

After the first line there is no other

William Eaton

First published March 2013

An artist may, seeking to draw a face, a landscape, a feeling, become frustrated and temporarily paralyzed, wondering what the right or ideal way to do this might be, or indeed whether the task could be done. A chasm lies between our representations and the things themselves, and even between myself, wherever “I” may be, and my representations (my performances?) of my feelings to this self.

If, however, and perhaps by accident, the artist should make a line, however halting, a next line may suggest itself, and more after that. It has been remarked that at some point the art object (or the essay) takes over from the artist. It has, or seems to have, established its own rules regarding what is needed and what not. The artist’s own demands give way or take a back seat to the demands of the work itself.

Of course in the end some works are judged, correctly or incorrectly, to have succeeded or not; some are judged masterpieces. An artist could well be excused for wanting to know what sorts of qualities (or personal charms or connections? what educational and professional credentials?) would lead to positive reviews or even glowing ones. I believe that the external factors (another: in what country or city the artist is working and showing) have much more influence than we usually recognize, but I am also struck by a quality I would call confidence.

From one perspective, I am simply doing here what most every philosopher does: passing the limitations of human understanding from one term to another in the hopes that they might get lost along the way. That is, first we did not know the right way to draw or if we could draw; then later we did not know what made a work successful; and now I have called this thing “confidence,” and we do not know what this is, or what it could mean as a quality of an art work.

While not wishing to be vulgar, I would refer to a feeling that some, perhaps many human beings have: that some of her or his *crottes* (droppings, typically in toilet bowls) are beautiful. And I am not here proposing that *crottes*, by definition, cannot be beautiful. It seems to me that when an artwork, be it with quiet or loud confidence, is able to sustain its claim for itself, for its beauty or truthfulness or silliness or whathaveyou . . .

William Eaton is the Editor of [Zeteo](#). A collection of his essays, [Surviving the Twenty-First Century](#), was published in 2015 by Serving House Books. His writings on art include [Morandi, Relationships, Fascism, Still Life](#) and [Morandi, Bonnard, and Silences Within](#).

Well now we have simply passed the buck from “confidence” to this idea of being able to sustain a claim. And I wonder if this might be where denial comes in. The sustaining, the confidence involves a denial of the possibility of doubt, or a denial of the extent to which doubt might be possible. (From this perspective, Courbet’s famous painting of a naked woman lying on her back with her legs spread—*L’origine du monde*—comes to mind as a triumph of Realism, of Realist art’s ability to distance us from the limits of our understanding, to trick us into thinking that if we position ourselves correctly and are scrupulous enough, what can we not see?)

I also find myself thinking of Stanley Cavell’s writing about skepticism. E.g., from *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*: skepticism demands “efforts at recovery internal to it: It is inherently unstable; no one simply wants to be a . . . skeptic.” And, in “Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture,” Cavell suggests that a final philosophical victory over (the temptation to) skepticism would mean a victory over the human, and that a philosopher has to learn to deny nothing, at every point. From these perspectives, it seems to me that what the artist and the philosopher (and human beings more generally) set out to do is to deny the impossibilities of their undertakings. And our success is often measured by our success in this task, of denial, and by the extent to which we help others with their denying. (So the great artist is not Courbet, but, say, David or Calder?)

Meanwhile there are art works, works of philosophy included, that can and do speak of our human need to deny and of the immensity of the task. (See *Oedipus the King*!)

Links

- Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* (1866) is exhibited at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris: [museum webpage for the painting \(English version\)](#).
- Stanley Cavell, *[Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare](#)* (Cambridge University Press, updated edition, 2003).
- Stanley Cavell’s article “Declining Decline” may be found in *[This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein](#)* (reissued by University Of Chicago Press, 2013).
- *["Finding Ourselves in Oedipus Again and Again"](#)* by William Eaton, *Zeteo: The Journal of Interdisciplinary Writing* (CUNY), Spring 2012.