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Tilo Reifenstein

«To organize the rectangle»: Teju Cole, art history, autobiography, fiction

As I conclude this essay, the present Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Rishi Sunak, the third PM since Teresa May who made a surprise, but not very surprising, appearance in Teju Cole's 2021 *Golden Apple of the Sun*, gave a press conference from behind a Tory-branded lectern that proclaimed: «STOP THE BOATS» (Fig. 1). His home secretary, Suella Braverman, had just unveiled her new *Illegal Immigration Bill* that aims to deny refuge to refugees. Counterintuitively, "illegal" does not refer to the nature of the bill itself, which it is (in view of British signatory status to numerous UNHCR conventions and protocols), but, apparently, to those seeking protection. Neither they nor their search for it is, of course, "illegal". It had barely been three weeks since she had refused to apologise to a Holocaust survivor who confronted her at her constituency for using dehumanising language that framed migrants through Nazi rhetoric. The leader of the opposition, the Labour Party's Keir Starmer, would, only a day later, at the bray-fest that stands in for British public-facing political scrutiny, Prime Minister's Questions, offhandedly conflate those in search for asylum with «rapists».[1] Here, too, "opposition" does not denote anything straightforward, like a contrarian stance, but the light admonishment that anti-asylum policies and public

[1] Hansard, *Engagements* (fasc. 729), UK Parliament 2023.

resentment towards the other are not administered with due efficiency and vigour. British anti-immigration politics and rhetoric currently move so fast that a two-week delay in delivering a manuscript requires significant rewrites to align the persistent repetition of the darkest past with the present.

Golden Apple of the Sun is a book of photographs of Cole's kitchen counter interspersed with images of a hand-written eighteenth-century cookbook followed by an untitled, written component. The text proceeds as one paragraph of about 16,000 words (Fig. 2). Regularly, it addresses itself as a work in the process of being written and edited, in a way that gives the impression that reading and writing direction coincide, though it also tells you that that is illusory. Marking the processes of its own development draws swift attention to the imbrication of its form and content. The meta-level recognition of the text's own function, purpose, and desire within the book does not operate on the level of mere summary or appraisal but announces directly that the photographer and writer anticipate a viewer and reader. There are several guiding motifs that move in and out of focus, at times through gentle segue, elsewhere, abruptly, without warning. One sentence ends; a new one begins; their connection to be resolved or not, in view of a memory of what came before or as a future recollection that this happened earlier or perhaps never. Thoughts chase one another with the vivid ineluctability of nocturnal restlessness.[2] These alternating narrative strands and modes of narration facilitate multi-perspectival discourses in a manner that promotes "neighbourliness" (*ein Nebeneinander*) rather than hierarchy.

The text is written directly to "you". The first time, I am addressed I do a double take that admits my uncertainty about having read closely and line by line, because "you"

[2] T. Cole, *Golden Apple of the Sun*, Mack, London 2021, p. 114.

comes out of the blue and is unexplained for a while. You, later, is again directly revealed as a deliberate pronoun that moves between you, me, mother, father, brother, and Other. The narrative voice, too, shifts, from the autobiographical, to the scholarly, to the yes-no questionnaire, to the dramatic dialogue, to the technical data set, and more. Of course, acknowledging the shift of voice explicitly rehearses the recognition of different genres and what might be proper for them.

The most persistent motif is hunger, which is introduced via the autobiographical—though Lydia Davis reminds us, too, that the essay's author should not in all cases be confused with the essay's narrator[3]— account of Cole's one-year boarding school stay during the Babangida dictatorship. Hunger returns via Cole ten years on, again hungry, though for different reasons, as he barely makes a living in the US. Later, hunger reappears through the language of a social welfare questionnaire probing an individual's level of poverty, in reference to food stamps in contemporary US society, as a «hunger striker's wager»,[4] through worries about the food-supply chain during the COVID-19 pandemic, via a dialogue of two prisoners talking about food not fit for human consumption, by way of food ethics. The narrative strand of hunger is interrupted, interrupts, and leads to, not only a discussion of 17th- and 18th-century still life, the American election and the essay itself, but also Dutch colonial violence, pandemic life, taking the kitchen-counter images, the history relating to the also pictured anonymous 1780 cookbook, historic and continuing violence against Black people and impossible—double bind—negotiations enforced by white supremacy politics. The history of art, its viewing, and production (in word and image) are here repeatedly framed, contextualised, probed, discarded, and reappropriated (Fig. 3).

[3] L. Davis, *The Sebald Lecture 2022: Lydia Davis*, Conversation/Interview, 2022 (https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/british-centre-for-literary-translation/sebald-lecture).
[4] Cole, *Golden Apple*, cit., p. 116.

James Elkins excludes, though apologetically, the artist's book from his consideration of «interesting writing in art history». While it is «non-normative», it is so «not in relation to any specifiable model, genre, or practice».[5] Elkins responds to his own previous enquiry, which questioned the chasm between the creative, experimental, and, perhaps, exciting nature of some theory, literary criticism, and contemporary fiction and the desiccated quality of much of art history. What Elkins

> wanted to know is how the writing stands up *as writing* […] Our writing is our testament; it is what matters about what we do. And if that is the case, then our writing must be understood as an expressive endeavor, one that speaks for us and for our contemporary situation.[6]

He attests, though, that much writing that may be art history, however, does not take its form, power, writerly potential seriously; it «remains […] very much unconscious».[7] It is held back by disciplinary conventions that pin the articulation of ideas—despite the frequent invocation of poststructuralist thought—to protocols that consistently diminish the power and construction of narrative, argument, and voice in itself, while recognising them in its "objects". Disciplinary understandings of its own rhetoric are determined by an insistence on transparency, economy, and serviceability (adequate, direct, persuasive), when its "objects" (pictures, archives, texts) are generally approached in no such terms. The insecurity that connects these qualities with notions of scholarly rigour, objectivity, precision, and efficiency, however, also necessarily belies any serious use of

[5] J. Elkins, *What Is Interesting Writing in Art History?*, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh 2014, p. 11; Elkins indicates the «problematic» nature of this exclusion on the longer version of the text on his project's website: Id. *What is Interesting Writing in Art History?*, 2017 (http://305737.blogspot.com/ consultato 24.12.2019).
[6] Id., *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing*, Routledge, New York; London 2000, pp. 296–7; italics in original.
[7] Id., *What Is Interesting Writing*, cit., p. 23.

poststructuralist ideas, since it seeks a position *radically other* for the writing of the discipline.

Early in the written part of *Golden Apple of the Sun*, the author quotes Chilean photographer Sergio Larraín concerning the basic job of photography as: «to organize the rectangle».[8] Cole is perhaps best known for his 2007 novella *Every Day Is for the Thief*, the 2011 *Open City*, and his critical writing *On photography* for "The New York Times Magazine". He uses the rectangle in need of organising to frame his thinking about the still-life paintings of Jean Siméon Chardin. At the beginning of fall 2020, Cole had begun to take pictures of his «kitchen, the objects that happen to be on its dark counter».[9] In the imposed isolation, grief, and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lead-up to the potential isolation, grief, and uncertainty that may accompany the result of yet another momentous American election, Cole enters the tradition of the still life with his «mid-sized digital camera in the comfort of home» in Cambridge, Massachusetts.[10] His rule is not to move any object for the sake of the photographic work (Fig. 4). Thus, the organisation of the rectangle is enforced through the position and angle of the camera alone.

Cole writes that he is «looking for the moment when one kind of interest becomes something else, where the words I want are neither "interesting" nor "boring"».[11] Between Chardin, Willem Claesz Heda, Pieter Claesz, Willem Kalf, Jan Advidszoon de Heem, Jurian van Streeck, later, Giorgio Morandi, and his own work, Cole considers how the availability, organisation, and repetition of objects are shared between still-life painter, photographer, writer, and cook. More broadly, these parameters come to

[8] Cole, *Golden Apple*, cit., p. 105.
[9] Ivi, p. 104.
[10] Ivi, p. 120.
[11] Ivi, p. 111.

circumscribe the history Cole is writing at that moment. In each case, the objects or ingredients both exceed what they are and do not. They gesture towards grand interpretive schemes—vanitas, death, the transience of life and wealth; the provision for loved ones through the Yoruba of «(Have you eaten?) In other words, I will feed you, I will care for you, I love you»[12]—and the mere thingness of matter and provisions.

More broadly, in «submitt[ing] to the accidental occurrences of the light, the chance appearances of what we last ate»,[13] the collection of photographs in the book and its written part also interrogate the nature of the record, of history as a practice—in pictures and words. Early on in his thinking about Chardin's work and life, Cole highlights the historian's role in plotting the past. He tells us that «[o]ne way of doing biography» would be based on Chardin's objects, «[b]ut another way of doing [it] would be to omit the objects entirely».[14] Then he launches into drudgery of art history as annualised chronology. Neither pursuit is exhaustive nor serious for Cole, rather they efficiently allow him to tick some boxes that frame his thinking to come, perhaps finger-wag in the direction of a certain form of scholarly dullness, and, more importantly, place the telling of history and the development of thought within a critical understanding where writing is not the mere deliverer of data or information. Crucially perhaps, Cole does both: he switches historical modes and draws attention to the multiplicity of possible historiographies.

Hayden White uses the idea of history as chronicle or annals in *The Content of the Form* to distinguish the *productive* work of the historian through emplotment of historical

[12] Ivi, p. 114.
[13] Ivi, p. 109.
[14] Ivi, pp. 104–5.

events, which both produces and elicits meaning. Thinking alongside Paul Ricoeur, he notes that the annalist's account

> produces the historiographical equivalent of a drama that is all scene and no actors, or a novel that is all theme but lacking in characters. Such a historiography features all background and no foreground. The best it could provide would be "quasi-history", comprising "quasi-events", enacted by "quasi-characters", and displaying the form of a "quasi-plot".[15]

Annaling as historiographic practice functions on the level of unknown forces exerting their powers, employing the fictions of historical narratives, however, can elaborate the uses and abuses of power and encounter what is unknown as well as known.[16] The nature of history writing, and the nature of the history Cole is writing is under scrutiny at various points throughout the text. As if to comment on the annaling of Chardin's life earlier, he laments the lure and danger with which «[h]istory and statistics» present themselves:

> So-and-so did something awful in the year 1834. Well, yes. We are appalled. But has the soul been stirred? Will the heart remember?[17]

Facts are only ever a Google search away, but their deployment, their emplotment, determines if facts partake in our world in a way that makes vicissitudes, powers, and players visible, palpable, and relevant. The interrogation of history's practice does not remain in the abstract either, Cole—or his essay's narrator—tells us about the text's writing as *fictioning* that aims to emplot the facts of the past. Phillis Wheatley Peters,

[15] H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore; London 1990, p. 174; n. omitted; for emplotment, see also Id. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore 2000, pp. 7–11.
[16] Cf. T. Reifenstein, *On Writing: propositions for art history as literary practice*, in L. Kovač *et al.* (eds.), *W.G. Sebald's Artistic Legacies: Memory, Word and Image*, Amsterdam UP, Amsterdam 2023, pp. 195–226.
[17] Cole, *Golden Apple*, cit., p. 115.

enslaved in Boston and later acclaimed as a poet, exchanges glances with the anonymous writer of the pictured cookbook.[18] A 19th-century Dutch salt spoon in the Metropolitan Museum receives a caption that links the geographies of the blistered bodies of West African people abducted to harvest salt in the Caribbean to the enrichment of the Dutch and contemporary America's multinational Cargill's «tagline: "Making salt in paradise"».[19]

To organise the rectangle then does not just implicate the taking of pictures. It also concerns the nature of writing. The rectangle of the sheet, the book, the column, the paragraph, the line. In anticipation of the election, Cole writes:

> I want a record of this apparently impossible and impassable distance, a record for myself of the "before", in light of which I might understand whatever terrible "after" there might be. That's when the idea for this essay comes to me – an essay in photographs, images, and words[20].

In what in a different setting would be called "artistic research", Cole's essay is not just verbal. Words and pictures, photographs, and reproductions argue with, through, against, and in each other, rather than in the orderly hierarchical fashion of illustrated "traditional research".

Cole has elsewhere, notably in his "NYT Magazine" essays gathered in the collection *Known and Strange Things*, addressed the commonalities of photographic and writerly practice.[21] Availability, organization, and repetition are structures and strictures in both.

[18] Ivi, pp. 115–16.
[19] Ivi, p. 110.
[20] Ivi, pp. 108–9.
[21] Id., *Known and Strange Things: Essays*, Random House, New York 2016.

Both are forms of record in a sense that something is called to mind, repeated to commit to memory, a memory that touches again the heart at the heart of *-cord*.

Hanneke Grootenboer has explored the visual thinking of *vanitas* still-life paintings and the capacity of art as a form of thinking.[22] In fact, her ideas exceed painting as she argues that art can promote a thought inaccessible to philosophy. Art is not only capable of presenting a viewer with what may be visually descriptive, beautiful, expressive, or didactic, rather it can be speculative, opening a space different from interpretation, where images «confront us in such a way that our wondering *about* the work of art—its subject of meaning—is transformed into our thinking *according to it*».[23] While Grootenboer's book is focused mostly on the *vanitas*, her approach is embedded within contemporary discourses around artistic research where art practice may operate as a mode of knowledge production. *Golden Apple of the Sun* engages with the pensiveness of the image doubly. The still lifes reproduced and addressed in the text are read through the stillness of their objects, food, drink, and arrangements. Though, they are also recognised as harbouring «further pressures, […] historical trouble or evidence of unaddressed toil».[24] Cole's pursuit of the images according to their logic repeatedly brings him up against their inherent colonial violence. By the time he discusses *Still life with peaches and a lemon* (n.d.), he has already established the absence-presence interplay of oppressive violence in pictures without human figures. Thus, confronted with the depiction of a Black person in Juriaen van Streeck's work, the portrait becomes recognisable as the reversal, merely «[an]other "item[…]" in a still life»[25] Individually,

[22] H. Grootenboer, *The Pensive Image: Art as a Form of Thinking*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; London 2020.
[23] Ivi, p. 6; italics in original.
[24] Cole, *Golden Apple*, cit., p. 107.
[25] Ivi, p. 108.

but also in succession, the images become a speculation on what is seen in absence and what is hidden in sight.

Positioned (organised) either in the top half of the page or at the bottom—or, on four occasions, full-page (no bleed) across the spread—the kitchen-counter photographs are stark in their ordinariness but also "composition". The darkness of the kitchen counter imposes itself and, yet, projects its objects outwards. At times, the banality of plastics and kitchen-tool colours brings us to the edge of a snapshot, but we never arrive. The objects are cut too well and perspectival lines recede too elegantly. There's a flatness of depth in the colour of objects that makes me think of Thomas Demand's photographs of carefully constructed paper cutouts of other photographs of real places. The text muses on the domestic sugar bowl—a receptacle full of exploited, violated toil—and in its reflection the photographer emerges. The historical and the "contemporary situation" meet. While Cole, as a writer, is already autobiographically positioned in the work at numerous points, the sugar bowl's high polish also reflects him, at least in imagined silhouette. «I cannot photograph the document of civilization without being reflected in it».[26] The rectangle encloses the historian, who is the image-maker of co-thinking photographs. The historian is in the text, plots it, emplots it, and his gaze is returned outward.

To organise the rectangle is not limited to any photographic notion of image-making. It is the writer's duty, too. The book as material form with weight, colour, layout, binding, design and so on is not a receptacle that neutrally accepts any "content". Here, too, form and content, and their joint alliance in the history of knowledge production, are inisolable. Anne M. Royston, among others, has shown how the material nature of

[26] Ivi, p. 112.

design, typography, and graphical decisions are not only part of the artistic repertoire of signification, but also have an effect on reading.[27] Royston makes the supposedly non-semantic materials of writing not only a disruptive factor, but a necessary contingency for the interpretation—meaning—of what is written. Unlike Elkins, her concern is not that any lack of conclusive parameters and determinants of the artist's book should prevent its exclusion from intellectual history. Consequently, she reads theory as artists' books, and highlights codices material importance for argumentation. This exceeds notions of linearity and needs to recognise the handling and encounter with the object as part of its signifying capacity. It is the material form of the book *and* the tendency of the text to emplot writer, maker, viewer, and reader that ensure that the work cannot but confront the world.

Golden Apple of the Sun recognises the continuous space between art and life, between art history and the world, between the making of art, the production of history, and their intersection with the exigencies and affordances of life. To encounter the book is not an experience detached from reality. The viewer and reader, "you", do not escape to some special realm of aesthetic experience that allows us to leave life behind. The ordinariness of each object in the photographs, their still melancholia and yet quotidian nature appears connected to our own mundane routines and habits. The written component, too, returns the historical dimension of the still life not only to the everydayness—then and now—of many of its recurring objects but also how they (are) incorporate(d within) a history of power and violence that extends to the present day. It is not a contemplative, chin-stroking consumption of the book form as art whose practice and history occupy a privileged sphere that lets us forget about the world. It does not purify us in aesthetic distance from the economic, cultural,

[27] A. M. Royston, *Material Noise: Reading Theory as Artist's Book*, MIT Press, Cambridge; London 2019.

and social strictures of life in the world right now, or better, life in Britain right now, or even closer, now, in England.

I first looked at and read the work on a fellowship in Essen, Germany. I was home, at last, in G— after having left my home in England. But then again, I was certainly not "home" because this was not a place that I had ever visited before, though something about it felt very familiar. Neither was it a home after having been "at home" elsewhere for nearly two decades. The home that I had left and that now does not as such exist anymore made me an "economic migrant"—in the British context a term akin to "illegality". Between the lack of opportunity other than to move to *the West* and the neo-Nazis in the local football club, leaving seemed inevitable. Once on the move, it did not really matter how far I would go, after all, a particular passport privilege had been extended to me. Through its images and words, *Golden Apple of the Sun* threads history not as a single-line connection between a distant past and a momentary present, but as a fabric on multiple levels and through numerous modes.

As elsewhere in Cole's essays, the distance between historical artefact and «our contemporary situation», to use Elkins' phrase, appears to shrink. In *After Carravaggio*, he follows stations of the artist's life, and while the direction of travel is historical, his eye is never not also on the now. Arriving at Sicilian ports, their present place of refuge for North African migrants arriving in small boats is integral to Cole's reading of the artist's work and life. In the closing stages of the essay, Cole takes to the waters near Porto Ercole (where Caravaggio died). The final paragraph binds Caravaggio's and Cole's travel to Europe's history and present.

> I signaled to him to cut the engine. It sputtered to a stop, and the silence came rushing in, so that the only sound was that of the waves lapping at the hull as the boat rose and fell on the Mediterranean.[28]

A place of violence, loss, opportunity, past, present, future and, above all, overwhelming power is opened up. It is not in need of further explicit exploration. The power to take, give, embrace, and drown moves his boat, their boat, our boat. (The «our» of Elkins' phrase and the boat is where interstitial difference, and the decision who gets to live, is played out.)

To view and read Cole's art-history through the vantage of colonial violence that reaches into the now in present-day England resonates on multiple levels, particularly because of the broad political reluctance—or willful ignorance—to understand its Empire *beyond* mere simplistic terms, but also to recognise the current shape of the world as indebted to that history. Despite Britain's globally negligible hospitality to refugees and asylum seekers,[29] "BOATS" have reached a notional quality through which political points are scored. That the political game is ultimately lined with corpses in the Mediterranean and the Channel is ignored or even welcomed.

The language of *swarms*, presumably of insects or vermin, or natural disasters like *waves* and *floods*, or the notion of an *invasion* to describe the arrival of refugees is commonplace if disguised through the Oxbridge veneer of the political and media classes. In the working-class conviviality of "we need to look after our own", the same group has become a mass of others, without individuality, without dreams, even their screams largely silent except for those few occasions when a young child or baby is found on the beach. Achille Mbembe calls it necropolitics, the politics of death, a politics that decides who can live and who must die.

[28] T. Cole, *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; London 2021, p. 29.
[29] UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, *Data insights on refugee statistics from UNHCR*, in *UNHCR*, 2022 (https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/ consultato 1.2.23).

Extending Foucault's notion of *biopower*, Mbembe explores contemporary state-sponsored death through «sovereignty (*imperium*) and the state of exception».[30] The sovereign nation state promotes political violence, death, and precarious, dangerous, exploitative conditions of life in order to privilege small groups, commonly on racialised terms. As a result, it «creat[es] *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*».[31] The encounter with death in *Golden Apple of the Sun* is directly linked to the intricate relations between facts and their historical emplotment. The numbers of a death toll, we are told, are captivating; we ask for them and try to understand their significance: «The death toll is a form of comprehension».[32] Though each individual death is beyond it. How can this number stand in for anything that resembles the magnitude of life and death. Death is beyond comprehension and the fact of the death toll merely resigns us to the knowledge that "as fact" it does not make us understand; it merely accounts. It needs history.

Cole invokes Britain's *death-world* with reference to the former Prime Minister, Theresa May, in her 2013 role as Home Secretary.[33] May refused to grant Isa Muazu, who had been on hunger strike for over a hundred days, asylum, instead issuing an "end of life plan" as he edged closer towards death. For Mbembe, necropower exerts itself particularly in the reconfiguration of forms of resistance which become forms of subjugation towards death.[34] Just months earlier, May had overseen the Home Office's advertisement campaign of "Go Home" vans. Vehicles brandishing the slogan «In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest» where driven through six London boroughs and became visual reminders of the Home Secretary's "hostile environment policy". Either unfazed or exhilarated by the phrase's

[30] A. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Duke UP, Durham 2019, p. 66; italics in original.
[31] Ivi, p. 92; italics in original.
[32] Cole, *Golden Apple*, cit., p. 128.
[33] Ivi, p. 117.
[34] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, cit., p. 92.

similarity the pub bore's slurred "Go back to where you came from!", the British public rewarded May's xenophobia and racism with a Premiership, first by succession in 2016 and by vote in 2017.

That the Empire pillaged over centuries, brought back the bounty and the Kingdom lives off it still enters public-political discourse obliquely through the insistence that "We abolished slavery!" I have to think of the sentence as I read Cole's: «not all abolitionists practice abolition».[35] In the exclamation, the empire and its violence are at once condemned to the distant past and simultaneously absolved. Cole's elision of historical past and a "contemporary situation" *situates* the works anew and belies the putative distance between then and now. The measure of distance Cole evokes through his focus on his sugar bowl is similarly captured, on a societal scale, in the British Government's paying off the Slave Abolition Act (1835) Loan in 2015. Our distance from the plantations and the inconvenience of abolition to Britain's slave owners in need for compensation is eight years. Not accidentally, Mbembe also highlights the function of debt to produce political allegiance in a political subject.[36] In Cole's art history the minimal distance of past and present, middle-class mores of art and culture in view of refugees' palpable living deadness becomes a means of understanding iconography.

To organise the rectangle is therefore not limited to the writer's and image-maker's task on the sheet of paper or in the book, each of which arrives loaded with historical and contextual demands, conventions, structures, and hierarchies. To organise the rectangle is a historical task in view of the privileged forms of knowledge production and distribution. To organise the rectangle is then also the engaging, challenging, belonging, to and working against the rectilinearity that is common to teleology, scholarship, and

[35] Cole, *Golden Apple*, cit., p. 113.
[36] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, cit., p. 86.

tick-box thinking. To organise the rectangle is to be embroiled in the established, solid, stolid square, that is old-fashioned or boringly conventional but also necessarily manifests the frame and validation in which thought is encountered and scholarship is funded. In short, this also concerns art history's uncomfortable naissance as an academic discipline in a Europe in the throes of nationalism. The linkages between the emergence of the modern university and the nation state have been widely explored, especially in view of the political, institutional, and ideological demands on the practice of art history in the late 19th and early 20th century, which provided fertile ground for the writing of national(ist) (art) histories.

Moreover, it is not only nationalisms that have shaped and been shaped by art-historical practice as its socio-political uses must equally be and have been deconstructed in view of race and gender.[37] What unites those valuable and necessary socio-political approaches to art's historiography are their enquiries into the structures, principles, and methodologies of the practice on a disciplinary level that renders the art historian's work of writing a priori a transparent process of knowledge production (albeit with the potential openness to ideological demands). If the founding principle of this scholarship is to respect and promote perspectives and celebrate difference as they progressively approximate the condition of a white, heterosexual, propertied man with an elite education—or, merely, his values—it is, however, not only imperative to question the content of its production, but also its form. It is therefore not simply a matter of what makes "interesting writing in art history" but *how* writing makes art history (a discipline). How writing writes history. Or succinctly, historiography partakes in theory,

[37] N. Broude, M.D. Garrard (eds.), *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, University of California Press, Berkeley; Los Angeles 2005; V. Horne, L. Perry (eds.), *Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice*, I.B. Tauris, London; New York 2017; K. N. Pinder (ed.), *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, Routledge, New York 2002.

fiction, poetry, autobiography, and so on, and is written through, with, by, and alongside them. Historiography is also epistemically a graphic story. Historiography holds reader and writer.

To organise the rectangle of historical writing—writing of course here as *graphos*, which is shared by historiography and photography—in the way that I am proposing here through Cole is what Gayatri Spivak calls «learning the double bind—not just learning about it».[38] In *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Spivak works at the «productive[…] undoing [of] another legacy of the European Enlightenment—the aesthetic».[39] The double bind of the writer/picture-maker/scholar I have in mind faces the impossibility to resolve binaries through logic because the writer is implicated in numerous sides from the beginning. Art-historical writing as an interdisciplinary, epistemic practice then inevitably brings with it its own boundaries and opportunities because it is also always a creative and literary practice. As a process of "knowledge creation", writing art-historically must recognise the cleave between objects (artefacts, materials, individuals, processes, etc.) and their graphic translatability. "Learning the double bind" is here, too, the deliberate upholding of the inseparability of both epistemic and creative values in order to think practically about approaches to art-historical practice that disrupt hegemonic values, methods, and understandings within the discipline, in both content and form.

Cole asks, in a conversation with Aleksandar Hemon, what if history done «"properly"» (firmly in inverted commas) is «too systematic, too knowledgeable» to account for the thing being explored.[40] Their conversation had begun with the seemingly stern distinction between fiction and non-fiction that is perhaps peculiar to Anglophone

[38] G. C. Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard UP, Cambridge 2012, p. 1.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] Cole, *Known and Strange Things*, cit., p. 85.

writing. Commenting on his «sideways move from art history» to essayistic and literary writing, Cole notes that in other areas of creative practice we are not categorising Monet and Ingres into fiction and nonfiction painters, and that that would be «the least illuminating thing we could ask about their works».[41] What if, as Derrida has it, proper is always linked to a «traditional philosophy of the *oikos*—of the *propre*: the "own", "ownership", "property"».[42] In a disciplinary setting, "proper" demarcates what is appropriate and proprietous for the subject itself. It brings the "object" home and makes it fit its law. In the economy of the discipline, accounting is done on the master's spreadsheet. Its columns determine what is accounted for, how things are organised, analysed, computed, and stored. The formal apparatus of this bookkeeping is inseparable from what is recorded. It is in the adherence to the uninterrogated notion of what is proper that the contrivance of disciplinary practice is hidden, rather than explored. The interrogation of this economy needs to be part of quite (un)disciplined encounter with disciplinary habits and agreements, otherwise they become mere reflections of disciplinary selves rather than partake in epistemic practices of encounters.

Golden Apple of the Sun pulls the viewer-reader into the thinking alongside the images and text but without the release of severing ties with the world. The movement between times, genres, modes, and voices facilitates an incongruous yet coherent history that shows itself as a construction between maker, material, and reader-viewer. The present will seep into the telling of history no matter what: let it happen; it has happened already; it needs to happen. The word-image relations of the work inhabit the territory of artistic research practices, where material, textual, and aesthetic relations are necessarily part of the investigated and problematised. This verbo-visual methodology enables an

[41] Ivi, pp. 79–80.
[42] J. Derrida, *Limited Inc a b c* ..., in G. Graff (ed.), *Limited Inc*, Northwestern UP, Evanston, 1988, pp. 29–110, p. 76.

innocuous sugar bowl to encapsulate the interwoven history of still-life painting, colonial loot, the author, the reader, and so on without pretending that these could be neatly resolved. The double bind Spivak encourages us to learn, rather than resolve (because that is what the humanities so often try to do), pertains to the separation of times, places, and people. It's a mess in which complexities must be upheld. Cole quotes Édouard Glissant as he recognises his own "opacity" to himself: «Why wouldn't I accept the Other's opacity? Why must I understand the Other in order to live next to him and work with him?».[43] Recognising the Other in their opacity avoids the sentimental and self-exculpatory gestures of the «White-Savior Industrial Complex», too.[44]

Alternating narrative strands, narrative modes, and voices and the integration of photographs, texts, and illustrations without explicit hierarchies, are also components of learning the double bind. The play and weaving of voices, modes, and stories question the efficacy and efficiency of adopting any single one. What is brought home in the essay is framed multiple times, registers numerously, may be heard through the chatter of voices rather than drowned out in the monotone of ownership. Time and place despite the centuries between still life and essay are palpable as parameters, and difference not subsumed into coherence, universalisms, and efficiency.

Reading and viewing Cole's «counter history»[45] does not only—and I am sure some would argue, not all—function as art history. It is also a photo book, an artist's book, a diary, an autobiography, a record. Its integration of images and words within a material object is productive of thought that points beyond itself, but also towards its own limitations and the limitations of the practices of the record more widely. Writing is here artistic practice is image making. The continuously shifting contexts and relations of

[43] Cole, *Golden Apple*, cit., p. 121.
[44] Id., *The White-Savior Industrial Complex*, in "The Atlantic", 2012, marzo 21.
[45] Id., *Golden Apple*, cit., p. 109.

still-life works and world embeds critical writing as necessarily processual. Record-making and -keeping is accretive and iterative. When the record points its acumen towards its own power and limitations as creative practice it learns the double bind of disciplinary scholarship and thus discloses its contingencies.

The contrivance of *this* essay rests in the apparent demand of the rectangle in need of organising. The disciplinary convention to declare its contrivances as "proper practice" forecloses a potential productivity of its own creativity in view of its objects. Contrivance in this way is both power and methodology. Historical scholarship is contrivance, convention, and chance. The way that I sought to consider this chapter is then also a methodological attempt not to externalise the workings of its apparent objects of its study. The analysis of pictures and writing must bear on possible values in pictures and writing more broadly.

«To organize the rectangle» is to recognise the form in the content and the content in the form. Neglecting the importance of art-history's creative epistemic practice of working with images and words propagates the dubious assignation of art history as truth, which plays into the hands of those nationalist, sexist, racist, and so on ideologies that seek to promote particular social and cultural "values" as evident and natural.
Avoiding the conflation of art-historical texts with their "objects" demands distance, particularly, from the accountancy-driven, neoliberal project of the university as a business in which language is a transparent and univocal tool of knowledge production. Characterising art-historical writing as a practice must, with every new word and image, line and stroke, confront its own relations as (im)possible ekphrasis and be cognizant of its own position as a creative fiction produced in the scholarly, rigorous, and discursive framing of knowledge and meaning-making in view of an "already-there".
Concomitantly, it is crucial to develop this philosophic-literary framework of art-

historical writing practices in order not only to contribute a vital aspect to the analysis of the discipline's connections to ideological uses, but also to shape its future, mindful of the characteristics of its epistemic practice: writing and the need to re-write.