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Beyond Interpretation?

Following in the provocative claim of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, most art today seemingly does nothing. Instead, it has become the aristocratic ornament of culture; that which can be comfortably appreciated or enjoyed, not feared or confronted. But how could such a profound debilitation have taken place? We cannot simply blame the artists. Rather, we must also turn to ourselves – the “we” that consume art today. Perhaps the most powerful contemporary art remains wholly vital and impressive, but is defused of its affectual forces as we receive it. That is to say, it is not the artworks themselves that have diminished, but rather our very means for encountering them.

Over the past century, we have been inundated with entire schools of analysis, from the Freudian to the Marxist. We are now trained from a young age – and throughout our education– to respond to art in a critical way, sustaining specific reading methodologies. Despite their discursive differences, all of these practices are founded on a central assumption – namely, that the role of the viewer is one of interpretation. It is precisely this assumption that must be thrown into doubt. This essay intends to cultivate an alternative reading practice, asking: how else might we approach art today, if not by way of interpretation?

Borrowing from literary thinkers ranging from Susan Sontag to Jorge Luis Borges, this essay attempts to locate the structures of power and violence in the interpretive apparatus. ‘Context’ serves as a way to fossilize, limiting an artwork to its respective era or authorship. ‘Subtext,’ on the other hand, assumes the work to be entirely ahistorical, fixed under the assumption of universal ideals. Both of these approaches serve as a kind of paralysis, containing the artwork from both within and without. Interpretation totalizes the artwork in its meaning, preventing the emergence of the new or the uncertain. At its conclusion, this essay does not call for more art or less criticism, but rather to blur the lines between them.