely visible, which makes the shop assistant appear friendly. You wonder to what extent the shop assistant is fully present.



That day, however, the shop assistant is fully present. There is a certain pleasure in selling, especially now that the shop and its range of products have become familiar. In the beginning there was little for the shop assistent to hold on to; every complicated question required the help of a colleague. Now, with knowledge turned into second nature, attention shifts elsewhere: to personal contact. Reading customers, trying to sense what they are looking for, and, if possible, having a real conversation. The days in the shop are long, but a customer can open something, perhaps even a small escape to the outside world.

You too are present today, perhaps more than usual. You have just completed a major article, and after weeks of long days a quieter period is beginning. You are not in a hurry. You want to work through your tasks and still have time for yourself until at least three o'clock. That is why you feel a certain openness, a quiet attentiveness.In the flow of conversation, you find your sympathy for the shop assistant growing. Something in the look, in the movements, makes you curious. That is probably why you allow the conversation, and why it gradually unfolds. As if it happens of its own accord. As if you already know each other. At first it is about the practical exchange on the quality of the appliances, but slowly the tone shifts. The two of you turn out to be evenly matched and slip into a philosophical conversation about quality and how it is perceived.

'So, if we think together about the quality of a vacuum cleaner, how might we do that?' You glance again at the curry-yellow Miele. 'An expensive model may look convincing simply because of its sleek design. It seems to say: I am of good quality. But of course, that is not necessarily the case. Appearance alone is no proof. Philosopher Moore once tried to show what proof might look like in philosophy.' You raise one hand and then the other. 'Here is a hand, and here is another hand. So an external world exists. At least, that is what he claimed. He wanted to show that some truths are so evident that you can use them as proof. But the design of a vacuum cleaner, however persuasive, is no such proof.'

The shop assistant remains silent.

You lower your hands. 'Wittgenstein thought that was precisely the problem: what we take for granted, we do not question. You do not truly know that the

world exists; you simply act as if it does. Only when something surprises you or throws you off balance do you realise: perhaps I never had that certainty. The same applies to quality. We think we can see it, measure it, buy it. Yet its full effect, the functioning of a hand, or of a vacuum cleaner, only unfolds in use. And even then, something remains unknowable.'

You continue: 'If we really wanted to know how well something works, we would, so to speak, have to step into the factory, understand the thinking of the designer and the producers, and even grasp the aims of the company, with all the secrets we will probably never know. But that is not how it works. Most of the time we base our choices on intuition, on assumed trust, not on certainty.'

A short silence follows before you proceed: 'Now we must trust that the producer has our best interests at heart and delivers quality. There is, of course, a mutual dependence, since the producer also relies on the consumer. Assuming they want to keep me as a customer, preferably for life. I can also turn to quality tests, reviews, the experiences of others, sites like Tweakers. You are not only selling me a vacuum cleaner, but also the assurance that it does what it is supposed to do. Only… that assurance might be nothing more than well-packaged marketing, right?'

The shop assistant breaks the silence. 'Certainty always sells better than doubt. Only in the act of hoovering is its value revealed. Meaning does not lie in the essence of the object, but in our relation to it, in the way it serves us.'

'In a way, I am also at the mercy of the models you sell, and beyond that, of the reliability of the manufacturer. We like to treat quality as something objective, yet in reality it is as slippery as taste.'

The shop assistant reflects. 'I think the logical question here and now is to what extent the vacuum cleaner fulfils its task, and whether one does it better than another. I also know that at this moment you cannot be certain which purchase is the right one. Philosophically speaking, it is impossible to know, however hard brands try to eliminate doubt. What remains is that the vacuum cleaner must fit your idea of a good buy, within your budget. If you have enough money, you can simply choose the expensive one. If you want to economise, for whatever reason, you can perfectly well make do with a red Inventum ST154RZA. But those are the

practical matters. In all likelihood I would, from different roles, give you different advice. If I were to fully adopt the role of shop assistant and set aside my other roles, it would be in my interest to sell you a more expensive model.'

'Switching roles does not suddenly change what you say, as if you could then advise me objectively. Do you really think you can separate that so easily? For me it doesn't work like that at all. Roles usually overlap. But if we are to make that distinction, I understand that as a shop assistant you would prefer to sell me the more expensive one.'

'My role as shop assistant certainly feels different from the other roles I have in my daily life. Right now, providing certainty in helping you with the purchase of a vacuum cleaner is simply my task. There is also something that makes me believe in that role at this moment, namely that I have knowledge you do not have. The more revenue this franchise generates, the better. You see, we are a small branch, and things are not going well. Sometimes there is even doubt about whether continuing is still profitable. We mainly continue to exist because it is useful from a marketing perspective. If this branch closes, I will lose my job here. I am not especially attached to this job, but losing it would certainly be inconvenient. My colleague, the store manager, on the other hand, has worked here for thirty years. For him it is different. He has an emotional connection to this place. And even though we are part of a large concern, he has worked hard to find his own voice. You might not notice it, but it is reflected in the products we sell here. A specific preference is embedded in them. I feel responsible for his job, and through that I am also responsible for mine. And besides, preserving shops in smaller towns is worth something too. People only miss them once they are gone. You see it everywhere, chains disappearing from the high street. How often do you not think: I could only get that at Blokker[2].'

The shop assistant pauses briefly. 'Apart from that, it is important that you take home something that matches your idea of what a vacuum cleaner is, or ought to be.'

Then the tone shifts, and the shop assistant continues. 'But what I, person to person, find more interesting is whether we can have a conversation with each other about

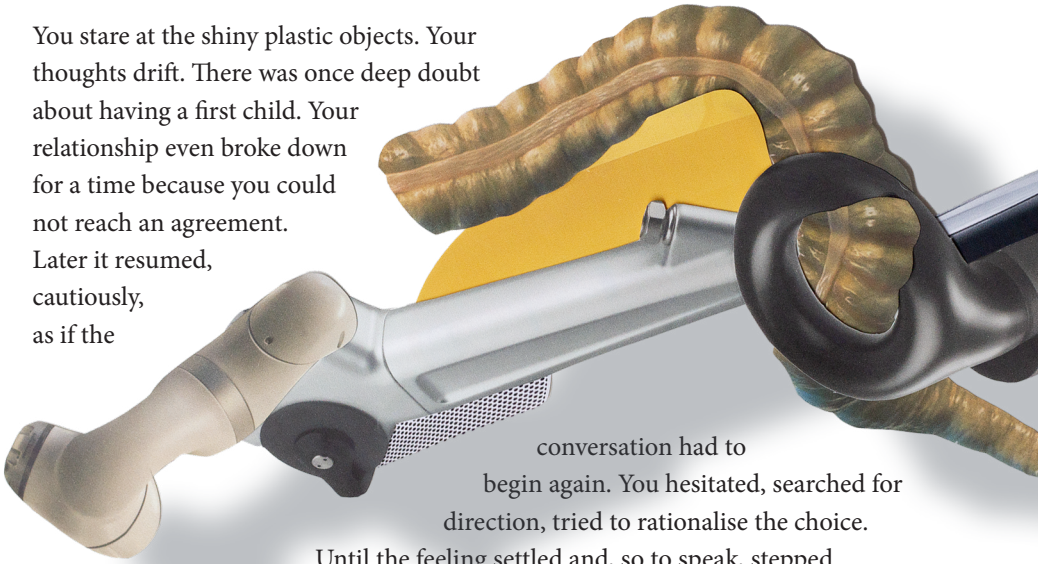
[2] Yet another typical Dutch shop, but one that has disappeared from the streetscape after going bankrupt.

the essence of this moment. Not necessarily about the device, but about what is happening here. About quality. And about doubt. Perhaps it is just me, and you think: what a peculiar shop assistant.'

You smile. 'In any case, I do find the issue you raise interesting, and my doubt, as it were, creates space for this conversation.'
The shop assistant nods. 'That doubt will resolve itself once you turn it into action. At the moment you put the vacuum cleaner to use, the value or lack of it will become clear.'

Part two: Doubt

A customer walks in, goes straight to the till and gives the shop assistant a meaningful look. The shop assistant nods in apology and steps over to assist.



You stare at the shiny plastic objects. Your thoughts drift. There was once deep doubt about having a first child. Your relationship even broke down for a time because you could not reach an agreement. Later it resumed, cautiously, as if the conversation had to begin again. You hesitated, searched for direction, tried to rationalise the choice. Until the feeling settled and, so to speak, stepped through a door. Strangely enough, there was no doubt when it came to the second child. Only a practical question: when? Given your age, the conclusion was quickly reached. As soon as possible.

The shop assistant has handed over an online order to the customer, returns and looks at you inquiringly.

‘Are you still in doubt?’

‘Well, I was thinking about doubt... For me, doubt feels like an in-between space. Not passive, not active, but containing both. A thin boundary between knowing and not knowing, across which you shift from one side to the other.’

The shop assistant listens.

‘That liminal space is made up of a web of considerations, emotions, weighing and hesitation. At first the web is loose, light, almost chaotic. Over time it becomes more defined. Doubt takes on a clearer shape, one that can be rationalised, reasoned away, until the choice becomes firm. At that point I only have to follow the form.’
You glance at the vacuum cleaner, then back at the shop assistant.

‘I often doubt things. About essential matters, but also about small ones, dinner, a purchase. But once I have chosen, I am fairly sure of myself.’

You pause for a moment. ‘Illness also makes you doubt. But that is a different kind of doubt, one that works backwards. Can I still trust my body? When will it fall ill again? Until the moment comes when you have to let it go, and doubt turns into nothing more than the passing of time. Perhaps even into a kind of hope.’
‘I sense that you speak from experience.’

‘Without going too deeply into it now, I have read a great deal about illness as a condition. What has stayed with me comes from Virginia Woolf. “Fall ill”: those words express something that “become ill” does not encompass. You fall into an illness. It is a tumble, a state in which things slip away from you: clarity, orientation, what once seemed self-evident. Your view of the world shifts, your self-image tilts. And a need arises to find a new language for what you are going through. In that language you are cautious, because you do not know how others will understand it. They still speak the other language, the one from before. Strangely enough, it resembles the movement from doubt to certainty, only the realities on either side of the threshold are fundamentally different.’

You shift the topic. ‘Do you find yourself doubting often?’

The shop assistant laughs. ‘I am an artist.’

‘And you doubt being an artist?’

‘In my work here I rarely experience doubt, but when it comes to making it is quite different.’

The truth is that for a long time the role of shop assistant did not coincide with being an artist and with making. In fact, nothing had come into being in the studio over the past year. Where being an artist had once served as proof of existence, as a way to gain a grip on the world and to remain in direct contact with its materiality, that connection had gradually faded.

The choice for art was made after several people remarked that the shop assistant had a certain talent. The first time this was recognised was in primary school, when a teacher was struck by an assemblage of found objects in a viewing box. The materials had been carefully selected: a small stone pipe, an old glass medicine bottle containing a rolled-up print of Melencolia I, a torn-off Barbie head, a bit of moss and some twigs. Patterns emerged from the seemingly meaningless things that together formed something new. The teacher praised the work in front of the whole class.

Two weeks later a classmate tried to copy the assemblage, but when placed side by side the difference was unmistakable. The Barbie head came from a cheaper doll. The medicine bottle had been replaced by a plastic sweet jar, the print by a sticker, and the moss lay dried out and faded. For the first time the artist-to-be felt in possession of something that needed protection, a form of artistic talent perhaps. A drive to share, coupled with the fear that what was shared could be copied effortlessly, without the love and attention it truly deserved.

Secondary school followed, where subjects such as art and craft stood out. Then a foundation course, where the visual talent was recognised again just before graduation. After that, art school, which was completed with honours. The young artist entered a brief period of success, with one installation after another, engaging with political themes of economy and commerciality.

‘I was quite successful as an artist for a while, until repetition set in. The same trick over and over again. For me the enthusiasm disappeared with it. Meanwhile the

focus on the crisis within art grew. Colleagues tried to stay afloat by making work that became increasingly commercial, and I too adapted more and more to the wishes of the market. Institutions pursued empty ambitions: art as problem-solver, as space-filler, as connector, as vehicle for urgency. Institutions disappeared and re-emerged. And at a certain point the label "young talent" no longer applied to me, which created new difficulties in continuing my practice. At the same time, politics placed less importance on culture. People spoke of a supposed left-wing elite of which art was allegedly a part. That felt confusing. I did not recognise myself in that left-right thinking. I always hovered somewhere in between, which was not appreciated by my art friends, who were much more outspokenly left-wing. They joined protests while I stayed at home. You could hear it in the hardness of their voices, as if they constantly had something to defend. I found that difficult. Do I only truly consider something unjust if I speak out about it in public? Yet I also understood the necessity and urgency they felt, their drive to take a visible stand, even if I could not muster it myself.'

You think about what the shop assistant has told you.

'What also struck me was that friends, former classmates, fellow artists constantly had to take on different roles to stay afloat. Sometimes they were makers, then curators of their own work or that of others. At other times speakers, researchers, educators, cultural intermediaries, a kind of one-person institution. And that, without being harsh, can affect the quality of the work. As if you can no longer show art without first intellectualising it, contextualising it, justifying it. As if meaning only counts once it has been spoken, spun out, explained. They also sometimes accepted commissions that pushed them in an aesthetic direction. The commissions brought in money but did not strengthen their own practice, sometimes even leading them to abandon earlier and more authentic positions. I understand it, of course. It is a matter of survival as well. You not only have to contend with the clichés around autonomous making, but also with the whole arsenal of projections and expectations that being an artist calls up. At the same time you remain dependent on temporary studios, grants and funders.'

You look at the shop assistant for a moment. 'But I wonder whether the problem lies in the need to account for things, or in the way we have learned to do it. I know the weariness that comes with it.

In philosophy too you have to keep stating your position, contextualising, framing. Sometimes it seems as if the very language we use to be clear also takes something away from us. And yet, perhaps that responsibility is not optional. Perhaps it belongs to making work that wants to touch something beyond yourself. But I do understand what you are saying. I feel it too, and that tension is confusing.'
The shop assistant replies. 'Not only confusion, it also leads to a loss of humour. You see, moralising creeps into artistic practice. Not out of ill will, but from a need for legitimacy. Art has to be about something, and preferably do something good. For me, those contradictions made it impossible to find my place, and that led to a period in which I made nothing. I froze. Until a few months ago.'

'And what did you make?'

'Wine bottles made of porcelain. It's best if I show you.'

The shop assistant takes his phone from his pocket.

Renée van Oploo, Wijnflessen, 2025

‘And what was the idea?’

‘I wanted the bottles to point symbolically to addiction and desire, a kind of narrative in which they are at once desirable and unusable. You cannot open them; they do nothing. They shine just enough to make you want to touch them, but above all they reflect you. The idea was that these bottles are objects which evoke something but resolve nothing. Things you look at without getting much further. Desirable objects, but with an edge. Of course several people pointed to the work of Morandi, who devoted his whole life to painting still lifes, often bottles too.’

Giorgio Morandi, Natura Morta, 1955

‘Ah, Morandi. I once had the chance to see one of his works in real life. I imagine it is impossible to use the bottle form again without evoking him.’

The shop assistant smiles. ‘True. Such references are welcome, but you have to understand them. What is interesting about Morandi’s still lifes is that he painted them endlessly, each time slightly different. An exercise in nuance, in subtle shifts. He never let go of the bottle form, yet he was always looking for a way to see it anew.’

‘The way you describe it now, it sounds like a form of doubt.’

‘But not paralysing doubt. Rather a form of attention. As if he created space for not-knowing, and as if that not-knowing did not need to be resolved. As if the meaning lay not in the object itself, but in the way it allowed us to look.’

You nod. ‘Morandi’s paintings have a certain logic and naturalness, but that does not make them unambiguous. His objects seem to hover between recognisability and abstraction, as if they occupy an in-between space.’

For a moment it stays quiet. In the background a southern-accented radio voice continues to hum.

‘Sometimes his bottles stand just a little too close to the edge of a table,’ the shop assistant continues. ‘That makes them unstable. It is a search for the abstraction of still life. As if, on the one hand, he wanted to retain the depth of classical painting, and on the other, to embrace modernity. His dilemma was that he clung to representation while at the same time trying to move away from it.’

You pause for a moment. ‘It sounds almost as if that instability is linked to not-knowing. Do you see not-knowing as something valuable?’

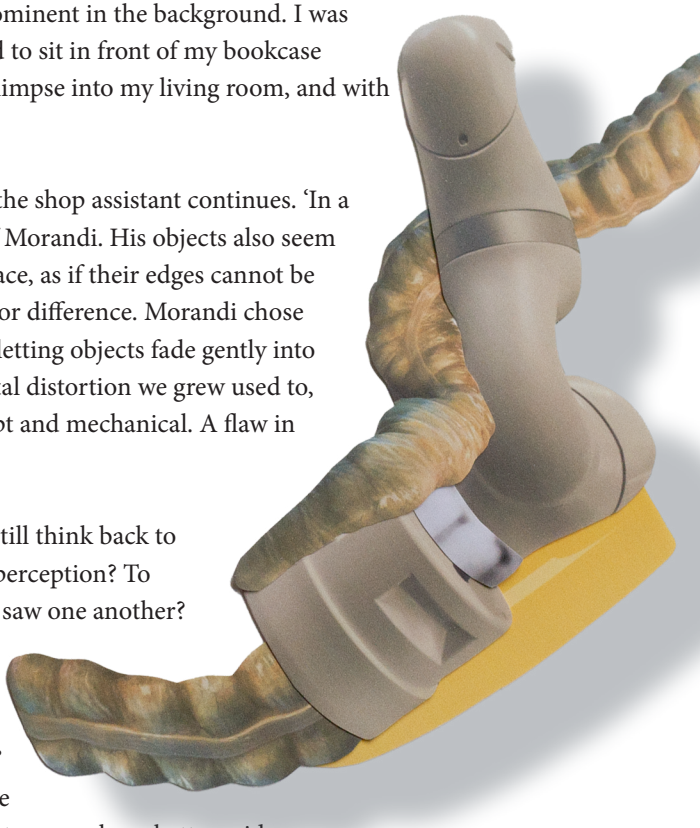
‘And at the same time as the problem. When not-knowing becomes form without content. Or worse, an excuse. I sometimes see it in artists, in myself too, by the way. That we glorify not-knowing, because then we do not have to finish anything. Do not have to choose. Then it almost becomes a stylistic device.’

You think for a moment. ‘Perhaps it is more about the everyday experience of reality. “There is nothing more abstract than reality.” A quote by Morandi himself.’ The shop assistant narrows their eyes. ‘Even so, I am not sure that the resemblance to Morandi really interests me, at least not because of the literal reference. What struck me when I delved into his work again was something else. I found myself in a series of online art history lectures. Since 2020 they have appeared in large numbers, and that is how I arrived at Morandi.’

The shop assistant’s gaze drifts for a moment towards the shop’s exit. The bright sun shines invitingly. ‘Teachers from all kinds of courses, at all levels, give lectures from

their home studies. In that digital environment you see heads in rooms, people staring at the screen, following a lecture. We look at distorted images of other people's living rooms, hear voices through crackling microphones, see jerky pixels. The image is never quite sharp.'

'I know this all too well,' you say. 'How we suddenly began looking en masse into each other's living rooms, especially those of people whose inner worlds would otherwise have remained closed. And then those bookcases of the lecturers, over and over again, large and prominent in the background. I was guilty of it myself. I preferred to sit in front of my bookcase rather than give students a glimpse into my living room, and with it my private life.'



Then, with a reflective look, the shop assistant continues. 'In a certain way it reminds me of Morandi. His objects also seem partly to dissolve into the space, as if their edges cannot be fully fixed. But there is a major difference. Morandi chose to work with light and tone, letting objects fade gently into their surroundings. The digital distortion we grew used to, on the other hand, was abrupt and mechanical. A flaw in transmission, a by-product.'

You sign. 'How often do we still think back to that accidental aesthetics of perception? To that abstraction in which we saw one another? Distorted, delayed, filtered out.'

'With Morandi it is different,' says the shop assistant. 'There the vagueness seems deliberate, or perhaps better said, necessary. He does not pretend that something blurs, he allows it to blur. Not to conceal, but to reveal something you might otherwise overlook.'

'So aesthetics as a slowing down. As a place where knowing is suspended.' Your voice lowers slightly. 'What does it mean if aesthetics lingers while the world insists on moving ever faster?'

A brief silence follows. In the background the television screens keep flashing. You notice how you have to turn away from them, otherwise they keep pulling at your attention.

The shop assistant looks at the wall of appliances, as if searching for an anchor in the visual noise. 'Perhaps that is it. You need something in order to slow down. Something tangible, something that reaches back or brings back.' A pause. 'Through the bottles I was able to land in my making again. There is something very comforting about making. It confirms a kind of acquisitiveness in me. A very basic kind. When I made little, I tried to fill the gap by ordering a great many clothes, mainly through Vinted. Later, when I began working more again, I bought new clothes as well, simply because I could. Buying and selling became a kind of addiction: tearing open a parcel each time, inhaling the smell of new fabric, trying things on for a moment, and if they were not right, putting them straight back up for sale, sometimes even with a profit.' The shop assistant pauses once more. 'Those bottles gave me the same feeling. Opening the kiln, holding the still-warm forms, turning them in my hands, and sensing the world shift along with them. I recognise a kind of consumer attitude in making. In the validation that surrounds it. In the expectation that it can yield something.

You think of how meaning, too, has to earn its keep, how rarely something may exist without a function. Even art is not exempt from that logic: it must circulate, convince, prove its worth.

'And as an artist I notice the same acquisitiveness in myself, the urge to possess through making, an impulse never far from capitalist logic.'

That thought opens another dimension in the conversation. 'I discussed Iris Murdoch in a seminar recently,' you say. 'She argues that there is no deep divide between ethical and aesthetic values. What we experience as beautiful often touches what we consider good or right, and vice versa. Making and experiencing art are not value-free activities, but morally charged practices.'

'That is beautifully put,' says the shop assistant.

'But also a little edgy.'

‘How come edgy?’

‘Because it suggests that beauty naturally leads to goodness, and that moral discomfort is naturally profound. Yet in practice I often see that aesthetics is used to soften or dampen awkward questions. Attractive doubt sells better than real discomfort.’

You hesitate. ‘Even so, I do not believe it is only camouflage. There are artists who genuinely seek moral meaning.’

‘Certainly,’ says the shop assistant. ‘But even they become part of the system. The problem is not a lack of sincerity. The problem is that in the end everything is absorbed into the same circulation. Prizes for critical art. Exhibitions on systemic critique, neatly designed. Protest that resembles performance. Aesthetics become the filter through which even resistance is made manageable.’

‘So friction becomes a façade?’

‘Doubt as a style.’

You nod, though the words leave a trace of unease. They do not sound like resistance, more like a shift. The silence that follows is lighter than before. Your gaze falls on the surface of the appliance in front of you, its color shifting with the light. ‘How would you define qualitative art?’

The shop assistant sighs, as if gathering the words. ‘For me, art is interesting when it opens something: a question, a dilemma, an aspect. Not necessarily something “good” in an aesthetic sense. It can also be banal, strange, elusive, kitsch, yet still carry its own aesthetic. What matters is that it contains a consequence within itself, that its content is already bound to what it sets in motion. Even the act of asking creates an opening toward what comes next. I don’t mean that art has to present a solution, but rather a gesture forward, something that moves beyond the object itself. A vacuum cleaner must remain measurable. Art should exceed that, it can and it should do more.’

You shake your head lightly. ‘Perhaps that is what makes art art: it has to go deeper than simply conveying a message well. At the same time, such a definition cannot dictate how we then go on to make “qualitative” art. That is the problem. Take Morandi: all his still lifes were necessary, yet no single one by itself opened the passage into questions of modernity. That is not something you can decide beforehand; it emerges only through the exercise, through the work itself, not from a pre-cast meaning.’

The vacuum cleaners before your eyes seem hollow, stripped of meaning. Their glossy, repetitive aesthetic, hard plastic, identical shine leave you weary, worn down by the endless parade of household appliances. Then your phone vibrates. You take it from your pocket, glance at the screen, open a few messages, and swipe them away by reflex. The interruption makes you suddenly aware of the time; you feel the pull to continue your day. The shop assistant looks at you. You nod toward the Miele. Not because the choice feels completely right, but because it seems pointless to postpone it any longer.

‘I will just pop to the back to fetch one.’

The shop assistant disappears into the stockroom. You remain standing for a moment. Behind the displayed appliances a glossy surface catches your reflection. Leaning a little closer, you notice the blackheads on your nose. You touch your face briefly. Straightening up again, you reassure yourself: they are only visible from close by. You rub your nose, then walk to the till.