

# The Art of Unknowing and the Unknowing of Art: A Few Alternatives to Interpretation

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“Art is a vision of the unseen.”  
—Plato

## Introduction

In the early 20th century, Walter Benjamin characterized modernity by the shock of sensory overload. Of course, this is not a new problem. But unlike the locale of early 20th century malaise – the street of the urban metropolis – the information fatigue of the digital age is more pervasive because it is harder to pin down or locate. Like the God of the mystics, the computer screen is everywhere and nowhere. Like the air you breathe, information is all around you. For most people, the most radical solution to the overload of information in the digital age – to unplug – is not a viable one. But there is something else that can become an antidote to the busy drone of clicks and tweets. Rich with ambiguity and nuance, this antidote is impervious to information. And this antidote is art.

Given that information overload is the defining characteristic of our era, academics should find ways of writing about art that refuse to treat it as a storehouse of information. All too often, academic writing dulls the thrill of discovering the strangeness of Kafka or Beckett by packaging their novels into neat interpretive parcels (“existential”, “absurdist”) that can be safely marketed to any academic audience. Thus, academic criticism tends to become a game of imposing cookie-cutter abstractions on a writer whose works baffle or perplex. But does every experience of art have to be discursive?

What would happen if we stood back before a painting, story, play, or song...and just decided to absorb and to *listen*?

To criticize frequently implies to extract informative content from a work of art and then mold this work into a digestible body of intellectual knowledge for the public to consume. What gets overlooked in traditional criticism is not just the spectator's own aesthetic experience but also the notion that art does not exist for the purpose of being consumed, treated like a textbook or a manual. To refresh, broaden, and diversify traditional academic perspectives on art, this article offers an alternative critical path that de-emphasizes the cognitive, the informational, and the discursive. In focusing on an artwork's formal nuances, this alternative mode of criticism preserves the wonder and pleasure a work of art inspires. It describes the work's formal elements with clarity and precision. In paying attention to the sensory details of a work of art and how they come together, we can come to a different understanding of a painting or story. This understanding is embedded in concrete nuances, techniques, and gestures that constitute aesthetic experience.

The cornerstone of the article is Susan Sontag's essay “Against Interpretation”, which asks critics to re-evaluate the interpretive project and calls for greater attention to style and the minutiae of text; Shklovsky and the New Critics bolster Sontag's project. Before I proceed with Sontag, though, I want to highlight some pitfalls of interpretation as a way of doing criticism. In being prone to the biases and blind spots of certain intellectual fashions, criticism can prove to be narrow and short-sighted. In addition, some critics deplete all wonder and vigor of literary works by making them into straw men for their own ideological agenda. Ironically, it is the high priests – the critics – who have inflicted the most damage on their own field of inquiry.

## To Interpret is to Impoverish

All too often, critics tend view a literary text as an illustration of a political or cultural principle; they forget that a work of art is not a manifesto or an instruction manual. Indeed, they treat the text as content neatly encased into the container of historical, sociological, and ideological context. Sacrificed are the specifics of the artwork which render it alive. Is another kind of criticism possible, where the wonder of aesthetic experience can be transmitted to the printed page?

Following Bruno Latour's notion of the critic as “...not the one who debunks but the one who assembles” (Latour 2004: 246), I want to highlight a body of criticism that relies on the careful observation of art's minutiae and not on preconceived abstract judgments; it emphasizes the artwork's nuances

of form and preserves the wonder and pleasure it inspires. Like any good teacher, this kind of criticism leaves us with more questions than answers in capturing the wonder of aesthetic experience through descriptive poetics.

Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" frames the parameters of my project by showing the philosophical dangers of interpretation as an academic practice, questioning the categories of "meaning" and "content", and calling for critical attention to the sensory and the experiential modes of art. The centerpiece of my essay is Roland Barthes' "The Third Meaning", a work of still analysis that describes the poetics of gesture in Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin". Charles Baxter extends Barthes' descriptive model to literature by writing about the unsaid, the omitted, and the implied. And Doris Sommer's *Proceed with Caution* details the political import of minority literature deliberately blocking easy access to interpretation.

### **Against Interpretation: Interpretation as Getting Rid of the Strange**

How did interpretation become entrenched in our debates about art? Susan Sontag grounds the modern methods of interpretation in the mimetic theory espoused by Plato and Aristotle, both of whom believed that art is essentially figurative. Even though most contemporary critics no longer view art as the representation of an external reality, the tenets of mimesis persist to this day. Whether art is believed to be an image of or a statement about reality, the content of a work of art often comes first when considering the piece as a whole. According to Sontag, the project of interpretation is inextricable from the notion of seeking content in art. Defining interpretation as an activity of translation – A really means B, C is really D, etc. – Sontag situates the practice of interpretation in the culture of late classical antiquity that was characterized by the clash of myth and new scientific knowledge (Sontag 1966: 6). In this way, interpretation became a kind of intellectual shoe-binding that made ancient texts fit modern mores or concerns. It was also a way to reconcile the strange or unacceptable ideology of an old text with the current ruling order. Sontag goes on to critique elaborate interpretive systems created by Marx and Freud insofar as they destroy or alter the narratives they interpret in their aggressive search for "true" or "latent" meaning.

Arguing that the project of interpretation has become stifling in her own time – the 1960's, or the heyday of conceptual art – Sontag calls interpretation "the revenge of the intellect upon art" and "upon the word" (Sontag 1966: 7). She adds that "to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings' (Sontag 1966: 7)." This might seem an

exaggeration. But in imposing a particular meaning, no matter how profound, on a given work of art, every interpretation takes away as much as it adds to our vision of the piece as a whole. To say that Hamlet is the first modern man in world literature is, implicitly, to deny this character a plethora of other potential epithets and descriptions.

In interpreting we translate textual complexity into a condensed summary of themes and content. In this sense, "interpretation makes art manageable" (Sontag 1966: 8). Indeed, critics have attempted to make Franz Kafka's works more palatable for non-specialists. His strange German syntax and quietly disturbing tales that erupt in paradox and *aporia* have employed no less than three armies of interpreters, according to Sontag. There are those who read his texts as social allegory and concentrate on examples of bureaucracy in his work; those who interpret his work as a psychoanalytic allegory of his own fears and anxieties; and those who see his art as a religious allegory. The point is not that these interpretations are somehow false or off the mark; on the contrary, each one can be a convincing schema for Kafka's fiction. But that's precisely it: all three are schemas which ignore the pervasive strangeness of Kafka's idiom and of his metaphysics. In engaging with the formal qualities of Kafka's work while leaving the overarching "meaning" be, a careful close reading of a single paragraph of Kafka's prose has the potential to reveal something more substantial.

At the end of her essay, Sontag calls for critics to pay more attention to aesthetic form; she invites us to recover our senses, to learn how to see more, hear more, feel more. We can find a similar calling in Victor Shklovsky's essay "Art as Technique." Significantly, his approach to art eliminates the distinction between form and content and concentrates on blocks and impediments to meaning. In emphasizing the strangeness of art as well as its capacity for cognitive shock, Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization invites the reader to engage with art's challenging formal properties.

### **Formalism, Defamiliarization, and the Stakes of Art**

Victor Shklovsky starts his 1917 essay "Art as Technique" with a philosophical claim that has urgent consequences for aesthetics: that perception is different than knowledge. He invokes the dangers of automatized perception, describing what happens when we glaze over familiar objects and leave phrases unfinished because we can guess at their meaning: "And so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (Shklovsky 1965:12). Beginning with quotidian surroundings, habitualization comes to devour everything in sight, including personal relationships, public space, and the fear of war. Yet art defies automatic

perception and breaks through any routine by estranging an object or an idea from its normal context and making us perceive the familiar as if it were strange:

And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important* (Shklovsky 1965:12).

Through “roughened rhythm” (Lemon and Reis in Shklovsky 1965: 5) and the deformation of ordinary language, defamiliarization increases the difficulty of the reading process and heightens our awareness of aesthetic form. Because meaning comes about through abstract reasoning while artfulness arises from the manipulation of concrete forms, Shklovsky writes that “the meaning of a work broadens to the extent that artfulness and artistry diminish” (Lemon and Reis in Shklovsky 1965: 13). And if a work of art stuns us with a form so complex and bizarre that knowledge becomes powerless and the only recourse is to look and feel, then art has made us “recover the sensation of life.”

How do Shklovsky’s insights relate to Sontag’s arguments against interpretation? Given that Sontag’s essay was written in 1963, we can read it in light of the literary concerns of the New Critics, whose 1950’s essays called for attention to form and championed close reading, much like Shklovsky and his fellow Formalists had done in the 1920’s. Indeed, the Formalist strain of Sontag’s argument in “Against Interpretation” emerges more strongly in her essay “On Style”, in which she laments that contemporary critics do not discuss the nuances of style when describing a particular work of art. She goes on to argue that the dichotomy between style and content is a false one because without style, there would be no content. Until critics pay attention to style in a work of art, Sontag argues, they will continue treating art as a statement, an expedient vehicle of philosophy, anthropology, or the social sciences. But a work of art is an experience, not an instruction manual or an answer to a question. Unlike a philosophical investigation, art does not give rise to conceptual knowledge “...but to something like an excitation, a phenomenon of commitment, judgment in a state of thralldom or captivation. Which is to say that the knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgment) in itself” (Sontag 1966:22). The distinction between the “knowledge of something” imparted to us by science or philosophy and the “experience of the form or style of knowing something” that we gain in an encounter with art is the distinction between theoretical knowledge and knowledge that is embedded in aesthetic experience.

## Byzantine Icons: First Case Study of Writing About Aesthetic Experience

But can criticism really transmit the wonder of art to the printed page? In her 2010 study of Byzantine icons, Bissera Pentcheva provides important historical and theological context for the ways in which an icon can enchant the spectator with its sensual detail. Crucially, Pentcheva presents the icon as far more than an abstraction or a pretext for theological speculation; in fact, she is adept at describing its nuance with such precision that it seems to materialize in front of us. She describes the 9th century relief icon as a performative object that immersed the devotee in a psychosomatic interaction with the divine by imbuing her with images, sounds, tactile sensations and smells that connected body and spirit:

Dense layers of fragrance and smoke from burning incense enveloped the icon, while *polykandelia* (metal disks with multiple oil lamps or candles) and wrought-metal grilles cast lace shadows moving across its face. This luminous, umbral, and olfactory richness was enhanced by the reverberation of music and human prayer... the faithful projected their own psychological stirrings back onto the surfaces of the icon, seeing in...the shifting shadows and highlights a manifestation of inner life, of indwelling spirit... (Pentcheva 2010: 1-2).

Thus, an icon is not just a visual representation of the divine. It is a promise of a rich religious experience that is intimately bound with the world of the senses, of flickering impressions, of changing light. Because Byzantine icons were not merely looked at but also touched and kissed by devotees, Pentcheva uses the term “tactile visuality” to describe their aesthetic uniqueness and argues that the dazzling surfaces of these icons “present at taste for sensual pleasure stimulated by an abundance of textures, glittering light effects, the sweetness of honey and incense, and sound” (Pentcheva 2010: 7). (Again, notice the specificity of her language and description.) The sheer pleasure of experiencing a Byzantine icon would be lost on someone intent on extracting its meaning alone.

Through their materiality, Byzantine icons become a manifestation of the spirit inhabiting the body, a key theological concept to Greek Orthodoxy. As Pentcheva emphasizes, “they simulated and acted out presence rather than imitating it” (Pentcheva 2010: 121). The author’s careful focus on presence and performance is very distinct from an attempt to read possible interpretations from the image alone. Rather than interpret the symbolism of these icons, Pentcheva wants to explore the overall sensory experience they produced for the spectator, and to argue that it is this immersive, pleasurable experience – and *not* the icon’s language of signs – that constitutes the spiritual significance

of Byzantine art. This fascination with experience is a particular way of writing criticism, and it certainly makes our reading process so vivid and enjoyable that it becomes a second-order aesthetic experience.

While Pentcheva's book on icons describes a visual aesthetic experience, I believe it is possible to describe literature with the same level of vivid detail. Since Pentcheva places so much emphasis on the experience of perceiving an icon, we can also consider reading a similarly immersive experience. If Pentcheva writes about icons by describing the communion between vibrant color, music, and flickering light, perhaps a literary scholar would think about how certain literary devices affect our perceptual consciousness, and how our attention can be attuned, deflected, or cracked open through bewilderment and wonder. In his essay on "Battleship Potemkin", Roland Barthes provides us with another (visual) model of descriptive criticism by focusing on elusive correspondences between gestures and stills in Eisenstein's film. Intriguingly, he implies that his observations may take criticism to its limits.

### Barthes and Baxter – Case Studies of Filmic and Literary Criticism

In "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills", Barthes decides to read Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin" against the grain of this film's traditional interpretation in terms of montage and Marxist dialectics. At first, Barthes explores some conventional ways of reading the movie. In the beginning of his essay, the critic establishes that a given film scene communicates meaning on the informational level, which encompasses everything a spectator can learn from the setting, the costumes, and the characters. Film can also communicate meaning on a symbolic level: the downpour of gold on a monarch, for instance, can symbolize the ritual of imperial baptism by gold, or communicate the theme of wealth as such. The informational and the symbolic comprise "the obvious meaning", which is intentional and seeks out its recipient.

Barthes suggests, however, that these levels of interpretation do not exhaust the full communicative power of a cinematic image. This is where he brings in the notion of "the third meaning," or the "obtuse meaning," which goes beyond communication and signification in opening up the image to *significance* – the play of signifiers without any visible signifieds. Because the obtuse meaning opens the field of signification up to infinity, Barthes explains that it "appears to extend outside of culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has something derisive about it; opening out into the infinity of language, it can come through as limited in the eyes of analytic reason; it belongs to the family of pun, buffoonery, useless expenditure" (Barthes 1978: 55). The

obtuse meaning always involves a noticeable pattern of visual correspondences within a given image that don't seem to add to our understanding of the piece as a whole and even seem to mock such efforts.

If the "obvious meaning" of Eisenstein's filmic images is always the Russian Revolution, according to Barthes, where can we locate the "obtuse meaning"? By way of response, Barthes analyzes some stills from "Battleship Potemkin." Figure 1 is a still of an old woman grieving for the slain sailor Vakulinchuk, whose makeshift shrine on the Odessa shore attracts much attention to the sailors' revolt. What strikes Barthes about this still was not the woman's facial expression or the gestural figuration of grief – all this belongs to the obvious meaning of the image.

When the obtuse meaning vanishes in the next still (Figure 2), Barthes is able to see it more clearly in the previous still. He realizes that the elusive "supplement...on this classical representation of grief came very precisely from a tenuous relationship: that of the [woman's] low headscarf, the closed eyes, and the convex mouth" (Barthes 1978: 57).



Figure 1



Figure 2

The passage in which Barthes details the "obtuse meaning" of Figure 1 is worth quoting in full because it is a particularly vivid example of film criticism that offers incisive and starkly original details while withholding any pronouncements about their significance. According to Barthes, the obtuse meaning comes

from a relation between the "lowness" of the line of the headscarf, pulled down abnormally close to the eyebrows as in those disguises intended to create a facetious, simpleton look, the upward circumflex of the faded eyebrows, faint and old, the excessive curve of the eyelids, lowered but brought together as though squinting, and the bar of the half-opened mouth, corresponding to the bar of the head-scarf and to that of the eyebrows, metaphorically speaking "like a fish out of water" (Barthes 1978: 57).

Often, the obtuse meaning emerges from a contradictory emotion expressed by the language of gesture. Barthes points out that these traits – the head-dress, the old woman, the squinting eyelids, the fish – refer to the somewhat low language of “pitiful disguise”, which clashes with the “the noble grief” of the obvious meaning (Barthes 1978: 57). But the critic is silent about the significance or the consequence of this clash: it is something the viewer herself should decide.

Precisely because the obtuse meaning extends outside of information, Barthes concludes that “[it] carries a certain emotion” (Barthes 1978: 59). Always bound up with disguise, this emotion never borders on sentimentality. Because the obtuse meaning of the still is a play of signifiers without a signified, Barthes contends that his reading “remains suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation” (Barthes 1978: 61). Significantly, the third meaning disturbs criticism (Barthes 1978: 64), and this disturbance may echo the disruptive power of art championed by the Russian Formalists.

Throughout his essay Barthes is not advocating silence or mystification as a critical response to film; rather, he wants us to develop a new language for talking about this medium, a language that takes note of visual nuance and its emotive value, goes beyond narrative or plot, and introduces a series of terms peculiar to film as an art form. In “Against Interpretation”, Sontag herself argues that cinema possesses a lexicon of forms, which includes the technology of camera movement, montage, and the composition of the frame.

Film is a convenient example of art that resists interpretation because it is primarily a visual art form. Unlike a scene in a narrative, a visual image captures a single point in time and, does not necessarily follow a narrative, a sequence of actions amenable to interpretation. This is why John Berger argues in *Ways of Seeing* that “seeing comes before words” (Berger 1977: 7) and that “original paintings are silent and still in a sense that information never is” (Berger 1977: 31). Barthes’ examples of the “third meaning” in Eisenstein’s film work so well because they point our attention to visual correspondences in the stills (the downward curve of the headdress, the eyebrows, the mouth) that go above and beyond signification not because they transcend it but simply because they bypass the question of meaning altogether, taking the viewer into the territory of emotional nuance and conjecture. It is not always possible to explain away the “pitiful disguise” of the old woman’s headscarf and eyebrows. But to notice them is to enrich the experience of watching the film; it is to enter into the realm of unconscious optics invoked by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1988: 237).

Just as Barthes zeroes in on minute visual correspondences and gestural echoes in his essay on Eisenstein, a literary scholar might focus on concrete

textual details that echo one another and form patterns within the fabric of a story. Paradoxically, this focus on the concrete might unearth mysterious connections that would otherwise pass unnoticed. American writer and critic Charles Baxter hints at the unspoken in his essay collection *The Art of Subtext*. Baxter sets out to describe the elements of a story or novel that continue to haunt the imagination long after the narrative has been read and explained: namely, “the implied, the half-visible, and the unspoken” (Baxter 2007:3). Baxter argues that the stronger the presence of the unspoken in a work of art, the more details are required for the work of suggestion to take place.

One strategy for building the presence of the unspoken is staging, which Baxter defines as the “micro-detailing implicit in scene-writing when the scene’s drama intensifies and takes flight out of the literal into the unspoken” (Baxter 2007:14). In other words, staging involves the build-up of objects, actions, and gestures to hint at the emotional nuance and subtext of a character’s inner life. In a particularly telling example of staging, Baxter shows how Robert Frost constructs the narrative of a couple quarrelling to mask their grief through the meticulous choreography of shifting positions on the staircase of their house.

What’s fascinating about Baxter’s approach to literature is that his search for the unknown is not clouded with abstraction and mystification. Instead, he suggests that the mysterious subtexts of a literary text will emerge only when you look long enough at the surface of the text itself. Just as, for Barthes, the shape of a hair bun or kerchief may evoke the touching and the loving, for Baxter, the unspoken is also not above and beyond the concrete details of narrative. Rather, it lies in them.

### **The Political Implications of Withholding Interpretation**

To be silent is to do more than listen to the nuances of art. Withholding the impulse to interpret an artwork can also have powerful consequences on the political arena. It never seems to occur to literary scholars or cultural theorists that some artists do not wish for their works to be interpreted in any definitive way, or that deliberate gestures of reticence are built into the text to block facile constructions of meaning imposed from the outside. But in her book *Proceed with Caution When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*, Doris Sommer is highly sensitive to gestures that block readerly access.

She remarks that similar gestures of reticence have been used by informants when they withhold information or supply false leads in order to keep ethnographers at a distance (Sommer 1999: 4). Sommer claims that minority authors do the same: “By marking off an impassable distance between reader and text, and thereby raising questions of access and welcome, resistant au-

thors intend to produce constraints that more reading will not overcome” (Sommer 1999: 8). Educated readers, she says, have a lot of trouble recognizing themselves as textual targets. We have been trained to achieve textual knowledge by uncovering baroque textual codes through a collection of clues, always hoping that textual difficulty will yield to our expertise. But what if this assumption has been naïve false, arrogant, or misguided?

In her chapter on El Inca Garcilaso, the 17th chronicler of Peru for the *Comentarios Reales* as a supplement to Spanish official history “in order to overload their [the Spanish historians’] simple ‘truths’ with complicating detail” (Sommer 1999: 64). While Garcilaso flatters the Spanish court and professes modesty about his findings, he also demonstrates superior knowledge of Spanish language, history, and grammar. He reveals the Spanish Jesuits’ poor knowledge of the Incan language, and tells us that Peru got its name because of a linguistic misunderstanding (Sommer 1999: 79). Garcilaso also offers an alternate narrative of the discovery of the New World, according to which America was discovered by a complete mistake, and not even by Columbus himself, but by a simple sailor named Alonso Sánchez de Huelva, who told Columbus what he had witnessed. Columbus, then, had appropriated someone else’s story! Garcilaso tells this narrative in a precise, objective tone, and the overabundance of detail he provides is stupefying. The mestizo writer’s narrative is not supposed to provide the Spanish court with a transparent account of life in the New World; rather, with his linguistic glosses, alternative histories, “just-so” stories and native mythologies, El Inca Garcilaso makes his “supplemental history” so rich with detail that it becomes opaque, like a tapestry of vertiginous design. To claim total understanding – and mastery – of the *Comentarios* would be to overlook Garcilaso’s textual erotics, the game of *abrazos y rechazos* that he plays with the unsuspecting reader. What El Inca Garcilaso shows is that the struggle to understanding and the process of (frustrated) engagement with the *Comentarios* may, in fact, be more significant than any informative content we may derive from the text. Once again, the experience of reading this text takes precedent over its content, and perceptive criticism should be able to recognize this.

### The Ethics of Bewilderment

To be open to aesthetic experience is to approach art without the knee-jerk rush to interpret and categorize what we’re seeing. For to interpret is to explain and to translate —to translate the complexity of dense metaphors and the nuances of craft into a language we can all understand. But what if we let the works of art we describe speak in their own language?

To this end, Lee Yearley proposes an ethics and poetics of bewilderment.

Yearley argues that religious forms of bewilderment appear in key narratives by Dante and the Chinese poet Du Fu because bewilderment strikes in situations of unclear moral action. It is “a way to deal with the irresolvable” (Yearley 2010: 440). Instead of leading to clarity and illumination, forms of bewilderment “will offer you a walk into a further wild place, one which shows not only how to get lost but also how it feels not to return...” (Yearley 2010: 440). Crucially, the heroes of bewildering narratives “disclose that the human heart in a state of bewilderment does not want to answer questions as much as to lengthen the resonance of those questions” (Yearley 2010: 440). With its ability to condense complex emotions into a few words or images, poetry is the best vehicle for expressing the ethics of bewilderment.

If certain narratives want to lengthen the resonance of bewildering questions, why should we act against them? And if a text’s ethics is so bewildering as to silence us, why not acknowledge that silence?

### Conclusion

In the world’s flat mentality of the 21st century, where information is just a mouse-click away, the blogosphere has made listening a rare commodity – there are too many of us who want to do the talking. But an encounter with art that bewilders us can also teach us to listen, to reflect, to tell better stories. By taking the time to meditate and to perceive, we will be honoring our yearning for art in the first place, which no wealth of theory could explain.

But we can recuperate the agency of the work of art by paying closer attention to its particulars, by making the reading process itself more intense and fulfilling. The next stage of writing about art, then, is to examine modes and practices that can prepare us for aesthetic experience by training our faculties of attention, focus, and perception. The growing field of embodied cognition suggests that consciousness is borne out of the interaction between brain, body, and environment – an intriguing insight that might contribute to embodied criticism. In putting theory together with practice, critics can one day attain the agility and the finesse of Borges writing about art with such lucid care and discernment that their pages – analytical, perceptive, but stubbornly well-crafted – can achieve the status of art.

*Russian Aesthetic Center 'Idea'*

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# Intersectionality Genealogy Revisited: From Radical Writings by Women of Color to Radical Writings for Transformation

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### Introduction

Intersectionality, as the celebration and recognition of differences, is finally becoming an interdisciplinary buzzword increasingly used both as an "analytical framework" to describe diversity in gender identities and as "a complex of social practices" (Hancock 2016: 7). Contemporary claims of intersectionality acknowledge power dynamics at the core of social practices and use it to explain experiences of inequality and disparate access to social resources. Not only as a key concept in Women's/ Gender Studies it has been adopted into many other disciplines (such as history, political science, geography, philosophy, cultural and postcolonial studies) and even in decision-making processes. Indeed, UN Commission on Human Rights officially recognized "the importance of examining the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, including their root causes from a gender perspective" (Resolution E/CN.4/2002/L. 59 Cited in Nira Yuval-Davis, 2006: 194). Moreover, institutions such as the European Association for International Education- EAIE<sup>1</sup> embraces in his Spring 2018 edition intersectional analyses in Higher Education as the necessary pre-condition to non-hierarchical internationalization encounters. Its scope has become so inclusive that it identifies not just disadvantaged but also advantaged social positions; that is, not only the experience of exclusion but also that of privilege, voice and agency. Furthermore, on the realization that depending on the circumstances a person or group might be disadvantaged in one social context but advantaged in other, a growing trend