

ONE DAY AT A TIME

The ego—what a racket.

HILTON ALS, WHITE GIRLS

Oedipa wondered, whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back.

THOMAS PYNCHON, THE CRYING OF LOT 49

Our leading man was born in 1917, the same year Marcel Duchamp entered *Fountain* in the Society of Independent Artists exhibition under the pseudonym R. Mutt. This might not be the best way to begin the story, but it's a coincidental fact nonetheless. Duchamp and our protagonist's stories intertwine in the negative, inasmuch as Duchamp, through his introduction of an everyday store-bought object into the field of art—an item called the readymade—profoundly changed the category of art. Duchamp's iconoclastic gesture has been used, for over a century, to shore up the perpetual death notice of painting. Our leading man took notice, but ended up a painter nonetheless. After decades of carpentry, writing film criticism, and teaching, it was studio life that caught him in the end.

He showed up in youthful Southern California in 1970, already fifty-three years old, having driven cross-country from New York in an old taxicab with his girlfriend Patricia Patterson, a fellow artist, sometime-collaborator, and his soon-to-be wife. That summer "Close to You" by the Carpenters and "Ball of Confusion" by the Temptations were topping the charts. The couple spent their nights in national parks, and they rolled into La Jolla, California with almost no possessions and even less cash. He was there to teach painting at the University of California, San Diego, but it turned out that the UCSD professor and poet David Antin, who gave him twenty dollars to tide him over, knew who he was and said, Why don't you teach the history of film as well? And just like that, he was given a painting studio on the then decade-old UCSD campus and started to teach what would become his legendary VA84: History of Film course. Farber then began to stock the newly formed art department with contrarians: filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin, camerawoman and photographer Babette Mangolte, artist Ree Morton—folks who were rubbing up against the boundaries of ideas about narrative and medium. Patterson started to teach as well, first painting and then classes on utopian communities, art, and artists: William Morris, the Shakers, de Stijl, the Russian Constructivists—all of whom or which, it should be noted, trafficked in the revolutionary potential of the decorative.

I arrived much later. Sometime early in the summer of 1987 I flew from New York to San Diego at the invitation of a friend who offered free lodging (aka the sofa) in an apartment her boyfriend had already paid the rent on through September. She was the first artist I knew who was my age. In other words, she was the first artist I knew who wasn't dead. I had been studying art history—David, Goya, Géricault. She had been reading Gertrude Stein and Roland Barthes. I worked a temp office job in Manhattan, answering phones at the front desk of a public relations firm. Once I had made enough money for the one-way ticket,

I quit and flew west. San Diego was about as exotic a locale as a girl from Flushing, Queens, could imagine. Birds-of-paradise grew like dandelions in front of two-story apartment buildings—back home they were five dollars a stem, sold in buckets outside of corner delis. My new friends all listened to punk, read theory, and had a slightly hostile relationship to the overwhelming beauty of the coastline, which they displayed by dyeing their hair black and generally staying indoors. I drove to the beach every day after work to gawk at the Pacific and upped my intellectual game by reading Leo Steinberg essays and Marcel Proust. By the end of the summer I had resolved to finish my last year of college at UCSD. I was in the thrall of my peers, some of whom were, in turn, in the thrall of our protagonist.

To be honest, I'm not sure I was ever "officially" enrolled in Manny Farber's lecture class in the fall/winter quarter of 1988. (I was a bit of an academic grifter with a fairly attenuated relationship to university protocols such as attendance and registering.) The buzz around my circle of friends about how it was going to be Manny's last class, combined with the fact that my boyfriend and roommates were TAs for the course, conspired to place me in the auditorium on any given evening slack-jawed, with my mind reeling, as I watched Jean-Luc Godard's *Les carabiniers* (1963) (that scene with those two dopey cops and all of their postcards), and Preston Sturges's slapstick Hollywood picture *The Palm Beach Story* (1942) (with Claudette Colbert appearing thriftily glamorous in men's pajamas), and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Katzelmacher* (1969) (with the totally beguiling Hanna Schygulla dancing in the shortest miniskirt ever). So far so good, but he really got me to sit up straight in my seat during his screening of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973). He showed the opening scene several times—once straight through, once without sound, and once while he spoke (or something like that, it's unclear to me how much of my memory I can trust). When Farber talked, he talked about how Robert De Niro moved like a dancer, and he asked us to watch carefully as De Niro moved his body through the streets, to see how the character seemed to inhabit his physical frame, how a low hum of criminality was embodied in those lilting footsteps—the compactness of his hips over his knees—all this, just before he put a cherry bomb in a mailbox on a street corner in downtown New York and scampered away, his entire body looking like a shit-eating grin. Even as the early-1970s palette of the film made me long for home, I knew I would never watch a movie in the same way again. Farber had destroyed my suspension of disbelief, replacing it with a keen attention to detail—indeed, he taught me in that instant to let myself be distracted by the minutiae that were operating on a different level from the master plot. It was a total inversion of everything I had understood about interpretation up until that moment.

And then: that was that. He retired. I went on to take more classes, watch more films, meet more artists, and write my first pieces of "criticism" for the local

San Diego arts paper. The path that led me to the life I lead today—in which my work as a curator occupies the central axis of my identity—had unfurled, and I was on it, although I didn't know it at the time. Certainly, when I sat in Manny's lecture hall, I had no inkling of what a curator even did, this being the time before the profession had achieved its bizarre cult status. And my current understanding of its operations, demanding a constant oscillation between the big picture and the details—the big picture being the institution of the museum and its central role in the creation of value, the formation of canons, and the presentation of private artistic acts for public experience; the details involving the development of intimacies with both objects and their makers, the why and how of choosing specific objects, the why and how of installing them, and what each act of adjacency in an installation might connote—was still a decade away.

During those heady college days, I, like so many others, developed a crush on the twentieth century's call for art to broker an arrangement with life. My cohort and I existed in the slipstream of the teachings by those who had lived through and believed in the revolutionary potential of 1968. We combined that with the punk and hip-hop leanings of our own generation. And I, like so many others, was more than happy to reject high culture for its own sake, more than happy to reject contemplation as the primary form of viewership, connoisseurship as the framing device for taste. Feminism blossomed in me and, in the closing years of the 1980s, having not yet learned the ills of essentialism, I found myself interested in the labor, thoughts, practices, ideas, and stories of the half of the world's population that had been systematically overlooked and undervalued. In other words, I was interested in women. This meant I was interested in décor and the decorative and decorum, and, by extension, housework, interior decorating, and style. I was compelled to reclaim underrecognized women artists. I was turned on by the proposition that the canon could be refashioned to make their concerns central rather than peripheral. Then I learned that there was no center or periphery. That's when things started to get really interesting.

Everyone (by which I mean the art students hanging around UCSD's original Mandeville studios building) knew that Manny and Patricia were painters, and the gossip about them—their love, her fabled garden, and their magical life—hung in the air. It would be decades before I looked at their work seriously, even as my interest in the everyday grew more acute and poignant over time. Back then, I couldn't have seen their work for what it was: I was too much in the grips of what I thought were the (exclusively) serious concerns of critical theory. Now, I find my attraction to the everyday to be a form of defense against what I perceive to be the near total eclipse of criticism by the market values of art as an asset class, the demand for museums to produce blockbuster shows, and the

Manny Farber, Patricia Patterson, and their Shetland Sheepdog Annie in their Leucadia, CA, home, 1991.
Photograph by Don Boomer



apotheosis of profit as the primary marker of cultural value that I see embodied in the frictionless finish fetish of Jeff Koons, the narcissistic grandiosity of Damien Hirst, or the production of charm without affect by Takashi Murakami. Harsh judgments for sure, and I don't mean to suggest that I don't find any of those artists interesting—it's just that the ideas and affects that their works promulgate are commensurate with the neoliberal values of "pure" market exchange, hedge funds, and financial instruments. I find myself longing for the days when art and culture were considered spaces where the human characteristics of curiosity, empathy, and critique held stronger sway. I think that my belated interest in Farber's and Patterson's work means that I need their version of the everyday now. I need to think about what people actually

do with their time, how they come together at table, how we create spaces for fellowship and exchange that are not measured by metrics borrowed from the for-profit world. Perhaps this is why I am brought to my knees by Moyra Davey's photographs of empty booze bottles on a still-dirty kitchen counter. Maybe this is why the well-ordered and closely observed interiors of Becky Suss's paintings—with their flat planes of pastel colors and their well-placed vases and pillows—produce such strong feelings of kinship in me.

Still life, nature morte, trompe l'oeil, vanitas . . . these kinds of images are as old as representation itself. The myths of Zeuxis established the game of representation to be one of illusion and the everyday: grapes painted with such tenderness that they fool the birds. It appears as if the twentieth century's profound questioning of art—what it is, what it can be, what it is good for, what it does—has not yet produced any scorched earth around the filiation we have for still lifes' uncanny ability to represent the world as it exists, complete with its ever-transitory dailiness and its messy conditions. It turns out the official culture of monuments to white men on horseback who won wars (or perversely, in the context of the United States, statues of those who lost a war) placed in the public square feels as antiquated as having a man deliver milk to the house each morning. (It's a distant memory: cold air, the texture of the bottles' thick glass rims, the sound the empty bottles made in their metal carrier when it was placed on the rough concrete of the stoop.) Nevertheless, Wolfgang Tillmans's still life photographs of food remnants

eaten out of hand persist in capturing my imagination. Part of this epochal attraction must surely be the eternal return of the same, the *plus ça change* quality of it all: no matter how much we love our iPhones, we all must eat, and eating, being at table, with all its implied necessity and conviviality, remains a constant—a truth, even. (And yet [the cranky feminist in me resents having to feel so cranky], the recent foodie revolution hasn't produced a society committed to the migrant workers who pick our food. Just as the new love of craft in the art world has yet to produce a canon of anonymous practitioners, and the intimacy between the art world and gentrification [i.e., the creation of increasing amounts of wealth held in the name of real estate] has not enabled much dignity to be bestowed upon the folks—primarily brown, predominantly women—who keep all those new homes clean. I digress.)

In 1978 Patricia Patterson wrote an essay for *Heresies*,¹ a journal born of feminism's dramatic eruption in the art world. In it she writes gently of the everyday aesthetic practices of women in Ireland's Aran Islands, which Patterson had visited and which had a transformative effect on her. She wondered if perhaps the women themselves did not conceive of their domestic labors of arranging and repairing and knitting as "aesthetic acts." But she noted them duly nonetheless. And then she tried to paint them: shallow domestic interiors where women spoke to one another of the things that structured their lives. In her essay, she takes note of the ceramic roosters that dotted the windowsills of Aran. Reading it I recalled the quixotic collection of ceramic roosters that punctuated the margins of Patterson and Farber's home in Leucadia. "She must have brought them back with her from her trips," I thought, remembering how all of the window sashes and jambs in their home were painted bright, flat shades of lemon yellow, robin's-egg blue, or a milky verdant green, a palette that lives on in the furniture and sculptures of Roy McMakin, a student of Manny and Patricia's at UCSD.

Their house began its life as a modest beach bungalow, probably no larger than seven hundred square feet, with a beautiful row of four-over-four paned windows that lined the bedroom. When Patterson realized Manny would lose his studio upon retiring from USCD, she set about redesigning their home. "I got busy," she said. She added two new wings, making it into a U-shaped structure, each addition acting as a studio: one for Manny and one for her. Both studios connected to the original house, and both opened out onto the garden via the French doors so typical of the indoor-outdoor architecture of Southern California. The garden was, and remains, a gentleman's agreement between the planned and neglected, filled with old-growth roses that climb to the roof, pomegranate trees, artichokes allowed to go to flower along with their sibling thistles, apple and lemon trees, parsley and mint, bougainvillea, rosemary, a fig tree, and a host of flowering plants that, as an Easterner, I sheepishly still don't know the names of.

During one of my visits Patricia described how Manny worked. She started at the beginning, when they were living in a loft in New York in the 1960s. Farber painted large abstract paintings on brown craft paper that he layered with wet paint and muslin. He would wake up in the middle of the night to go to the studio to turn them so they would dry properly. After he removed the muslin he used a chalk-encrusted thread to snap drawn lines on their mottled and variegated surfaces. All of this took place on the floor. Sometime in the mid- to late 1970s he began making modest square-format oil paintings on paper; images of stationery supplies and candy littered the pictorial field in an allover composition lifted directly from the Abstract Expressionism playbook. When it came to depicting the stuff of the world, he didn't take his cues from Pop; he preferred to miniaturize rather than to blow up. And despite the precise rendering of bottles of Wite-Out and Hershey's candy bars, the fetishism of the brand was not at play. What was at stake was the ubiquitous nature of the things themselves; their commonness and their appearance in the spaces of work. The labor of representation was very specifically acknowledged in the ground of the composition, for Farber painted, in an almost trompe l'oeil spirit, the craft paper etched by the lines of an X-Acto knife. The grounds of these small paintings counterintuitively offered the residue of a process via the logic of representation. The painted paper background acted as segue between abstraction and representation, and its resolute flatness was simultaneously offered as a plane of color and a surface troubled by the painted renditions of the cut lines. Some of these drawings bore titles that hooked them up to Farber's other great passion, the cinema, as in the painting of an open box of Red Hots and a broken Hershey bar titled *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). (Remember the scene where Warren Beatty chases the elusive Julie Christie in the winter forest, and how director Robert Altman perfectly captured the muffled quality of sound in the snow?)

These workplace tableaux ultimately gave way to large, slightly unwieldy, canvases that because of conventions we can call still lifes. Although, truth be told, they are anything but still. Rather, they appear to race and pulse with an energy that might be called cinematic, as they jog along establishing both the connections and breaks between the things they represent: handwritten notes, open books of Japanese *shunga* (erotic prints), flowers, gardening and painting tools, books, toy figurines, miniature train tracks, plates of fruit, notepads, rulers, strips of film leader, matches, razor blades, glasses of water, seed pods, detritus from the neighboring Batiquitos Lagoon, rebar, and vegetables from the nearby Chino Farm. Farber's still life paintings were also conceived horizontally. First he laid the canvas or board flat on a table and prepared a colored ground. These typically planar and rectangular grounds were frequently divided: black and white or contrasting colors, as in *Untitled Red/Green Diamond* (1988–89). This seemingly simple act of

dividing the canvas into bands of color destabilizes both the visual and conceptual aspects of the ground as fundamental to the figure-ground dyad so essential to representational painting. Upon this “compromised” ground, Farber placed the actual objects of his everyday life—plates of half-eaten food, scrawled notes, open books—before climbing a ladder to look down at the composition forming before him. Then, with a pencil taped to a long piece of rebar, he proceeded to trace the outlines of the forms. He would remove and replace objects at will, and would commence new traces. Patricia would bring flowers from the garden into Manny’s studio, and he would say, “Put them there,” gesturing with the rebar to where he wanted them to go. It was, she recalled, their way of communicating without interrupting the work of the day. What she didn’t say was that they were gifts, tokens of affection, love letters.

Termite Art

In 1962 *Film Culture* published Farber’s now-legendary essay “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art.”² A mere nine years later the article was included in an anthology of Farber’s writings titled *Negative Space*. The essay is a screed against the idea of the masterpiece, a diatribe against monumentality, a manifesto against the narcissism of the artistic ego, replete with lines such as: “The painting, sculpture, assemblage becomes a yawning production of overripe technique shrieking with preciousity, fame, ambition; far inside are tiny pillows holding up the artist’s signature, now turned into mannerism by the padding, lechery, faking required to combine today’s esthetics with the components of traditional Great Art.”³ Let’s keep going: “The three sins of white elephant art (1) frame the action with an all-over pattern, (2) install every event, character, situation in a frieze of continuities, and (3) treat every inch of the screen and film as a potential area for prizeworthy creativity.”⁴ Both quotes refer as much to the sins of Hollywood cinema as they do to New York School painting. Farber’s ire regarding a lack of commitment to detail (“frame the action with an all-over pattern”), his disdain for an evinced preference for the smooth and sinuous rather than the tactile and the disjointed (“a frieze of continuities”), and his deep suspicion of the tyranny of the first person pronoun (“prizeworthy creativity”) all speak to an on-time arrival of Farber and what would become the dominant hallmarks of postmodernism, particularly the postmodernism of the Deleuzian strain—a rhizomatic form of thinking, in which horizontality trumps verticality, where all ideas are capable of hooking up with other ideas, and where the “I” is merely a transitory position occupied provisionally and awkwardly. For French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (and Farber), desire did not come in the form of an aching absence (to be framed, enacted, and disguised

by fame in an all over composition) but instead came from the contingency of ideas and bodies grasping and releasing one another. But I've rushed ahead a bit here, because the previous sentence is a better description of a Manny Farber still life painting than it is of his termite essay.

I think it's fair to say that in 1962 Farber was struggling to articulate and validate his neologistic phrase "termite art." Castigating white elephant art was the much more effortless task. Statements of negation are easy; affirmation—really and truly getting at why something is good (or why one values it or finds it beautiful)—is a much harder proposition. And termite art, even in the hands of a writer as tenacious and innovative as Farber, was no exception. He spends most of his time dissecting the performances of John Wayne to get at the small gestures and details that constitute the "termite tendency." He's at his most explicit when he says that termitism "feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art, and turning those boundaries into conditions of the next achievement."⁵ This commitment to process, to the artist's own working-through of their medium was not, however, the only characteristic of "termite art." Lest the whole project devolve into a kind of studio navel-gazing, Farber clarifies in his introduction to the 1971 anthology: "The important trait of termite-fungus-centipede art is an ambulatory creation which is an act *both of observing and being in the world*, a journeying in which the artist seems to be ingesting both the material of his art and the outside world through horizontal coverage."⁶

In my copy of *Negative Space* the sentence above is heavily underlined; it's what allows me to hang on. Traditional representation seems to rely on the idea that the artist is somehow separate from the space of the world, sitting at her easel, peering out at her subject. For me, this omnipotent fantasy of objectivity sits at the core of Western civilization, and is one of the roots of its ills. Farber calls instead for an artist who can navigate the complexities of being in the scene and describing the scene, who can occupy an ethical position of enormous nuance. No pretending objectivity, no pretense toward a state of pure being, but instead a situation in which observation and action, if not exactly simultaneous ("ingesting"), are equally valued ("horizontal coverage"). Farber would do this in his criticism by breaking with standard grammar, meaning that he never let the form of representation obscure the act of thinking—with all its ellipses, doubling back, stammers, and revisions. The filmmaker Kahlil Joseph (himself deeply gifted at the filmic capturing of the details he calls "black gesture") once told me that the best part of reading a piece of criticism by Manny is that you get to the end of the essay and wonder, "Did he like the movie?" Because the liking, of course, isn't the point. The liking or disliking is the intrusion of the hyperpersonal ego into the

situation of trying to be with and observe the film. Farber's great friend, the filmmaker Jean-Pierre (J-P) Gorin, understood the termite part of Farber's essay as a repudiation of the omnipotent "I": "The advantage of bringing the Farber quote into the debate is that it takes the I out of the equation and aggressively replaces it with the instinctual energy of a bug that prompts generally more a call to the nearest exterminator than the celebration of an aesthetic."⁷

J-P Gorin: former collaborator of Jean-Luc Godard, shows up in California, meets Farber, and falls for him hard. The feeling is mutual and Farber gets Gorin a teaching position at UCSD, where Gorin goes on to make a trilogy of essay films dedicated to mapping the bizarre suburbia that is Southern California. The second film in the trilogy *Routine Pleasures* (1986) is half about Manny and half about a group of model-train enthusiasts and their storefront hobby space in the beach town of Del Mar. It's a buddy movie about termite art where most of the action comes via Gorin's befuddled, bemused, and bewildered voice-over. Never explaining nor teaching, the film is essayistic in its observation of the intensity with which of a group of grown men attempt to enact rituals designed to impose order on the entropic state of things in their Lilliputian world. Their efforts are as poignant and humorous as Gorin's attempts at dissecting the American psyche. The film's sculptural analogue is Fischli and Weiss's masterpiece in miniature, *Suddenly This Overview* (1981–2012), a suite of tabletop unfired clay sculptures that typologizes the foibles and successes of Western man, making no discernible distinction between the two. The failure of the enterprise is built into the work, much like the futile endeavor of trying to exterminate the termites in Southern California that gnaw away at single-story houses without foundations while the exterminators who tent those very same houses watch as they fly through the open French doors the day after the tent is removed.

Gorin's first film in the trilogy, *Poto and Cabengo* (1980), was the stuff of legend during my senior year at UCSD. The film followed the local development of a pair of twin sisters who linguists believed had created their own language. To hear Gorin recount the origin of the project is to get a glimpse into the film's ultimate game plan:

I got hold of the event through the press. It was the middle of the summer and news was sparse. The Loch Ness monster had been nowhere in sight that year, and I suspect the journalists felt the twins would be a good substitute. They built up a case, which reeked of Wild Child mystique. The very day I saw the first article on the twins, Eckart Stein from ZDF was passing through town and I sold him the idea of a film. I lied through my teeth, told him that I had seen the twins, seen the therapists who took care of them at Children's Hospital, secured the rights to the story. I assured Stein that they spoke a "private language." He agreed to do

the film. But when I saw the twins for the first time I immediately realized that the story as the press—and by then, myself—had cast it was not there. There was no private language and never had been. All along the twins had spoken a Creolized language, some densely unintelligible American/English, a patchwork of southern lingo spoken by their father and of the deformations imposed on the English language by their German-born mother.⁸

How to make a film about a nonevent? How to make a film about a failure of the discourse of discovery and objectivity so crucial to the narratives of science? How to make an anthropological film that neither elevated nor pathologized its subjects? How to make a film about a pair of twin girls communicating in secret that is also a film about the displacement of a French artist in the dry, overdeveloped canyons of San Diego County? The film was mythical amongst us students because its very existence was proof of a category we might call “interesting failures,” proof that there was a virtue inherent in chipping away at a project, doing the work, proceeding against the obstacles. There was a virtue in not knowing what you were doing. The unintelligibility of *Poto and Cabengo* recalled every punk show you’d ever seen: a bunch of guys who barely knew how to play their instruments, shouting the words to a song you didn’t understand, and, if you were a girl, trying to make sure you didn’t get hurt in the pit. The scene I remember most vividly is one in which Gorin is preparing a meal for the twins in his kitchen. While slicing a cucumber, he holds a thin celadon sliver up to the light and says to the girls, “Look, isn’t that beautiful?”

Still Life

While I was cutting my teeth on the history of cinema according to Farber, and its current vicissitudes according to Gorin, I was not capable of looking at, much less “getting,” Farber’s paintings. Nor was I particularly adept at reading Farber’s criticism. Like so many of my generation, I was finding my way, through the byways of Continental theory, to feminism: feminism as a means to critique patriarchy, and by extension the very concept of the West; feminism as a way to rethink the primacy of gender as a tool to structure the world; feminism as a way to query power, its effects, and one’s relationship to it. The idiosyncratic struggles of a couple of white dudes in Southern California wasn’t exactly where I was at. So the irony of finding myself, now a woman of a certain age, obsessed with both the termite essay and Farber’s still life paintings, to the point of thinking they might be an interesting set of coordinates around which to build an exhibition, is not lost on me. When I first started explaining the project to people, almost every encounter devolved into playful banter dominated by the question “Is (fill-in-the-blank) a termite artist?”

Surely this game had losing as its only outcome. Clearly the task of the exhibition was not to produce a category, although of course I was narcissistically interested in valorizing my curatorial choices. The problem was that the damn essay doesn't make a strong enough case for what termitism is, and it could only partially describe what termitism looked like in action. Termite art was like pornography: you knew it when you saw it. I felt my enterprise to be as flawed as Gorin's pursuit in *Poto and Cabengo*. People looked at me blankly and I would just mumble, defeated, "The show is basically about still life," which mollified most of my interlocutors and left me in a pit of self-doubt. Until, that is, I found myself sitting in Gorin's San Diego apartment, surrounded by his Jurassic-era DVD library (my laptop doesn't even have a DVD/CD drive). The apartment had one of those classic pink-and-black-tiled bathrooms from the 1940s, a Proustian madeleine for anyone who has ever lived in Southern California. It also appeared to be dangerously close to the airport. Even though I grew up in the shadow of both LaGuardia and JFK, I flinched with every takeoff and landing. Gorin's face remained implacable, reminding me of a phenomenon I remembered from my childhood, when my parents' friends from out of town would be surprised by the cacophony above us that no one in my neighborhood even heard.

"It's the 'versus,'" he said. Of course! The essay is structurally flawed by a false antinomy, an either/or scenario doomed to generate opinions rather than dialogue. Anyway, who wants to have an argument that only has two sides? The paintings, on the other hand, operated with the logic of "and, and, and. . . ." The paintings were the enactment of termite art twenty years after the idea had first occurred to him. Farber had somewhat famously given up writing in the late 1970s. His last essay, cowritten with Patterson in 1977, "Kitchen Without Kitsch," was on Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975),



Chantal Akerman *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, 1975.

perhaps the most perfect film ever made. Considered by many to be a feminist masterpiece (an oxymoronic phrase if there ever was one), *Jeanne Dielman* was the ultimate suturing of art and life, one that was shot with structuralist rigor by director of photography Babette Mangolte. The impeccable and implacable Delphine Seyrig plays a housewife who turns tricks in the afternoon for a living. But the tricks play second fiddle to the real labor of housework: cleaning the bath, making the bed, shopping for dinner, making a meat loaf—all represented with quiet dignity, in near real time. In *Jeanne Dielman* the everyday is about repetition and duration. Farber and Patterson described it as a “still life film”—a genre painting by a ’70s Chardin (to quote Babette Mangolte: “a Forties story shot by a Seventies camera.”⁹). Farber said that he abandoned writing so he could devote himself entirely to painting. “The writing was very difficult,” Patterson told me while we sat together in weathered leather club chairs in Farber’s former studio. “The paintings don’t seem exactly easy,” I thought, knowing that wasn’t the point.

What was clear was that, in Farber’s hands, painting’s complexity—its ability to compress and condense meanings, its capacity to traffic in aporias—simultaneously competing realities—and its adeptness at registering its process as part and parcel of its final product—rendered it an essayistic medium without the inherent limitations of writing as such. Writing has no choice but to be consumed in a linear fashion: the mere incident of one word having to follow another, all of which must, in turn, cohere into sentences with proper syntax that are further obliged to coalesce into paragraphs with topic sentences, obliged to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. From left to right, we read one word after another, encountering one idea after another; thus it is difficult not to presume that one idea comes before another, to put them in an order, to imagine the cause and effect implicit in such an ordering, to start the unconscious production of hierarchies for which the human mind has such a profound facility. Unlike writing, painting has the gift of gestalt: an immediate apprehension of a situation composed of both a whole and its parts, or parts that exceed the whole, or a whole comprised of parts both present and absent. This is the force of visual information and intelligence. This is what pictures do before, during, and after our attempts to discuss what it is that we see when we look at them.

Farber was one of the first critics to take this capacity of painting and use it as a hermeneutic for how to look at film. This is why the details of an actor’s performance, or the choice of chairs and tables on a set, or the way the camera is moving, or the way light is imagined are so crucial in Farber’s criticism. He is trying to look at a film “all at once,” rather than allowing himself to be sidelined by linear narrative. Each shot is a composition. Each edit offers a new one. Farber’s criticism was a way of articulating the “and, and, and” of all the particularities that give the film

its totality, and Farber's willful breaking of language was his way of forestalling the film's linearity for as long as possible. One of the best descriptions of the sympathetic relationship between Farber's writing and his picture making comes from Kevin Parker, who wrote: "Synecdoche expands space by enabling a small part to stand for the whole; asynedeton, on the other hand, cuts space back. It is the suppression of linking words, conjunctions, adverbs, or even conventional punctuation between sentences. . . . In Farber's painting these two rhetorical moves are simultaneously at work anywhere you look."¹⁰ And just as Farber's criticism used painting as a lens to look at film, his paintings took up the logic of the essay as a form.

I first encountered the writer Elizabeth Hardwick in a text by Gorin written to accompany a selection of films in the termite tendency. A quick Google search established her provenance: she was a pedigreed writer, cofounder of *The New York Review of Books*, and tumultuously married to poet Robert Lowell. Her *New York Times* obituary reads like a screenplay about a New York intellectual whose life was undeniably caught in the undertow of feminism, but who swam parallel to the shore so steadily that she may not have admitted it. The last two paragraphs read:

In a 1984 interview in *The Paris Review*, the writer Darryl Pinckney asked her about her feelings about getting older. "You can always ask," Ms. Hardwick responded. "Its only value is that it spares you the opposite, not growing older. People do cling to consciousness, and under the most dreadful circumstances. It shows you that it is all we have, doesn't it? Waking up, the first and the last privilege, waking up once more."

When Mr. Pinckney asked her, "Do you think it is more painful for women than for men?" she replied: "More about women and men? About something so burdensome it doesn't seem valuable to make distinctions. Oh, the dear grave. I like what Gottfried Benn wrote, something like, 'May I die in the spring when the ground is soft and easy to plough.'"¹¹

Tracking down Gorin's citation and reading Hardwick's obituary made me think of Moyra Davey's writings and her video essays, treasure maps composed of footnotes. Whenever I think of Moyra, I imagine her notebooks filled with other people's words. Davey was in the MFA program at USCD, and was one of the TAs for Manny's famous last class. She didn't start making her own video essays until much later, when her son was old enough to fend for himself, and after a long period working as an editor for a small publisher. Clearly, she had been influenced by Gorin's essay films, but in the best way, long after her exposure to them, so that the influence is more of a faded trace than a strongly drawn line.

For Hardwick, the “aggressiveness of the essay is the assumption of the authority to speak in one’s own voice,” and her essays “are addressed to a public in which some degree of equity exists between the writer and the reader.”¹² I think Farber was ambivalent and suspicious of the authority of the first-person pronoun, and reading Hardwick’s account of the essay helped me understand why Farber had tacked toward the seemingly timeless terrain of still life and landscape—genres whose purchase on the everyday remain unrivaled. Who hasn’t made an ersatz still life arrangement? And everyone lives in a landscape. By this I mean to suggest that it is not only the “accessibility” of the imagery as such that matters. It is also the structural connections of that kind of imagery to people’s lived daily lives that takes on a special role in Farber’s slightly ham-fisted American populist hands. And yet for Farber, ever the contrarian, populism only went so far, for any viewer of a Farber painting knows that his work assumes your familiarity with the flowers of late Manet, the apples of Cézanne, the spatial flights of fancy of early Picasso, single-point perspective, the dragon of the conventional composition, and its St. George, the expansive fields of Abstract Expressionism. To look at a Farber painting is to be aware of late modernism’s fetish for flatness and anti-illusionism: it is to recognize Ellsworth Kelly’s recuperation of color, to see the ukiyo-e print’s confirmation of the influence of Japan, and to see in Farber’s use of stencils a nod to Jasper Johns. It is, in other words, to see a field littered with objects and images laden with referential meaning. Their organization, however, breaks from any modernist pretense to order. The words “centrifugal” and “meandering” appear again and again in the writing about Farber’s pictures. Jonathan Crary keenly observes the “willfully unreconciled spatial systems at work.”¹³

As it did for countless numbers of still life painters before him, the terrain of the everyday, as mapped by Farber, exists on a tabletop. But whereas previous painters used the tabletop as a site of relative stability (discounting the history of perilously placed knives that rest at the threshold of gravity’s intervention), Farber’s pictures start out on the horizontal plane of the table and then tilt violently, elastically, euphorically to embrace the verticality of the wall. The extreme literalness of Farber’s move from horizontal making to vertical presentation always summons, for me, the work of that other great gymnast of the everyday, Robert Rauschenberg. Farber’s practice evokes Leo Steinberg’s still-trenchant essay from 1972, “Other Criteria,” in which the deeply insightful critic comes to terms with the radical implications of Rauschenberg’s work by coining the term “flatbed picture plane.” For Steinberg, the work of art made on the tabletop was produced in the space of work—it was about the language of the printing press, kitchen counters, and the draftsman’s table. Steinberg saw this as a profound shift in worldview: from a painting that imagined itself as a window offering a view out onto the world, to

an artwork that behaved as if it was at work in the world. The change in pictorial orientation was analogous to a larger societal shift in the wake of World War II from the modern to the postmodern, from a belief in rational order to a belief in entropy, from art as illusion to the art of the actual, from the idealized to the pedestrian. Farber's work is sensitive to these arguments, and the deliberate heterogeneity of the objects in his paintings, his confounding of the spatial relations between individual details, and his proliferation of ways in and out of the picture, means that his paintings enact the postmodern sensibility that revels in "the hopelessness of all systems of organization, of storage, of categorizing."¹⁴

One of the defining features of the postmodern era is that knowledge became more horizontal and networked, and less vertical and hierarchical. We might even say that Farber, Steinberg, and Rauschenberg were all at work on this considerably profound paradigm shift. Rather than the old enlightenment conception of knowledge as functioning like a tree, with its central trunk and many branches, and its intense verticality ever lifting and craning up toward the sun, Deleuze offered us the metaphor of the rhizome, an image of knowledge, culture, and human organization that escaped categorization, that ran horizontally along the ground, splitting into networks that break off from one another like errant rivulets, only to find a confluence with ideas that had germinated elsewhere. Farber's pictures visually play out the rhizomatic impulse and they behave like essays as described by Hardwick, in which an "essay is nothing less than the reflection of all there is: art, personal experience, places, literature, portraiture, politics, science, music, education—and just thought itself in orbit."¹⁵

This is where Farber's canvases move the needle for me. His still life paintings avoid the genre's historical pitfalls: no vanitas moralizing, no staging of objects as a form of psychological displacement. The everyday objects strewn about Farber's canvases are not placed there in a pretense at formal exploration. To see him as updating Cézanne's play with apples—if what you see in Cézanne's apples is the use of an everyday, negligible thing, so that the artist could better concentrate on the formal and spatial problems of painting as such—is to miss the point of Farber's termitism. Farber wasn't trying to reinvent the language of painting, because he didn't seem to treat it as a grandiose act. (In *Routine Pleasures* Gorin quotes him as saying, "Life isn't too big a deal and shouldn't be painted as such.") He painted Deleuzean pictures from the position of the carpenter he had once been. He painted them to figure out how to make a picture not of how the world looked but of how it functioned. In this regard, he may have shared the poet Charles Olson's understanding of metaphor: "Metaphor is not what a thing is like: it's how it behaves."¹⁶ In Farber's termite essay it becomes clear that the details of an actor's performance, or the particularities of the *mise-en-scène*, are

what make the enterprise real for him; they are what grounds it and bestows upon it legitimacy. It's not the devil but reality that lives in the details. And without the details all you have is a white elephant story. This is why my one of my favorite scenes in Kahlil Joseph's *Fly Paper* (2017) is one in which a young woman sits with a child underneath an open window. Their physical intimacy leads us to believe they are mother and son, and as they sit, close and still, they watch, with evident pleasure, a diaphanous curtain blow in the breeze. The vignette is an offering of time slowed, time suspended, of air defying gravity ever so provisionally. It's why I find Dike Blair's gouache of an empty chair in an airport so devastating: the relief of it, to know that one's loneliness has already been accounted for. It's why seeing myself reflected in extreme miniature in the chrome of Josiah McElheny's *An End to Modernity* (2005) always feels so pleasurable; finally, I am depicted at a scale that feels appropriate to my place in the multiverse.

The Everyday

I have long wondered exactly what it is we're talking about when we talk about the everyday. Since I am not interested in masterpieces—to the point of being allergic—or war, or a theory of everything, or people who insist upon their rightness, I tend to stick pretty close to the quotidian. But still, just where and what is that? Is it the sound of mourning doves at dawn? The laundry? The dust under the bed? The picked-at cuticle? Is it how you arrange your desk, or how you like your breakfast? Is it the photographs we remember so well we think they are our memories? Is it the microaggressions of everyday racism? The casual sexism of the office? Is it the way we idly scroll past the parts of the newspaper that don't speak to us, as in that staggering scene in *Jeanne Dielman* where Delphine Seyrig spreads the newspaper out on the immaculate dining room table and turns page after page but reads nothing? Is it the contents of the junk drawer? Is it the oil stains in the driveway? Is it the water bill? In the words of Georges Perec, "It matters little to me that these questions should be fragmentary, barely indicative of a method, at most of a project. It matters a lot to me that they should seem trivial and futile: that's exactly what makes them just as essential, if not more so, as all the other questions by which we've tried in vain to lay hold on our truth."¹⁷

The everyday implies an endlessly horizontal proliferation of concerns, each with its own specific tonality, each with its own tributaries. To be truly curious about the water bill is to open out onto the systems of the state and its putative concern for the common good of its citizens; it is to encounter the phenomenon of money, power, and the discourse of resources. It is to attend to the monthly time of the billing cycle, and the daily time of the drip irrigation system. It could

become a conversation on the relative merits and pleasures of showers and baths, the effectiveness of dishwashers, and the women's work that is never done. It is a way of thinking about all the flowers in Farber's paintings. The ones laid flat on the canvas. The vegetables with dirt still attached to their roots. It is to speak of the vases filled with flowers arranged by Patricia. It is to understand the repeated nature of the activity of making. It is to see it as an endless performance: the sowing and weeding, the selecting and arranging, the trimming-down and the discarding, the washing of slime out of the vase, the starting over again. It is to think in the realm of the verb, of the gerund and the infinitive. It is to be invested in the process of things. It is to know the pleasure of process resolving itself into a noun. It is to loosen one's dependence on one's proper name, a name, after all bestowed on you by others who did not yet know you at the time of their Adamic act.

And to paint that gift economy over and over? To double down on the sunflower in the blue vase: to paint it twice from two different angles in the same painting? To do this is to recall the opening line of Olson's poem "The Kingfishers:" "What does not change / is the will to change."¹⁸ Farber's pictures are about the timelessness of change, the beautiful banality of a lifelong love, the small pleasures of a job done well. To make work of this kind is to see that space and time are indeed inextricable; it is to know that everything happens one day at a time.

NOTES

1. Patricia Patterson, "aran kitchens, aran sweaters," *Heresies* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 89–92.
2. Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, ed. Robert Walsh (New York: Praeger, 1971; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 134–44.
3. *Ibid.*, 135.
4. *Ibid.*, 137.
5. *Ibid.*, 135–36.
6. Manny Farber, introduction to *Negative Space*, 10.
7. Jean-Pierre Gorin, "Proposal for a Tussle" (2007), in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 273.
8. "Jean-Pierre Gorin by Lynne Tillman," *Bomb*, no. 23 (Spring 1988), accessed June 29, 2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1056/jean-pierre-gorin>.
9. Patricia Patterson and Manny Farber, "Kitchen Without Kitsch," *Film Comment* 13, no. 6 (November–December 1977): 48.
10. Kevin Parker, "The Termite and All-Over Meaning," in *Manny Farber*, ed. Howard Singerman (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), 56–62. See also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
11. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Elizabeth Hardwick, Critic, Novelist, and Restless Woman of Letters, is Dead at 91," *New York Times*, December 4, 2007, A29.
12. Elizabeth Hardwick, introduction to *The Best American Essays 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Hardwick (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1986), xiv–xvi.
13. Jonathan Crary, "Manny Farber: The Garden of Earthly Routines," in *Manny Farber: About Face* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2003), 129.
14. *Ibid.*, 130.
15. Hardwick, *Best American Essays*, xviii.
16. Fielding Dawson's class notes from Olson's course at Black Mountain College, in *The Black Mountain Book* (Rocky Mount: North Carolina Wesleyan College Press, 1991), 98.
17. Georges Perec, "Approaches to What?" (1973), in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), 211.
18. Charles Olson, "The Kingfishers" (1953), in *In Cold Hell, in Thicket* (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1967), 11.