

1752950
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HARTM0035_2017
Text and Image
Assignment 1

**Distance and Intimacy:
The Role of Ekphrasis in Lisa Tan's *The Baudelaire Itineraries***
4867 words

Lisa Tan is an American contemporary artist currently based in Stockholm. She was asked several years ago by her sister where she would go if she could go anywhere in the world. She decided on Madrid, specifically to see the Museo Nacional del Prado, specifically to see *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503-15, Madrid, Museo del Prado) by Hieronymus Bosch. The thought experiment resulted in Tan's piece *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2004) (figure 1), which lays out in linear form the names of all Bosch's paintings, where they are currently held, and the means by which one could go see them.¹ Tan expanded upon the concept in another piece and the subject of this essay, *The Baudelaire Itineraries* (2007) (figure 2).² Tan developed travel itineraries detailing how viewers can visit every painting mentioned in the footnotes of Charles Baudelaire's 1846 review of the Paris Salon, translated by Jonathan Mayne in 1965, and printed them into simple instructional panels. It is a thoughtful piece that raises questions of distance between a physical object and contemporary gallery viewer.³

¹ C. Schum. (2018). *Interview with Lisa Tan* and L. Tan, 2004, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Photograph in artist's frame, 38 x 98 in.

² L. Tan, 2007, *The Baudelaire Itineraries*, Ink on canvas, photograph, and artist's frames, various dimensions.

³ L. Tan, 'Archive, Works 2010-2011', *Lisa Tan*. <https://lisatan.net/archive%2c-works-2010---2001.html> [accessed 30 April 2018].

Ekphrasis, or verbal description of an artwork, plays a central role in the piece. The purpose and power of ekphrasis is subject to ongoing debate in the history of art. It can influence the viewer and preclude a spontaneous looking experience. Regardless, ekphrasis is ubiquitous in art history and drives its development and discourse, Jaś Elsner argues in 'Art History as Ekphrasis'.⁴ Tan engages with the challenges of ekphrasis through *The Baudelaire Itineraries*. Degrees of separation, the result of description and translation, remove the viewer of Tan's piece from the artworks Baudelaire referenced. Alluding to Charles Baudelaire's original ekphrastic text, Tan simultaneously subverts written description and emphasises its intricacies. *The Baudelaire Itineraries* reflects the artist's desire to acquaint herself with art, an experience complicated by ekphrasis.⁵ *The Baudelaire Itineraries* deconstructs the distance, experience, and intimacy enmeshed in looking at art.

The Purpose and Power of Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis' relationship to art and its history is a contested one. While verbal description of work is inevitable, ekphrastic writing tends to assume a creative identity of its own, either in tandem or in conflict with the source material. Ekphrasis becomes the intermediary character between object and viewer. Therefore, it is necessary to assess contemporary theory on ekphrasis to discern Lisa Tan's concern with closeness.

⁴ J. Elsner, 'Art History as Ekphrasis', *Art History*, 10 (February 2010), p. 11.

⁵ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

According to Jaś Elsner, ‘Art history is not possible without ekphrasis, just as it not possible without objects’.⁶ Elsner is adamant that the study and discussion of art cannot function without ‘the constant translation and re-translation of art into text’, as well as ‘the potential transfiguration of the visual cast in verbal terms that can make it more clearly or effectively or essentially grasped’.⁷ Because images exist to produce reaction, Elsner’s explanation of ekphrasis allows for an outwardly communication of response, physical or emotional, that exists inside the individual viewer. Without verbal description of visual information, there is no discourse, no argument, and certainly no academia.⁸ The language art historians use is itself derived from a descriptive tradition. Elsner states:

...what we adduce as formal is in fact not the object’s own object-hood and existence as matter but that ekphrastic transformation which has rendered it into a stylistic terminology. How secure can we be that such ekphrastic formalism (the closest in art history some might affirm, that an object can be to its pre-verbal state) is no more than a carefully crafted verbal translation whose discursive functionings are as far from the actuality of objects as any other interpretive description?⁹

Elsner expresses a generally positive view of the necessity of ekphrasis, but he admits that it is non-definitive, subject to those individual reactions. He urges ‘compelling and well-founded arguments out of objects’, stressing the importance of the source material, but does not scoff at the writing of ‘fiction with footnotes’.¹⁰

⁶ Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’, p. 24.

⁷ Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’, p. 24.

⁸ Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’, p. 13.

⁹ Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’, p. 16.

¹⁰ Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’, p. 24.

While Elsner is accurate in his assessment of ekphrasis as, at worst, art history's necessary evil, one cannot deny the distance formed by description. The immediacy of contact with a work of art in person, as opposed to through the words of a third party, is impossible. Of course, description that remains anchored purely to the visual information, as if it were a police report, may communicate objectively a sense of the work. But, as Stephen Cheeke argues in *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis*, a pure transliteration rarely results. Humans are subjective.¹¹ Ekphrasis, then is perhaps 'a form of incantation or evocatory magic that replaces or stands in for the subjective experience of the gallery visitor, instructing the visitor in the correct aesthetic response while mystifying the "art object itself"'.¹² Notice that Cheeke uses the terms 'replaces or stands in', emphasising that description never truly recreates the experience of standing before an artwork, but it can offer a worthy alternative if one keeps in mind the writer's intention. Furthermore, Cheeke points out that ekphrasis often verbalises not only the physical work of art, but the effect it has on the viewer, adding a further element of subjectivity. He cites John Ruskin's description of J.M.W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*, a portion of which is included here:

Along this fiery path and valley, the tossing waves by which the swell of the sea is restlessly divided, lift themselves in dark, indefinite, fantastic forms, each casting a faint and ghastly shadow behind it along the illuminated foam.¹³

Cheeke questions if Ruskin has assisted readers in comprehending the painting, suggesting, 'this is an *evocation* of Turner that attempts a parallel act of concentration and heightened attention,

¹¹ S. Cheeke, 'Prose Ekphrasis', in S. Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 168-9.

¹² Cheeke, 'Prose Ekphrasis', p. 171.

¹³ Ruskin, J., Description of J.M.W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*, as quoted by S. Cheeke, 'Prose Ekphrasis', in S. Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 173.

developing an equivalent density of perception...Most importantly it seeks to affect the reader'.¹⁴ 'Parallel' here signifies that ekphrasis can hold a significant place in the life and atmosphere of an artwork, but it will always function as a separate creative work.

David Kennedy further explores the human subjectivity tangled into ekphrasis in *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere*. Kennedy acknowledges:

...the desire or perhaps the need to add a knowing narrative to a painting or a work of art...Ekphrastic writing that celebrates works purely in aesthetic terms – a sculpture seen, for example, as the artist's exploration of a particular material of its effects on the space where it is exhibited – is virtually non-existent.¹⁵

Kennedy is concerned with the completeness and perfection of a work of art as an object, which cannot be improved by description.¹⁶ Of the three authors cited, Kennedy is the most skeptical of the practice. He claims it results in a narrative meaning applied retroactively to the work, which can be derived from several potentially alienating factors, including gender, class, and the cultural norms at the time of writing. At its most honest, ekphrasis is an 'encounter'. This terminology is used by Kennedy because it indicates 'the change of direction' possible only from an in-person experience.¹⁷ Subsequently, 'an active exchange', results between object and viewer-writer.¹⁸ Ekphrasis captures a single, individual encounter, onto which readers look in.

Baudelaire Versus *The Baudelaire Itineraries*

¹⁴ Cheeke, 'Prose Ekphrasis', p. 176.

¹⁵ Kennedy, D., *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), p. 4-5.

¹⁶ Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter* p. 6.

¹⁷ Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter*, p. 22.

¹⁸ Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter*, p. 31.

It follows now to look to the specific allusions present in *The Baudelaire Itineraries*. For a piece based off of such a rich collection of paintings, *The Baudelaire Itineraries* is very simple. Notably, images are scant. What is presented is a piece of historical ekphrasis and a reduction of its contents down to a simple task. The work is a series of black and white diptychs. On the right is a photograph of a page from Jonathan Mayne's translation, which Tan intends to function as an 'index' (figure 3).¹⁹ This particular translation combines footnotes from Baudelaire himself with ones added by Mayne. Tan was drawn to the pithy additions of information and commentary, many of which note the collection where the work can be found.²⁰ On the left, sans-serif and left-justified text on canvas informs of the city where the piece mentioned lives and how to travel there. Tan deliberately frames the the text-on-canvas 'paintings' in the 'museological way'.²¹

The matter-of-factness with which Tan provides directions is in contrast with the expressive language used by Baudelaire in 'The Salon of 1846'. Consider, for example, the text of Tan's 'Pg 71' (figure 4). Headed by 'WASHINGTON, D.C.', the instructions simply say to 'Take a train from New York to Washington, D.C. to view these works of art', along with details of four specific works by George Catlin.²² *The Baudelaire Itineraries* gives no further indication of Tan's interpretation of the work, nor does it give any context of the artists' method. There is nothing that would suggest or prescribe an experience for the viewer.

¹⁹ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

²⁰ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

²¹ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

²² Tan, *The Baudelaire Itineraries*.

Baudelaire's ekphrastic writing, however, does the opposite. His review is rich with evocative language, as demonstrated by his description of the Catlin's portraits of Native Americans (figure 5):²³

M. Caltin has captured the proud, free character and noble expression of these splendid fellows in a masterly way; the structure of their heads is wonderfully well understood. With their fine attitudes and their ease of movement, these savages make antique sculpture comprehensible. Turning to his colour, I find in it an element of mystery which delights me more than I can say...Once again I find Red (so inscrutable and dense a colour, and harder to penetrate than a serpent's eye) – and Green (the colour of Nature, calm, gay and smiling) – singing their melodious antiphon in the very faces of these two heroes. – There is no doubt that all their tattooing and pigmentations had been done in accordance with the harmonious systems of nature.²⁴

In describing the tattoos and body paint of the figures depicted, Baudelaire is beset by their conjurations of natural elements. Notice his capitalisation of 'Red' and 'Green', connoting that these are not simply colours but symbols of the opposing forces of war and peace, a conflict which he believes is present within the Native Americans. Next to Tan's austere itineraries, Baudelaire's enthusiasm for Catlin's skill buzzes. This illuminates a key risk in the practice of ekphrasis. When description is presented as boldly as it is in Baudelaire's criticism, it reads as incontestable. A subsequent viewer who may not experience the same intensity of experience is left feeling bereft of critical aptitude.

Moreover, another portion of the description refers to the Native Americans in terms that sound racist today. He casually calls them 'savages' and notes their head shape.²⁵ Now politically

²³ G. Catlin, 1832, *Ma-to-he-ha, the Old Bear*, Painting, Smithsonian Collection, Washington D.C.

²⁴ C. Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846', in C. Baudelaire, *Art in Paris: Salons and Other Exhibitions*, tr. and ed. J. Mayne (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1965), p. 71.

²⁵ Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846', p. 71.

incorrect, those were normal terms in the lexicon of 19th-century France. These words call attention to the age of this criticism, which results in a continuously widening gap of interpretation and relevance. The distance here is not only physical but temporal and social as well.

Furthermore, the intended audience must be considered in both Baudelaire's writing and Tan's piece. 'Pg. 75' (figure 6) is headed by 'CHANTILLY' and features the following instructions to see Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps' *Souvenir de la Turquie d'Asie* (figure 7): 'Fly from Amsterdam to Paris to see this work of art. Stay in Paris and take a day trip to Chateau de Chantilly, which is about an hour away by train.'²⁶ Compare Tan's instructions with Baudelaire's description work by the same artist:

The most appetizing dishes, the most thoughtfully prepared kickshaws, the most piquantly seasoned products of the kitchen, had less relish and tang, and exhaled less fierce ecstasy upon the nose and the palate of the epicure than M. Decamps's pictures possessed for the lover of painting. Their strangeness of aspect halted you, held you captive and inspired you with irresistible curiosity. Perhaps this had something to do with the unusual and meticulous methods which the artist often employs...Sometimes he seemed to stem from the oldest the boldest colourists of the old Flemish school, but he had more style than they, and he grouped his figures more harmoniously; sometimes the splendour and the triviality of Rembrandt were his keen preoccupation; at other times his skies would suggest a loving memory of the skies of Claude.²⁷

In this passage, Baudelaire provides an example of the relational exchange mentioned by David Kennedy. Baudelaire uses non-visual language – 'relish and tang', 'exhaled' – to equate the imagery to olfactory sensations. Notably, Baudelaire speaks in the second person – 'their

²⁶ L. Tan, *The Baudelaire Itineraries* and A.G. Decamps, 1846, *Souvenir de la Turquie d'Asie*, Oil on canvas, Musée Condé, Chantilly.

²⁷ Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846', p. 74.

strangeness of aspect halted you' – suggesting an assumption that subsequent viewers' sensation would mirror his. This speaks to the authority assumed by art critics of Baudelaire's stature in nineteenth-century French salon culture, at the time the aesthetic heart of the Western world.

Stephen Cheeke states that the elevated status of critical tastemakers in the nineteenth-century is significant. It exists in conflict to a popular tropes of the time such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the National Gallery which equated art viewing with a religious experience and the museum with a church. The intensity of the experience, however, is undermined by the markers of privilege, such as education and training, uniting many of the prominent critics of the time (he cites Baudelaire and Marie Henri Bayle, among others).²⁸ Criticism of this time by 'the bourgeois individual himself (usually male)' is influenced by 'aesthetic theory' and involves 'a mode of writing for art practised by the "aesthetes"'.²⁹ This style of writing does not invite a universal readership; it requires an initiation to art theory. When Baudelaire in the passage above refers to Flemish masters, he assumes a prior knowledge of the reader and alienates the uninformed. Moreover, Baudelaire opens his review with a dedication specifically to the bourgeoisie. It must be noted that Baudelaire intends for the bourgeoisie to include the masses (as opposed to their apparent collective enemy, the 'monopolists', who 'keep the forbidden fruit of knowledge').³⁰ However, he goes onto describe the bourgeoisie as those with means to establish a cultural institution; some of which are 'rich men and the others scholars'.³¹

²⁸ Cheeke, 'Prose Ekphrasis', p. 168.

²⁹ Cheeke, 'Prose Ekphrasis', p. 168-9.

³⁰ Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846', p. 41.

³¹ Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846', p. 42.

Baudelaire's emphasis on knowledge in cultural discourse suggests a proclivity towards the educated classes.

The privileged status of he 'who gets to speak about art history' was on Lisa Tan's mind in making *The Baudelaire Itineraries*.³² The arrangement of the work into travel itineraries is meant to spur viewers contemplation on the 'distribution of artworks globally' and the sort of institution that acquires them.³³ The majority of places named in the itineraries shown in Tan's web archive are in North America and the wealthiest bits of Western Europe. Again, the concept of distance arises. For a person outside of these regions, travel to Amsterdam, Washington D.C., or Caen, for instance, is expensive and time consuming. Reviewing the piece's exhibition in Munich for *ArtForum*, Noemi Smolik notes, 'this is how gentleman scholars and dandies in the nineteenth century were accustomed to travelling, in an atmosphere of comfort and ease, of refined pleasure—a dream come true.'³⁴ Even in the physical act of breaking down the distance, participants in *The Baudelaire Itineraries* are confronted with its variety of social implications.

Wading Through Translation

As stated, Baudelaire was French. He wrote in French and for the French. But Tan is American, and the text she read was English. This leads to a key point about the presence of translation in *The Baudelaire Itineraries*. There was no particular reason Tan chose Jonathan Mayne's translation of Baudelaire's criticism. She does not speak French, and this was an

³² Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

³³ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

³⁴ N. Smolnik, 'The Art of Production', tr. S. Bernofsky, *ArtForum*, October 2007.

accessible English version.³⁵ That said, the fact that this piece of writing had been translated from its original prior to Tan encountering it is cogent, because it adds yet another layer of distance. Mayne, as translators do, cognizantly selected the English he used. He interpreted Baudelaire's source to read elegantly and to communicate its worthiness of translation in the first place. Between each step that separates the Salon artworks from *The Baudelaire Itineraries* a translation occurs. Baudelaire translates painting into French description, Mayne the French into English, Tan the English into instruction. The final step – the instruction into action – does not complete the sequence as much as it collapses it all together. It renders irrelevant this game of ekphrastic telephone and prioritises a presence with original artwork.

In 'Managing Imitation: Translation and Baudelaire's Art', Sara Pappas explores a slightly different, but no less salient, iteration of translation functioning in Baudelaire's criticism. Pappas posits that Baudelaire employs translation to mitigate inconsistencies in his critique.³⁶ She states that previous inquiry into Baudelaire's canon of criticism shows his championing of painters' pure originality over 'imitation' of old Masters, but a closer look reveals instances where derivative style is permitted, specifically in the case of Eugene Delacroix.³⁷ Pappas proposes that Baudelaire reconciles his conflicting stance on artistic training versus innate talent when he urges artists to 'distance themselves from the traditions they studied'.³⁸ 'Distance' is key here, connoting that there is space between arts training and nineteenth century painting, where

³⁵ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

³⁶ S. Pappas, 'Managing Imitation: Translation and Baudelaire's Art', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 33 (Spring-Summer 2005), pp. 320.

³⁷ Pappas, 'Managing Imitation', pp. 320-2.

³⁸ Pappas, 'Managing Imitation', p. 321.

the teachers' lessons were translated into modern form. In that space is a process of interpretation. Imitation can be equated to transliteration – a direct replication of information, free of interpretation. That is not what happened in the work Baudelaire praises, nor does it happen in ekphrasis. Gaps develop as work passes between artist and viewer, viewer and critic, critic and reader.

Pappas writes that translation also functions in Baudelaire's writing in terms of translating the emotions evoked by a painting into words, a common element of the ekphrastic passages included in this essay.³⁹ All this is to say that Baudelaire's criticism is not to be taken as documentary. Pappas concludes her article by saying that 'Baudelaire's texts construct art and vision in accordance with his ideals', and while it occasionally fails to be 'logical and consistent', what should be examined is the method by which 'he *makes* it logical and consistent'.⁴⁰

Translation features heavily in Baudelaire's writing as a way of smoothing over conflicts. It is evidence of the mental processes of interpreting art, the transitional moments between seeing and thinking. It follows, therefore, that Tan was keen to illuminate those transitional moments present in artistic practice. Tan uses the term 'liminal' often.⁴¹ In speaking with her, she described how the making of *The Baudelaire Itineraries* connects thematically with one of her more recent pieces.⁴² In her video *Waves* (2015), the third in a series of videos produced for her

³⁹ Pappas, 'Managing Imitation', p. 324.

⁴⁰ Pappas, 'Managing Imitation', p. 335.

⁴¹ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

⁴² Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

doctoral thesis from University of Gothenburg, Tan explores the liminal spaces existent in her own life.⁴³ This video captures her ‘desire of trying to understand and become intimate with a way of looking’.⁴⁴ After reading Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, which Woolf described as “writing...to a rhythm, not to a plot”, Tan began extending the uniting force of water into several directions; she pondered metaphors like “oceans of data” and “sea of information” – phrases that connote ‘global networking, and sometimes literally refer to ‘undersea fiber-optic cables’.⁴⁵ She thought about the interconnectedness people, information, words, and images. Footage shows Tan clicking around Google Art images of the Städel Museum in Frankfurt and Gustave Courbet’s paintings of waves (figure 8). The odd distancing effect of viewing this painting through multiple screens, Tan’s computer and whatever screen the video is played on, is collapsed. Tan points out the fact that the very sea that Courbet painted is used for cooling Google’s Finnish data centre. There is a tangible force uniting the digitised images.⁴⁶ The video is narrated by Tan, and towards its end, footage is shown of the artist in the process of writing the words she will then use to for that narration on her computer screen (figure 9). She reads aloud to herself and substitutes words, themselves first developed as the artist flew over the Atlantic ocean.⁴⁷ Viewers are reminded of the many processes that the artist underwent to make the video, which, even at its end, feels as though it will continue to change. ‘I’ve filmed in places and at

⁴³ L. Tan, 2015, *Waves*, HD Video, 19 minutes 23 seconds.

⁴⁴ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

⁴⁵ L. Tan, *Lisa Tan: Sunsets, Notes From Underground, Waves* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2015), p. 42-3.

⁴⁶ Tan, *Lisa Tan*, p. 43-4.

⁴⁷ Tan, *Lisa Tan, Waves*, p. 47.

times that exist at some threshold', Tan writes in the exhibition text that accompanied the series' 2015 installation as Galleri Riis in Stockholm.⁴⁸ The video is about movement, but also about the forces that draw it together. Tan says that through much of her art she finds herself attempting to 'reconcile...reading about something and experiencing it'.⁴⁹ *Waves* is her response to the Virginia Woolf novel's 'countermovement to finalism', a non-linear translation of motion and tone into words.⁵⁰ *The Baudelaire Itineraries* is equally predicated on an embodied experience. Just as *The Baudelaire Itineraries* draws attention to the transformations that artworks undergo through various sets of eyes, this video follows continuous motion and the forces that facilitate it.⁵¹

A Precoccupation with Intimacy

Perhaps, then, it was a very lack of movement that inspired Tan to make *The Baudelaire Itineraries*. Tan was 'landlocked in New York' when she developed the piece.⁵² She was also reading through T.J. Clark's books on criticism, specifically *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and 1848 Revolution*, and *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851*. She recommends reading the introductions to understand the questions on her mind at the time. Tan

⁴⁸ L. Tan, *For Every Word Has Its Own Shadow*, exhibition text, Stockholm: Galleri Riis, 2015.

⁴⁹ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

⁵⁰ Tan, *Lisa Tan*, p. 46.

⁵¹ Tan, *Lisa Tan*, p. 48.

⁵² Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

believes that the discourse around art ‘preferences enlightenment over the phenomenological experience’.⁵³ Viewers see an atmosphere of ideology, social critique, and intellectualisation around a work before they see the paint on canvas. This sentiment is also present in the writing of T.J. Clark. *Image of the People* is interested in the multifarious links between art and politics in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁴ The author, however, warns against ‘flirting with hidden ideologies’, referring to the bad habit of contemporary art historians to apply meaning to art where it may not live.⁵⁵ He insists:

What is barren about the methods that I am criticizing is their picture of history as a definite absence from the act of artistic creation: a support, a determination, a background, something never actually *there* when a painter stands in front of the canvas, the sculptor asks his model to stand still.⁵⁶

Clark encourages a closeness, a direct line, to the work, devoid of an assumption that the artist intended through this piece to synthesise ‘systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes’.⁵⁷ It is beneficial to maintain a general awareness of these, but better to consider each artist and work in relative isolation.⁵⁸ One finds evidence of Clark’s method in *The Absolute Bourgeois* in his treatment, incidentally, of Delacroix and Baudelaire himself. He fleshed out these men as if they were characters in a novel. Clark consulted Delacroix’s journals and letters

⁵³ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

⁵⁴ T.J. Clark, ‘On the Social History of Art’, in T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973), p. 9.

⁵⁵ Clark, ‘On the Social History of Art’, p. 11-12.

⁵⁶ Clark, ‘On the Social History of Art’, p. 12.

⁵⁷ Clark, ‘On the Social History of Art’, p. 12.

⁵⁸ Clark, ‘On the Social History of Art’, p. 13.

as research, weaving details of characterisation and setting, such as ‘...Delacroix began in a hurry, working direct from nature, afraid of the first frost and the end of autumn’ and ‘Baudelaire fought because he has a personal stake in revolution; because he was poor, because he sweated under the tutelage of *conseil de famille*, because he hated his stepfather...’.⁵⁹

Clark imagines what it is like to be in the room with these men. Tan seeks a similar intimacy.⁶⁰ In fact, her piece *In Search of the Forgotten, Letters from Mme de Forget to Eugène Delacroix* (figure 10) drove her to translate the responses to the letters Clark consulted for this book.⁶¹ Delacroix’s correspondence to this best friend and lover Madame de Forget (Tan points out that her name in English is ‘forget’) had been translated, but her letters to him had not. Tan was eager to dig deeper, become closer, to these canonised individuals, exploring the influences in their work.⁶²

The Phenomenological Perspective

It can be argued that, in her seeking of an intimacy and her dismantling of the distancing effect of ekphrasis, Lisa Tan encourages a phenomenological experience. In the case of the *The Baudelaire Itineraries*, that would be with the Salon artworks. Phenomenology functions conversely to ekphrasis, because it relies not on an intellectual organisation of themes, but a

⁵⁹ Clark, ‘Delacroix and Baudelaire’, in T.J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973), pp. 131 and 171.

⁶⁰ Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

⁶¹ L. Tan, *In Search of the Forgotten, Letters from Mme de Forget to Eugène Delacroix*, Ink-jet, chine-collé, artist’s frame, 38 x 50 cm.

⁶² Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

base-level, bodily experience of the work's presence. Amanda Boetzkes explains this method of viewing in 'Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond the Flesh', stating:

The viewer's task is not to ascertain the artwork's objective meaning, but rather to respond to the artwork with the question, 'how does this artwork mean to me?' The ethical charge of this questioning lies in its acknowledgement that the meaning of the artwork is not inherent but rather presents itself to the spectator, historian, or critic through the body's actions, reactions or non-actions.⁶³

While the author acknowledges that social commentary is often a factor in an artwork's creation, phenomenology emerged to counteract a method of art history predicated on 'ideological apparatuses', which can lead viewers to apply arbitrary or historically specific interpretation before considering her personal response to it.⁶⁴ Referring to the writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Boetzkes says that phenomenology promotes instead 'extreme openness to the artwork that allegedly precedes any preconceived notions about it'.⁶⁵ From this openness a dialogue occurs between object and viewer, the purpose of which is not to deduce one singular and incontestable meaning, but to appreciate the mental processes (many of which may be reliant upon those prior notions) happening in the act of viewing. It is an intimacy not only with the work, but with one's own cognition and sensation in the gallery.⁶⁶ Phenomenology is a physical method which assumes a life and agency within the artwork. Boetzkes writes of the 'artwork's demand for the expression of the body'.⁶⁷ In phenomenological viewing, one's movement

⁶³ A. Boetzkes, 'Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond the Flesh', *Art History*, 32 (September 2009), p. 690.

⁶⁴ Boetzkes, 'Phenomenology and Interpretation', pp. 690-1.

⁶⁵ Boetzkes, 'Phenomenology and Interpretation', p. 691.

⁶⁶ Boetzkes, 'Phenomenology and Interpretation', p. 694.

⁶⁷ Boetzkes, 'Phenomenology and Interpretation', p. 708.

reflects her reaction to the object.⁶⁸ Phenomenology emphasises the present and the immediate as one stands before a work of art. It is inherently individual to each viewer because it is rooted in the body.

Merleau-Ponty's quote emphasises the importance of movement in phenomenological study of art. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* would paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world in paintings. To understand these transubstantiation we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which in an intertwining of vision and movement.⁶⁹

This is an active process, an approach of the artwork matched with a physical response. *The Baudelaire Itineraries* urges actions as well. The travel plans focus not on what the viewer will think when she gets to the museums mentioned, but how to get there – ‘take a train’, ‘travel from New York to London’, ‘rent a car in Paris’.⁷⁰ Active, physical participation is required.

So where does that leave art criticism? It is tempting to assume that critical art writing is merely a record of a phenomenological experience. However, unless it is written in the exact moment of viewing, art criticism will undergo a process of mulling the reaction with ideological framework of social archetypes and artistic preference. In other words, the internal mixes with the external, the bodily with the intellectual. Consider this passage from Baudelaire's 1846 review:

⁶⁸ Boetzkes, ‘Phenomenology and Interpretation’, p. 699-702.

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty, M., ‘Eye and Mind’ parts I and II, in G.A. Johnson (ed.) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, tr. M.B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1994), p. 123-4.

⁷⁰ L. Tan, *The Baudelaire Itineraries*.

The works of M. Ingres are the result of an excessive attentiveness, and they demand an equal attentiveness in order to be understood. Born of suffering, they beget suffering. As I explained above, this is due to the fact that his method is not one and simple, but rather consists in the use of a succession of methods.⁷¹

Here Baudelaire records the feeling of being pulled in by the painting, anthropomorphising the work and giving it agency over him. Then, he immediately goes on to make a statement about Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' amalgam of artistic method, knowledge of which would have to have been possessed by Baudelaire before visiting the Salon or researched afterwards. He contextualises his experience within a schema. These lines do as much art criticism does, it underpins impressions with theoretical analysis and previous experiences.

That is not to say art criticism is without value. Phenomenology is only one method in art history, and it is frankly over-ambitious to assume that viewers of art can just turn off their thinking in a gallery. That said, it should always be remembered that art writing, and especially ekphrasis, is a highly subjective synthesis of the object and our expectation of it. *The Baudelaire Itineraries* does not reject art writing (in fact it was through reading reviews that Tan developed the concept for the piece), but it illuminates that it is only one way of understanding art.⁷² Exciting things happen in those spaces when the experience of reading and viewing collide, or even conflict.

Conclusion

This essay needs to turn the reflection on itself now. The irony of its purpose being to describe and interpret Tan's piece is not lost. People can assess *The Baudelaire Itineraries*

⁷¹ Baudelaire, 'The Salon of 1846', p. 84

⁷² Schum. *Interview with Lisa Tan*.

through a computer screen pulled up to Lisa Tan's website – yet another layer of separation, distance, and translation. *The Baudelaire Itineraries* speaks to art's power to inspire action, to draw a viewer into an experience. Despite its desire to collapse the distance generated in Baudelaire's 1846 review, the piece celebrates the journeys art takes through processes of viewing, description, and interpretation. Ekphrasis can tinge a viewer's encounter with a work, but it can also lend it a new life, a new vehicle for access. Charles Baudelaire's words have been concentrated down to the text in Tan's work, but they live in a parallel realm to any other viewer's experience. *The Baudelaire Itineraries* is a work about the myriad overlapping goings on in viewing, interpreting, and discussing artwork.

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List of Illustrations

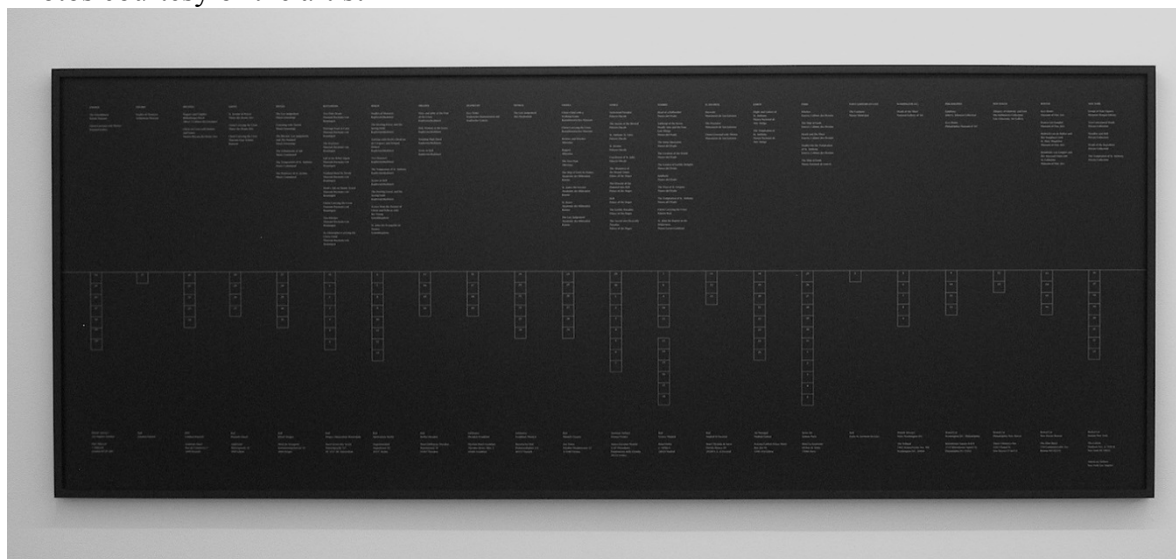
1. Lisa Tan

The Garden of Earthly Delights

c. 2004

Photograph in artist's frame, 38 x 98 in

Photos courtesy of the artist

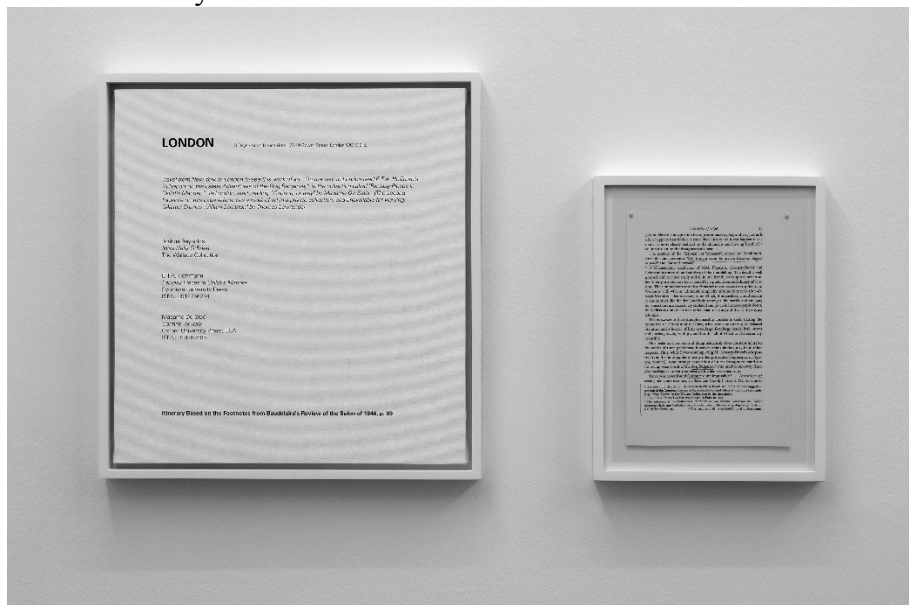


2. Lisa Tan

The Baudelaire Itineraries

c. 2007

Ink on canvas, photograph, and artist's frames, various dimensions
 Photos courtesy of the artist

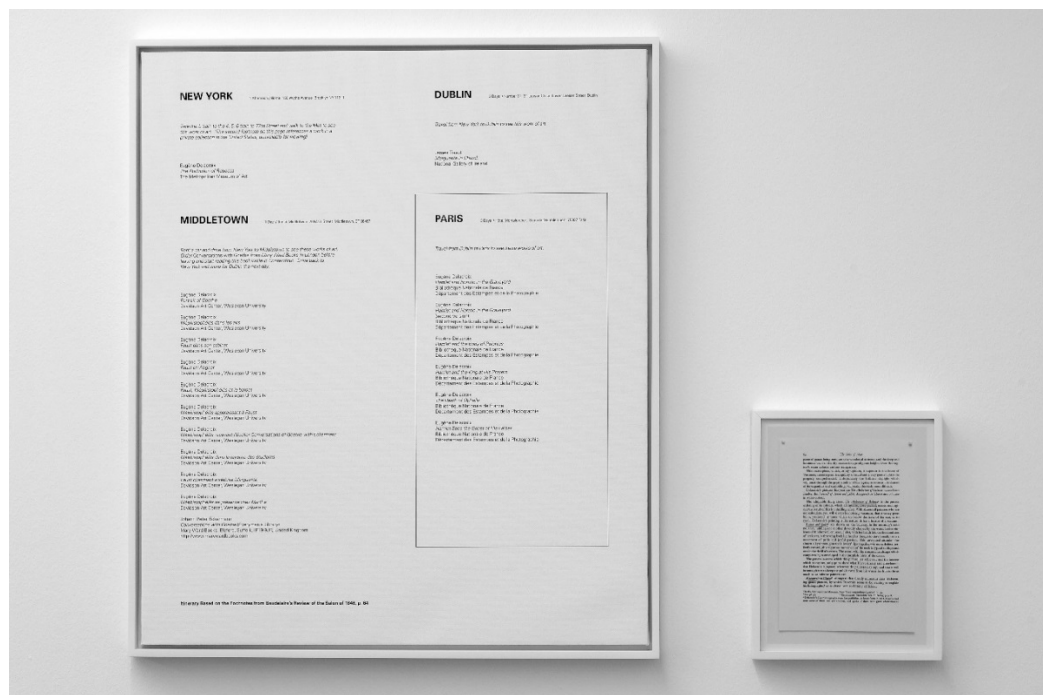


3. Lisa Tan

The Baudelaire Itineraries

c. 2007

Ink on canvas, photograph, and artist's frames, various dimension
 Photos courtesy of the artist



4. Lisa Tan

The Baudelaire Itineraries, 'Pg. 71'

c. 2007

Ink on canvas, photograph, and artist's frames, various dimensions

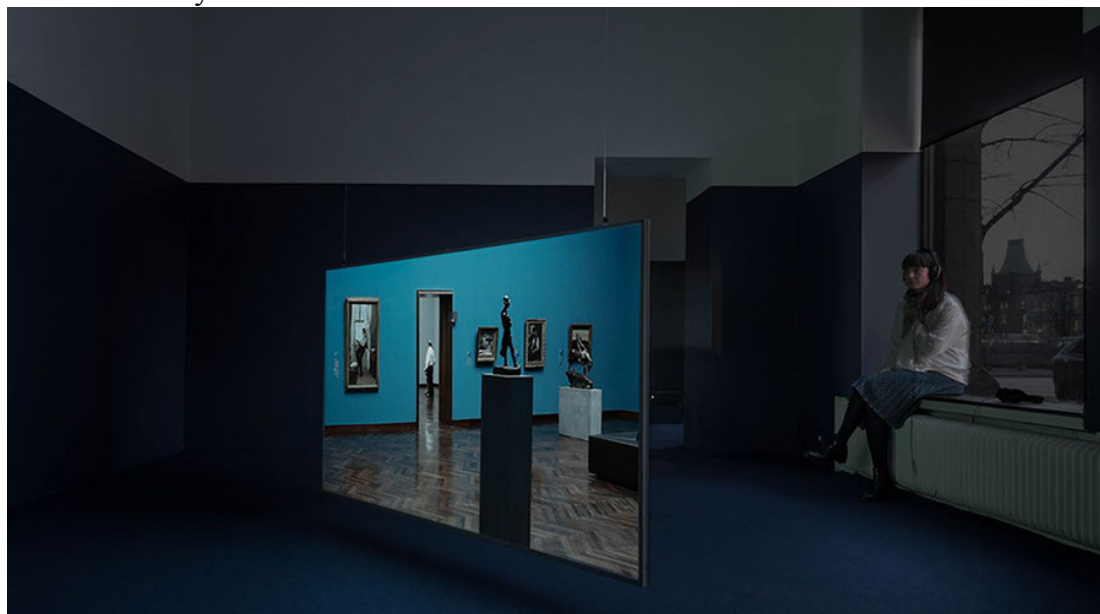
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The Waves

c. 2015

HD Video, 19 minutes 23 seconds

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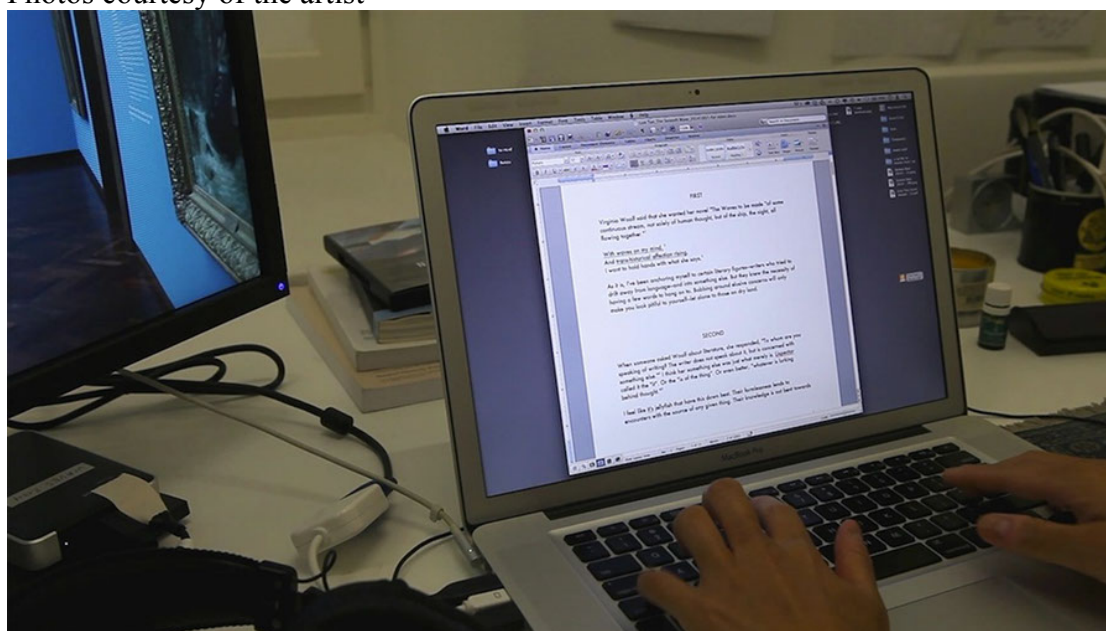
9. Lisa Tan

The Waves

2015

HD Video, 19 minutes 23 seconds

Photos courtesy of the artist



10. Lisa Tan

In Search of the Forgotten, Letters from Mme de Forgetto Eugène Delacroix

Ink-jet, chine-collé, artist's frame, 38 x 50 cm

Photos courtesy of the artist

