

# The Secret Life of Objects in the Immanent Art of Morandi

*Or: How art shows us how to write about art if we only let it*<sup>1</sup>

ON: *Giorgio Morandi: Masterpieces from the Magnani-Rocca Foundation*  
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10,400 words  
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<sup>1</sup> This article is related to a shorter and contemporary ‘sister’ article published contemporaneously in The Journal of Contemporary Painting. That article is titled *Staying Alive: Transcendence and Immanence in Contemporary Painting*.

## **ABSTRACT**

In this example of relatively long form art writing the writer begins by relaying an anecdote regarding a difficult interaction with an editor. As this rocks the confidence of the writer, they try to rally themselves but seeking out an almost arbitrary receptor for their art writing skills and passions. This turns out to be a concurrent exhibition of the paintings of Giorgio Morandi. The piece describes the writer's feelings, as well as the journey to the gallery, and ultimately creates a form of review or representation of the exhibition. However, the initial impulse for the piece remains and is returned to in a series of analyses of the writer's method. This includes a candid exploration of the writer's considerations of the place of judgement in their own, and in contemporary art writing. Ultimately, the piece toys with the idea that, in an age of ambivalence, in which judgements all too easily seem all too harsh, it might just be the use of adjectives that are sufficient to betray an art writer's evaluation of what they are otherwise simply describing. While the initial criticism by an editor involved the concept of transcendence, the art writer takes this accusation on board and tries, again candidly, to judge themselves, and for themselves, with regard to this concept. Ultimately, they find that, far from leaning towards transcendent values in art they are in fact committed to forms of immanence. Along the way other artists, including Cezanne and De Chirico, as well as other thinkers such as Deleuze and Alfred Jarry are utilised to develop the lines of thought. Ultimately, and rather obliquely, the piece becomes a response to the editor's riposte, and appears to succeed, to some extent, in re-founding the writer's confidence in their own methods and beliefs, to which they have been led by their own approach to art writing, and of course by the art itself.

## **INTRODUCTION**

An editor recently explained and excused their decision to not publish my art writing on the grounds that I had somewhere cited a famous passage from Walter Benjamin in which he defines the aura (of a natural object) as: "... the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it (the object) might be", and that this meant to the editor, that I "cleave to the transcendent in art".

Of course, quoting someone else's words and ideas does not make me or my own words or ideas synonymous with the cited person and their words and ideas, and I suspect that I was merely using those words and ideas to compare with those of others and of my own, in order to explore something in a rounded way. Hence, I suffer a sense of injustice regarding this decision, as well as missing opportunities to publish in, and to have my ideas

disseminated and appraised within that particular journal. Paid, professional and prestigious publishing opportunities like that are increasingly hard to find, and this makes it more painful. But then, of course, I have mostly written, for the past 25 years or so, for the love of it; for the love of art, of writing, of art-writing. But it is the sense of injustice and of being misunderstood and misrepresented which is the greatest difficulty for me here and now.

The editor's comments also seemed to suggest that I did not sufficiently emphasise 'the political' in my writing, but the fact that I have class-migrated, from someone who grew up on a council estate and left school with one 'O' level, to becoming an academic, with a PhD, who has published 2-3 hundred professional articles and a handful of books, means – I would argue – that myself and my art writing are always, intrinsically or implicitly 'political', and often or invariably make reference to the social context of the art that I write about.

Meanwhile, this does not exclude me from also asking other and different (i.e., other than and different from political and social) questions about that very same art, and of exploring the possibility of addressing political and social questions obliquely, imaginatively, creatively – as the best art and art writing (including Benjamin's) has surely always done.

### **VISITING THE MORANDI EXHIBITION**

Despite currently having no commission or destination for an essay or article (which diffuses my momentum somewhat), I recently did what I used to do in the years before I was able to publish; I scoped-out the London exhibitions listings to see what took my fancy. This was, it should be said, a rare day on which I felt justified (having recently completed a significant task for my university employer) in indulging myself in some art viewing and art writing. I had carved-out a special day for myself, beyond the demands of academia that generally absorb most of my time, energy and creativity.

In searching for the right show to visit, I took into account that this would also be a rare opportunity to go out with my artist partner and share an enjoyable, as well as professional experience. And so, having shown some interest in one or two contemporary art group shows, I noted that the Estorick Collection in Highbury and Islington was staging a show of

Giorgio Morandi's paintings, drawings, and prints. SOLD! Morandi might not be an emerging contemporary artist but he fitted my bill on this occasion. I thought he might offer an opportunity to soothe my art-writer's wounded spirit and ego, bruised by the demanding machinations of the university and by the aforementioned refusal of a certain editor to continue to consider or accept my offerings.

I hadn't visited The Estorick Collection for many years, and I used the *Transport For London Journey Planner* website to determine my route, which consequently involved a new encounter with the *Great Northern* train line. It runs from Moorgate, near the financial heart of the city, out to Hertfordshire, but it stops on the way at Essex Road, a station I had never visited before but which is five-minutes' walk from the Estorick Collection.

I cannot recall the how, who, or when of my initial introduction to Morandi but I suspect it was affirmative and that Morandi was recommended by an art tutor, a colleague and/or friend. It is difficult now to approach his works in any truly critical, sceptical, or dispassionate way. Instead, I prepared myself as a kind of fan or admirer and approached Morandi's paintings with a certain reverence – a pre-judice of sorts – bound to confound any attempt at clear-headed, dry-eyed, objective judgement (which, in any case, I do not believe really exists).

As Morandi is not an emerging artist, his work does not require my pen, my judgement, my critique or my encouragement. Reams have been written about Morandi, most of it, I suspect, quietly adulatory. And so, this writing returns me, at this time of personal creative crisis, to the roots of my relationship with art writing, one that feels now like a love affair or friendship. No one needs any more writing about Morandi, and it could be argued that the present paucity of my professional publishing outlets is proof that no one needs another art writer either – after all, we can all write today. We are wired-up to a keyboard for much of our waking time and we all have access to virtual pages and typographic software that makes our writing look authoritative and professional, compared to our more socially divisive handwriting. We also have access (for a few pounds, or at the flash of a press card) to The Estorick Collection, its website, and oodles of other internet-archived info about Morandi should we need it. Out of all this access we can each create a platform, perhaps a

regular Blog, that stands-in as our very own, self-edited, self-published, freely and internationally available journal, through which to disseminate our ideas, our persona, our angle, and our style.

## **WRITING ABOUT MORANDI**

To write about Morandi then, despite my attempts here to frame the event in personal and idiosyncratic terms, remains a somewhat predictable event. Despite my wish or ambition to 'bring' something new and different 'to the table' (Morandian pun intended), it seems unlikely that I will be able to do more than add a few more words and ideas to the volumes of already written about this artist and his work.

And here we might refer back to Walter Benjamin's slightly arcane and esoteric claim that aligns 'aura' with 'distance'.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin was writing there about 'natural objects', but if we replace these with the 'cultural objects' of Morandi's paintings, as well as the cultural objects (ceramic tumblers, pitchers, vases etc.) that they describe; and if we then try to apply Benjamin's claim, we might agree that these objects, previously and literally distant from me, and now brought, literally, closer by the staging of this temporary exhibition, nevertheless maintain what Benjamin claimed to be a (metaphorical, but not necessarily metaphysical) 'distance' arising from the 'aura' of their various cultural framings and contextualisations (their social and cultural context), as works of art that are revered and valued in both aesthetic and monetary terms, framed here and now by the Estorick Collection as a highly respected institution – but only as much as they are framed and thereby 'distanced' by the significant reputation that precedes them and which it is all but impossible to remove from our sight and our evaluation.

A 1990s soul-jazz-Latin classic song is titled *Something in My Eye* and this might well describe the experience of seeing Morandi's paintings, or those of many canonically established artists whose work it is difficult or impossible to see and evaluate without the interference of the reputation that precedes them and which we are here equating with Benjaminian 'aura'.<sup>2</sup> All the love and admiration that has been directed at these paintings over many decades has accrued as the cultural 'aura' of these cultural objects, which –

Benjamin might concur – creates an inevitable (though I would argue metaphorical rather than metaphysical) ‘distance’ between us and them, even as they are literally brought closer to us by means of the temporary exhibition in our home city.

## **ART WRITING**

Editors of art journals are of course within their rights to banish metaphysics or what they perceive to be aspirations to transcendent thinking about art from their pages, in order, perhaps to maintain a certain loyalty to, or remit regarding, judgements on art that they feel should be restricted to the rationalist and materialist realm. Many modern and modernist artists and commentators who lived through the upsets of Postmodernism may have become more ardently materialist as a result and by way of compensation. But no position in art can ever remain dogmatic or pedantic for long. In fact, it is one of the great attractions of Walter Benjamin’s thoughts that they are ready and willing to challenge and undermine even themselves in order to purposefully avoid any thoughtlessly dogmatic position. This point reminds me of Benjamin’s writings on Moscow in the early 1920s in which he seemed to have more to say about the significance of snow and about locally produced toys than about endlessly rationalising revolutionary Marxist meetings taken place and presuming to shape the world. (Benjamin, W. 2000. pp.177 – 214). You can also find Benjamin’s mischievously deconstructive approach at work in his *Theses on a Philosophy of History* (one of the last things he wrote) as he ceaselessly undermines both religious and political images of time, progress, Marxism, and modernity. (Benjamin, W. 1968).

I suspect that metaphor and rhetoric, which are always present, to some degree, in every attempt to describe and evaluate art both as accurately and as personally as possible, are themselves transcendent functions of language, and therefore aspects of the longest traditions of art criticism. I am aware that self-consciously modern and modernist authors did strive to streamline a modern style and to boost their modernist credentials by reducing their use of adjectives by pruning all things florid, and that, in the modern era, with its own modern model of truth, rhetoric accumulated a negative patina and came to appear anachronistic. I might note here that my PhD resolved itself in a discussion of the value of rhetoric (O’Kane, P. 2009).

We could argue that the pre-modern urges that modernism would purge, remain perennial and pervasive aspects of *every* art writing and every writer's will-to, or attempt-to, convince others of the value of their experience and opinion, using all the tricks and skills (modern or not) of language, and of their language. Thus, rhetoric is more or less candidly perpetuated and practiced in a state of what might be called modernist denial; and rhetoric, like metaphor, can be regarded as transcendent, even akin to a certain metaphysics that pervades, not only all art writing, but all of writing *per se*.

Given that I have already confessed to the probably pre-judicial failure of my ability to respond negatively to Morandi's paintings; and given that I am reconciled to the inevitability of my own use of both rhetorical and metaphorical devices in writing about Morandi's work, I will try to proceed, keeping 'feet' as firmly 'on the ground' as I can. (N.B. these inverted commas refer to the fact that the same editor in question used this metaphor in claiming that their journal progresses and perambulates in a sure-footed manner while I, apparently, do not, because of my tendency to: "cleave to the transcendent in art").

As I have already said, there is no need or good reason for me to write about Morandi, and I cannot expect to contribute anything particularly new or influential to the field of Morandi research, other than that is than my own peculiar and yes subjective angle. Having made a long journey from unqualified school leaver to much published Dr. and Senior Lecturer etc. I can't seem to help valuing those aspects of my perspective and judgement that are most unusual, individual, and different. In fact, I see it as my duty to represent equally disadvantaged others by striving to articulate and share whatever difference I might have to offer as my special contribution, in return for the rich education and opportunities I have received along the journey of my unorthodox career.

Moreover, I cannot see the point or purpose of 'art-writing' (taken as a hyphenated verb perhaps) if it is only to placate and reassure, to shore-up and defend a certain narrow and given community who perhaps – for all art's rhetoric about 'challenging', 'questioning' etc. do not like to have their boat rocked and maintain a certain, reassuringly constant and stable power and authority over the realm of art, or at least a certain portion, niche, or

corner of it. Surely there is much more to art than this, though, to be fair to the editor in question, none of us, and no journal, can ever expect to accommodate the whole of art, or even approximate all of the art worlds within art worlds, with all of their corresponding forms and habits of judgement and evaluation – but, given the 21<sup>st</sup> century vistas opening up before us, can we after all? And should we not at least try?

Art and judgement are intrinsically linked. For something to be art necessarily involves judgement. Meanwhile judgements about art play a large part in establishing communities and marking their boundaries, providing their gateways, gatekeepers and shibboleths. Then again, there are artists – Walt Whitman comes to mind, as do practitioners of the Baroque – who might reach out with open arms to attempt to embrace some ‘untrammelled’ (another word used by the editor in question) universalism that aspires to a kind of de-subjectivisation or objectivity, a realm that is not that of the subject but is nevertheless served by the subject. (Whitman, W. 1947).

Such ideas may also conjure the unfashionable ghost of postmodernism, but I suspect it can already be seen that here in this text at least postmodernism is not regarded as something offensive to modernism and modernists; a temporary aberration in or challenge to the modernist narrative, but as a more revolutionary paradigm shift that I unashamedly, endorse.

### **ART, WRITING AND RESEARCH**

In truth, I have always been uncomfortable with the title of ‘researcher’, even though much of my writing is now allied to and intertwined with a university role. ‘Researching’ sounds more scholarly and academic than I have ever felt myself to be, perhaps because I feel I can never retrieve that missed and non-existent secondary education that might have laid some scholarly foundations within me (though I very much doubt that any but a small few at my poorly-funded Catholic, council estate boys’ school felt any such benefit even if they attended while I did not). Rather than ‘Researcher’ or ‘Scholar, I therefore prefer to introduce myself as an ‘artist, writer and lecturer’.



I have always regarded my art writing as a practice that emerged out of a seven-year stint in a live-in studio (funded by London Borough of Lambeth housing benefits) in which I tested as many media and processes and identities as I could before conceding that writing was perhaps my 'strongest suit' and also best suited to my fragile socio-economic standing (I could at least afford paper and pencil, with which I made my art.) Today, through writing I would say – rather than through 'research' – I continue to feel that I produce or uncover words, thoughts, and ideas of which I was not previously aware; that I did not know that I knew before I wrote them. And it is this pleasure, of witnessing writing as it evolves and appears, almost inadvertently, unconsciously, sometimes precociously or uncannily, from and within a honed personal and material process, that is the core motivation for all my art writing. Above, beyond and despite any of more utilitarian, professional, or commercial purposes we might assume, it is this pleasure for which I primarily write, and I can see that some might find this process inexplicable or irrational, and perhaps 'transcendent'.

However, I recognise something of my own approach in that of the arch- or original essayist Michel de Montaigne who felt qualified to venture an 'essay' or 'try', regarding anything (i.e., not just his recognised areas of expertise). (Montaigne, M de. 1958). Montaigne felt confident, it seems, that the very process of writing would always lead him to some new (new to him at least) and valuable (to others) observations and contributions. Please allow me then, and please allow me to please allow myself (*sic*), to write something here about Morandi, if only for the love of Morandi and for the love of art writing.

### **'IN' MORANDI'S PAINTINGS**

I was about to begin this paragraph with the words 'In Morandi's paintings . . .', but hesitated long enough to question the initial assumption that his paintings have an 'in', an 'interior' distinguishable from an exterior. I hesitated long enough to question the assumption that 'in' is an appropriate way to address Morandi's paintings. The Renaissance theorist Alberti famously associated paintings with windows, claiming that they offer an experience and serve a purpose like that of looking *through* a window, at or into another scene, place, space or world. (Alberti, L. B. 1966). But is that the case with a modern painter like Morandi, and is it the case for modern painting in general?

Perhaps one of the changes that makes modern painting modern is the fact that it no longer considers this analogous 'window' to be present or operative in and as modern painting. If we no longer look as if 'through' a modern painting, can we also claim that modern paintings, like those of Morandi, have any interior into which we look? If not, then what could be more appropriate language here?

It might feel equally uncomfortable to say that we look 'at' Morandi's paintings, as this suggests that they are harder, flatter, more resistant and less absorbent than they seem (though this 'seeming' is admittedly questionable). 'At' suggests a wall, a dead-end. 'At' aligns them, somewhat incongruously, with those paintings, painters, isms and theories that, or who, explicitly champion flatness, surface and superficiality as modern values. But those are issues that never seem to have excited or troubled Morandi. In fact 'at', 'in' or 'through' all seem inappropriate when describing these paintings. Am I therefore looking 'with' these paintings, or perhaps always looking 'for' them? Perhaps that will suffice, so let us try again.

Looking 'for' Morandi's paintings ... no, it sounds as if the paintings, frames-and-all, have been lost, when they are clearly here in this exhibition. Perhaps we could say then that we 'look upon' or 'look on' to Morandi's paintings – as we might 'look on to' a scene; as an elegant house with *portes-fenêtres* 'looks on to' its garden; or as a cheaper, bleaker apartment might 'look on to' railway sidings. Perhaps our gaze then rests 'upon' these paintings.

But perhaps we have dallied too long with this preliminary detail, interesting and productive as it might be. Looking 'on' or 'upon' Morandi's paintings, we might think that we know what we are going to see. He famously painted similar things in similar ways, for many years – decades in fact. His paintings, as collected here for this show at The Estorick Collection, do not emit any sense of struggling for innovation, nor any record, or dynamic narrative of increasing achievement against odds. Such a story could surely be told by a larger, biographical survey exhibition like that made for and about Cezanne running contemporaneously on the other side of London at Tate Modern. (*The E Y Exhibition*

*Cezanne*, 5 October 2022 – 12 March 2023). You know the kind, replete with introductory *sans serif* wall texts, in consumer-sized paragraphs, or as profound-seeming sound bites and philosophical quotes writ large against coloured walls. These increasingly formulaic shows tend to be divided chronologically, into rooms dedicated to various phases, changes of style, epiphanies, and acknowledgements of significant artistic and social influences as we are led, sometimes exhaustively, from the artist's jubilant juvenilia through their heyday and on to their elderly etiolations and final rage against the dying of their light.

All of this seems inappropriate to the Morandi we know and – yes – love'. Rather, what counts is seeing his consistency and repetition (and it might be said, a kind of immanence, rather than 'transcendence') across a long period of his creative life, as if eschewing the axiomatic modern belief in the concept of 'progress', and almost despite the significant time, and times, that passed while he patiently painted.

Artists like Julian Opie, Michael Craig-Martin, and On Kawara come to mind here as having similarly alighted, at a certain age or stage, on a certain technique and subject matter that sufficiently satisfied them, and which, henceforth, no-longer required 'development' or 'improvement'. Morandi might be a champion of all such artists, blessed with the experience of going beyond trying, beyond progressing, to fly (and here I admit that my transcendent tendency shows) – as it were – beyond question, enquiry, and research; even beyond 'experimentation' and eureka moments, towards a personal and self-imposed academism that begins to make art consistently, for a certain reason that is, above all, 'certain', and a way of making art that is, highly personal while popularly and critically acclaimed and at heart made for the simple love of making it, for the fulfilment of a gentle sense of vocation or duty, thus closing a circle that has maturely explored and exhausted enquiries, trends, professionalism and contemporaneity, to return to some original childlike impulse and justification for making art.

## **WHAT MORANDI DEPICTS**

What Morandi usually and famously depicts, is – we know – a modest cluster of small vessels, perhaps ceramic and glass (it is not always clear) tumblers, vases, and pitchers. As a

result, it is as if both life and art depend upon our ability to contain and consume liquids – water, juice, or wine perhaps. And yet the scene is also and always dry, there is no beverage to imbibe, none to be seen, no half-full or half-empty glass that might symbolically serve as a metaphor of an optimistic or pessimistic outlook. The only trace of moisture here is that which must have been an attribute of Morandi’s paint before it dried, and which, in drying, ceased to be malleable or subject to change. In its fluid state Morandi’s paint was once equivocal, becoming, transient, transformative. Once dried it became unequivocal, permanent, fixed, perhaps even historical, or monumental. Between these states, the fluid and the fixed, is, we might argue, ‘the painting’, i.e., ‘the painting’ that is not the object but the act of painting, the event that every painting also is and which every painting records.

A particular and personal quality of time is fixed and framed here, a particular and personal image of a time whose precedents and referents might include the philosopher Henri Bergson, or the 18<sup>th</sup> century French rococo painter Jean Siméon Chardin (with whom Morandi has been compared).<sup>3</sup> A quiet space, a certain place, a plain and undramatic light that tints a range of liminal tones and hues, pale greys, pinks, lilacs, and mauves. Morandi’s tentative palette becomes a stage for the tense event of painting; an event perhaps not so different, distinguished or disconnected from *this* event, this event of art writing (and subsequently of your reading); the here and the now of this very writing.

This is not to claim, of course, that my modest (currently troubled, unconfident, struggling) art writing is equivalent to or similar to Morandi’s paintings, or those of Chardin, but merely to attempt, as I have many times before, to erase the line or heal the wound that otherwise opens-up between a work of art and any writing ‘about’ that work of art; a divisive act that might itself be accused of perpetuating a ‘transcendent’ (even this ‘about’ being, after all, a kind of transcendence) position, profession and tradition that are both relatively local (we could say parochial) and recent in that they are rather modern, and not something we would simply and easily find in the 18<sup>th</sup> century art writing of Diderot. (Diderot, D. 1966)

Should we then not aspire to a 21<sup>st</sup> century immanence, and to *ekphrasis*, always aiming to produce a work of art made in response to a work of art, and, accepting that our art, our writing and our art writing are of the same world and therefore none truly transcends the

other, remember or rediscover this whenever we don the mantle, wear the costume, and take on the role and responsibilities of an art writer?

I have long believed and theorised that, what happens in the act of art writing, which still retains, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some sense of criticism, journalism and judgement; or perhaps I should say what *should* happen or what I *believe* happens in my own art writing; is that writing 'of', 'on', 'with' or 'about' art is just as influenced by the art as the art is influenced (at least in the sense of changing how it is perceived) by the writing. Art writing must therefore enter, on every occasion, unguardedly, into a dialogue with art, and in a way that allows for transformation of itself by art.

At the same time, a work of art is always open, available, and susceptible to the influence or enhancement of itself by any art writing that is directed at or to it. I therefore feel justified in comparing here my own quietly placed and gently paced moments of art writing (elsewhere I have written of "slow criticism"), with and within the acts and events of Morandi's painting, acknowledging that only these particular paintings could have led me to this particular appreciation and reappraisal of the moment, the place, the event of my art writing.

### **THE PLACE OF JUDGEMENT IN ART WRITING**

To go a little further, I would like to explicate – for the record, or perhaps in my defence – some more (and long-) established thoughts on the relationship between art writing, art criticism, art, and judgement. When I first attained what I then regarded (and which various editors confirmed to be) a 'publishable' standard for my art writing (c. 1997), I recall a certain anxiety and curiosity regarding the placement of judgement within my texts, i.e. the presumption to judge and evaluate – which then seemed to relate to a different era, a different century perhaps – within my writing. In a relativised, postmodernised climate or *milieu*, I could see that there was little or no place for the patriarchal, modern figure of a connoisseur, guide, or guru of art and its theories, histories and criticisms. And yet I suspected that my art writing, and probably all art writing, nevertheless retained some sense of judgement and evaluation, however subtle or mealy-mouthed it might now be.

Ironically, around that time, while preoccupied with this issue I made my own ill-judged experiment, to test the waters perhaps, by publishing a negative review of a show of emerging artists (said to be reviving the sculpture tradition), only to subsequently regard this essay a blot on my own career's copy book and as a moment in my writing career of which I will never be proud. That experiment's only value it now seems, to me and probably to others, was to provide a little further proof that the age of the explicitly negative review is over and that trying to revive it for the sake of my own understanding of my own craft was irresponsible, and at best provocative.

But like the philosopher Nietzsche, who impressed me as an MA student, I suspected that value *per se* is not so easily eradicated, dismissed or 'transvalued'.<sup>2</sup> It might always be concealed, or subtly interwoven within our every utterance or articulation. Our evaluations are not 'things' that we 'have' (*a priori*?) and subsequently give voice to, but are, rather, events that emerge (*a fortiori*?) through and during the event of our utterance or articulation, and are, therefore, events that we need to (and need to learn to) allow to appear; events that we can invite and welcome within our writing, sometimes despite what we might believe, currently believe, or believe that we believe.

The art writer, like the artist, and as well as the artist, allows the possibilities and limitations of their particular skills and materials – their time, space, process, knowledge, culture, motivations, aspirations etc.– to inform and transform all of these, bravely, freely, entering into a generative event, the outcome of which must remain unknown at least until it is regarded as 'finished' (though of course any 'finished' piece of writing only begins, at that point of supposed completion, to be available to numerous, perhaps infinite ways of reading, interpretation and translation, that transform it further, and just as susceptibly as any work of art).

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<sup>2</sup> The enticing concept '*Transvaluation (or Revaluation) of All Values*' is an adventurous idea that pervades much of Nietzsche's late thought and writings, and he seems to have planned to use it as a collective title or subtitle for more than one projected but uncompleted projects.

To return to the question of judgement or evaluation laced within (and therefore never explicitly expressed) any piece of postmodernised art writing, I also concluded that it might just be my adjectives and adverbs that betrayed my judgements, even to myself, and that this might be satisfactory and sufficient. Given that, at some point, I would 'complete' any piece of art writing and hand it over to the wider world of readers to interpret; and given that I am writing in a postmodernised, relativistic age in which authoritative judgements and explicit evaluations are, or seem, incongruous and anachronistic; given all of the above, it seems satisfactory and sufficient that I should entrust any judgement or evaluation implicit in my art writing to 'the writing itself' – if I dare say such a thing without being accused of being too abstract, transcendental, mysterious, metaphysical, rhetorical or prone to magical thinking.

More specifically, I can entrust my judgement and evaluation to be revealed in and by the use and influence of adjectives, adverbs and other writerly devices that emerge in my writing without consciously judgemental effort, without strategic or explicit cultural positioning, and despite my actions, my art writing event, which is, in turn, determined by my tools, habits, processes and a certain, gradually acquired 'knack' – as the English say.

## **PAINTING AND WRITING**

Giorgio Morandi – given the materials and processes of paint and painting, rather than of ink, pen, computer, keyboard and typing – may, we suspect, not need to worry about judgement and evaluation to the same degree as the art writer. It is hard to see in his works any immediate sense of judgement or evaluation, and yet does not every artist work with at every work of art with some form of superego-istic, real or imagined judge perched on their shoulder whispering guidance, seeding fear and bolstering bravura? Then again, has Morandi not chosen certain objects and places, rather than certain others, to paint and paint and to paint repeatedly? Has he not, as we might also assume, selected certain paintings rather than others to represent and to uphold his own valuation of what a 'good' or 'finished' Morandi painting might be? And so, does this particular way of clustering and representing these particular kinds of objects, not respond to and broadcast a certain innate or prescribed judgement and evaluation, even if only to say that these objects, painted by

Morandi, take on a 'modest' and 'endearing' quality? And are there then 'adjectival' marks, tones and procedures at work, not only in my, or our language of interpretation, but also in Morandi's paintings? Are painting and art writing not then equally capable of, and fallible to, some form of inevitable judgement enwrapped in our processes and embroiled in our every attempt to describe? And is there not an infinitely subtly shaded 'grey-scale' (and perhaps an entire colour-wheel) of nuanced judgements and evaluations, restricted only by the quantity, quality, ability and potential of our words, their composition, their readings, and their readers, just as there is for the painter's literal and actual colours, brush-marks, tones etc?

### **WRITING ON MORANDI**

Before I run out of time and space (though no-one is actually waiting for this un-commissioned work, done purely – or almost purely – for the love of doing it; and no-one has enforced any boundaries of word-count, deadline etc. upon it); and given all we have said theoretically and abstractly above, we should try, or try again here, to add a few modest descriptions to the aforementioned reams of writings previously inspired by encounters with Morandi's art.

We have already used words like 'clustered'. 'modest' and 'vulnerable' when referring to Morandi's representations of 'humble looking' kitchenware or tableware, but it also strikes me (or struck me during my visit to this show) as significant that when Morandi painted flowers in a vase (which it seems he sometimes did to create gifts for friends) the vase was invariably more interesting to him than the flower. The vase (at least in the single example of his floral gifts displayed in this show) was at least more idiosyncratic, more perverse, more 'Morandi', and therefore, and thereby more lively and more compelling than the relatively desultorily depicted flowers. The relationship between flowers and beauty, flowers and art, flowers and aesthetics, flowers and judgement (thinking here of Kant and a certain rose) is perhaps more dense and more difficult to unpack than the relationship between *vases* and beauty, vases and art, vases and aesthetics, judgement, evaluation etc. (Beardsley, M.C. 1991). The ground is less well-trod but might tell us something (if we only let it) about the particularly modern value of Morandi's art.



The Romantic poet John Keats famously used the form of *ekphrasis* to respond, in poetry, to a ‘Grecian urn’, and more recently contemporary artist Grayson Perry has proclaimed the postmodern value of pottery, pots, vases, and the model of the potter as worthy of the realm and status of fine art.<sup>3</sup> There has also recently appeared a wave of ceramic contemporary fine art by artists like Jesse Wine, Jonathan Baldock or Marguerite Humeau (to name a few). But we are not contriving a ceramic canon here so much as querying why, in Morandi, it should be that ceramic vessels, here of a quotidian kind, should absorb this artist’s attentions, and even his affections, at the expense of the flowers and liquids that the same vessels might, could, or should contain? I suspect that an expert flower arranger, an exponent of *Ikebana* perhaps, would assure me that a vessel or container for flowers is just as important and integral to an arrangement as are the flowers contained, just as a wine connoisseur could well argue for the importance and influence of an appropriate vessel from which to drink a valuable vintage. However, Morandi – at least on the evidence of this selection of works – is not much interested in the aesthetics of flowers (that might interest the recipients of his little gifts) but is fixated on the relatively unsung glories of largely utilitarian-looking vessels sometimes pressed into the service of displaying flowers and which might have other uses.

Morandi’s objects huddle, often unnecessarily given that there is often plentiful space around them into which they could be deployed. Today they might call to mind refugees crowded into inadequate dirigibles, or – closer to Morandi’s own lifetime – figures from the 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian diaspora squeezing onto trains and ships to escape poverty or hostile ideologies. Thus we, our writing, and perhaps the artist himself, are drawn into anthropomorphism by these otherwise dumb, inanimate objects. And if we are not humanising them, we might still choose to animalise them as a series of small creatures in a ‘clutch’, ‘brood’ or ‘litter’ gathered and embraced by a maternal figure, who might be the artist himself, or perhaps one slightly larger and more decorative vessel that occasionally appears in the groups. Some of the generally quite plain and stubby figures are more

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<sup>3</sup> Written by the Romantic poet in 1819 and published anonymously in *Annals of the Fine Arts*. See also: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn>

graceful, looking a little like ladies in lace and better described as figurines. These are more seductively shaped, more pleasing to the eye perhaps, and yet ultimately all belong out of sight when out of use, normally stored in a cupboard, in or on a dresser, part of the belongings of a certain house, home and family, marking its history, its stories and traditions, its legacies, ancestry etc.

### **THE SECRET LIFE OF OBJECTS**

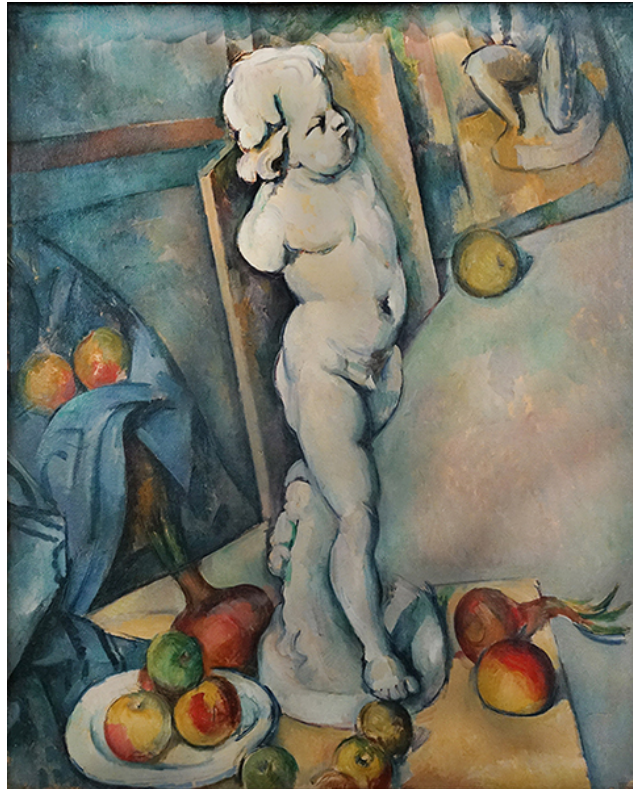
In his subtly moving film *Summer Hours* (2008), Olivier Assayas tells the slow, touching story of a bourgeois family undergoing the process of losing their mother, and subsequently the family's much-loved home, along with its modest, tasteful, and quite valuable collection of art and *objets d'art*. (Assayas, O. 2008). One design object finds its way to a prestigious national museum of art and design. Another is unknowingly inherited by the family's long-established cleaner who is unaware of the object's cultural value in a more bourgeois context. Some small paintings by Corot are destined for auction, and hence to a collector, but these are also desired by one of the sons, who sees them as heirlooms, symbolically linked to maintenance of the family line. Having watched this charming movie more than once, I came to realise that it is not the tale of the family, nor of individual family members that it tells, rather it is the story of these objects, their own journey, through their own 'lives' (which might well be longer and more consistent than the lives of the human beings in the film).

These objects, along with their placement, displacement, and context, not only strongly influence and determine the status and class of the family and its members but will also have ups and downs, rises and falls, perhaps their births and deaths. And revealing this might have always been the aim of the director and writer. Similarly, with Morandi's objects, a domestic scene, a family and its story are gently alluded to by the vessels, a table, a wall, although the presence of any human beings always remains implicit and oblique. It is as if these objects, when not utilised in the way intended for them, can lead lives – and perhaps more privileged, revalued lives– of their own. The artist's task then becomes to describe, not 'life' (a transcendent abstraction according to the philosopher Gilles Deleuze)

but *this* life (this immanence), and therefore a secret life of these objects that is neither Morandi's life and story nor that of the wider Morandi family.

Of course, very little, in the narrative sense, occurs in the lives of these objects (to anthropomorphosise further). One day, we might imagine, they either are or are not selected, are or are not clustered, introduced to others, poised or posed in a certain way, in the middle of the table, or close to its edge, and for a certain amount of time (hours, days?) just like any other artist's model, while subject to the sensitive affirmation of being recognised and translated, by the artist – his brush, palette, paint – into an image, a kind of tribute or minor monument perhaps.

Nevertheless, a certain dis-individuation, often, almost always occurs, wherein the particular and peculiar process undertaken by Morandi seems to blur, glitch, or otherwise confuse our reading of where one object begins and ends and another object (or sometimes their context, the table, the wall) begins and ends. It only takes a slight, eccentric extension of a plane of colour to disrupt our common sense of what and where one thing is and what and where is another. Is the artist then suffering from some form of visual stigma or scotoma? Is he at fault? Is there something he believes that he sees that we do not habitually see? Something that he allows us to see and to also believe?



### THE GLITCH

A painting by Cézanne (*Still Life with Plaster Cupid*, c.1895), whom Morandi admired, famously shows, in the depiction of certain domestic objects in a kitchen setting, the artist playfully confusing the audience's eye (in a subtle version of the endless plays and puns deployed by Picasso).<sup>4</sup> A humble onion (the one just behind the base of the statue), sat on a table, sprouts greenery that, due to a certain diagonal line that is apparently 'behind' it, seems to allow this greenery to sprout onto another visual plane (that of another painting perhaps), leaving us uncertain as to where the sprouts exists in the spatial logic of the rest of the painting, or somewhere else.

Perhaps a 'glitch' like this (and maybe Cubism too) liberated Morandi from loyalty to his own knowledge of the limits and bounds of the individuated objects at which he was looking and their relation to their contexts. Then again, Morandi might imply that individual things, different from each other, and distinguished as objects set against and within contexts, are not so individuated after all. Perhaps contexts can be objects, and objects contexts? Perhaps all ceramic vessels come with a material memory of the shared processes of throwing,

moulding, firing and glazing, from which they are all derived and which they thus have in common, thereby constituting the single object of 'all ceramic vessels'? Then (yet) again, the apparent 'glitches' in Morandi's representation may be more to do with a modern, or modernist fascination with questioning – particularly via painting – visual perception (again a quasi-Cubist approach). What we might call the 'Morandian glitch' then, frees the eye from a knowledge that informs and therefore constrains it, and invites both eye and mind to roam and wander, gracing, tracing, and playing with the precious gift and experience of vision itself.

### **TRANSCENDENCE?**

So, to return to that editor's criticism of my apparently too 'transcendent' approach to art writing, I wonder if I have here allowed Morandi's painting to charm and seduce me into committing the error of making fanciful, rhetorical statements that invest my experience with unjustifiable and un-scientific transcendence, or even metaphysics? If so, might I defend myself by claiming that I succumb, in fact, only to the lesser vices of metaphor, analogy and alliteration, of adverbs, anthropomorphism and adjectives, but not metaphysics. And if so, might I appeal to be welcomed back into a certain (in my insecure case, rather desperately wanted and needed) sense of belonging and community by the relevant cultural gatekeepers, if only on the grounds that I might just be a valuable maverick contributor, a follower perhaps of Alfred Jarry's strange notion of 'pataphysics', which he playfully and oxymoronically, but effectively defined as a 'science of exceptions'? (Jarry. A. 1965)

I can be scientific, rational, materialist etc. as long as (like Walter Benjamin) I can also be allowed to explore the realm of exceptions to rules. Similarly, I am ready and willing to change my ways, my bad habits, in order to remain inside, not outside of the community of published and respected art writers, if only by representing what the highly respected writer and thinker Maurice Blanchot called 'the community of those who have no community', particularly as I believe it may well be precisely *this* community (that of those who have no community) that I, or we, enter and re-join on every occasion upon which I/we find

ourselves involved with a piece of writing that deserves to be called 'art writing' (here taken as a noun). (Blanchot, M. 1988)

Hopefully it can be seen that, for me, serious art writing, like serious art, always requires this kind of adventure, journey, and gambit; this risk of falling and potential loss; but, if possible, also this capture, rescue and flight into unknown territory (again, if that is not too transcendent), a flight into that which is not yet my or anyone else's territory? As I often tell my students, 'I first write myself into trouble, and then write myself out of trouble again'. That is an aspect of my method, and it is in the latter part of the process that I believe I make a contribution, a difference, a change, to and for myself, to and for art and art writing.

It may be true that, again for me (for this is all surely, and admittedly personal, subjective, creative, ungrounded and unfounded in any standard scientific sense) science, physics, reason and materialism are not enough (and of course, not something I ever studied at school as – I realised as I grew older – I did not have a secondary education). I do *believe in* science and physics, but only as I believe in all other aspects of my experience. I believe in science and physics as an ever-increasingly, marvellously sophisticated human toolbox by means of which to operate in and on a broader experience that also includes the unscientific, or less scientific – which is where I am willing to follow Alfred Jarry. I am also willing to follow writer/artists like Rushdie, Murakami, Borges and Calvino into the realm of the 'magical' as, even if I do not believe in magic, I think of the 'magical' in terms of the rarity of fortunate coincidence, and the inexplicable ways and means by which e.g. art, love, and creativity are or can be pursued and developed by the most and least experienced and qualified.

Morandi's paintings, with their apparently purposeful, intentional 'glitches'; and perhaps precisely in and *by means* of those glitches, might offer us exceptions that become vehicles, passages, ways to go and to go beyond any literal, commonplace, habitual or rational representation, in part by never allowing us to forget that this is always a particular and an 'exceptional' way of painting, in the hands of a particular painter; never allowing us to forget that this *mis-leads* us in a most inviting manner, into a peculiar, particular and exceptional truth of its very own. But then, but now – to finish this paragraph with a

question that perhaps shows the whole of the above to have been inadequate, too insubstantial a self-defence – is this ‘truth’ then also shamefully transcendent and therefore unwelcome among this collection of thoughts?

### **MORANDI AND METAPHYSICS**

We also see in this show, some paintings that are less typical of the Morandi we best know, and this is usually because they precede his long, ‘classic’ phase of consistent and repetitive production. One of these earlier paintings shows the influence of De Chirico, who, as a proto-Surrealist, or Surrealist *avant la lettre* later claimed, embraced and endorsed by Surrealism, explicitly trumpeted the ‘metaphysicality’ of his own best-known paintings. De Chirico’s enthusiastic use of this term might be helpful to us in understanding what a ‘metaphysical’ art or art-writing might be, contain or look like, and this might, in turn, illuminate any accusation that my own writing is, in being too transcendent, also too metaphysical. Along the way, of course, we might gain a further opportunity to explore any realism, Surrealism, materialism, physicality, metaphysicality or transcendence implicated by Morandi’s paintings.

For De Chirico, a ‘metaphysical’ painting seems to have been one in which worldly objects and physical spaces are described quite accurately, figuratively, but in such a way that they are also clearly not real. The Surrealists attributed Freudian or dream-like qualities to them, but whether De Chirico would have conceded or consented to this I am unsure. Suffice to say that what De Chirico (who interested Morandi at one time, though only perhaps as much as Cezanne also interested Morandi) adds to the realistic depiction of objects and places is something widely recognised but enigmatic – inevitably difficult to explain. We might claim, if slightly glibly, that De Chirico transforms objects and places into events, but more obviously he imbues them with atmosphere, something that even the most scientific among us might find it hard to deny that we have experienced even if it remains an unscientific or irrational concept. (Benjamin, W. 2000. p.229).

Other ‘metaphysical’ aspects of De Chirico’s ‘metaphysical’ paintings are found within long, deep shadows, ponderous Romanesque arches, reclining statues, and passing steam trains,

all of which play their part in endowing his scenes with a particular temporality, one that seems to weigh heavily on all that it pervades. Then there are certain displacements of scale and distortions of perspective, perhaps multiple, slightly jarring perspectives. Now, perhaps it can be seen that we might be able to understand how Morandi, influenced in turn by De Chirico and Cezanne, found his own *metier* by considering, but then refusing both, and developing his very own analytic (Cezanne-ian) and metaphysical (De Chirico-esque) fusion.

So, can we go further and call Morandi metaphysical? It seems incongruous, and the claim is perhaps cancelled by the relative rationality he brings to his also quite scientific Cezanne-ian observations. And yet there does seem to be in Morandi more than 'meets the eye', more, that is, than a relentless materiality; more, we might say, of a restless hyper-materiality or meta-materiality, one that even vibrates, refusing to be placid, still, willingly observed; one that refuses to be an object – and perhaps this leads us beyond 'mere' physics and 'mere' materiality.

Can we then call Morandi 'Cezanne-ian'? Only in the sense that he, in ways similar to Cezanne, seems to have isolated himself and repeatedly addressed the same 'subject matter, evolving and then using the same technique, in a seemingly or quasi-scientific way. Orthodox European art history tells us that such a 'way' led Cezanne to a uniquely grounded system of personal representation that eventually came to be a crucial influence upon and progenitor of the arch-modernist abstract line or family of modern painters. Many of these, apparently influenced by Cezanne's own, relatively clear-headed, dry-eyed method, sought to expunge mystery, emotion, irrationality, and yes, metaphysics and transcendence from their works. However, there were metaphysical and transcendental modern abstract painters too.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Perhaps, as we said near to the start of this writing, there is nothing that can be said about Morandi, or by me at least, that would contribute any further to his reputation or understanding. I have, like most commentators I suspect, been unable to criticise, but have rather maintained a slight sycophancy or fandom throughout the above, while in some ways



discovering, or rediscovering a model or mentor in Morandi, not for how to paint but for how to conduct my art writing.

Any art or artwork might have sufficed at this time of need, but it just happened that, as I processed the implications of a certain editor's certain refusal, I just happened to give myself a day-off of my University duties, to also take a rest from 'the contemporary', and attend an exhibition by this perhaps unfashionably canonical modern painter, whose works proved capable of motivating and shaping this rather long and slightly sprawling text.

Yes, there is nothing to be said about Morandi, and that is perhaps why I am writing about him, reminding myself, in the process, quite why I have always written and quite why I write, which is perhaps not so different from the underlying reason that Morandi had to paint. In both cases, it is, in the end, for the slightly mysterious love of the act, the process, the revelation. It is ultimately for the love of writing, for the love of painting, for the love of art and of art writing.

We could go further here and suggest that Morandi may have only become satisfied by his own paintings, by his own process and technique, at the point when he also knew they 'said' nothing and could say nothing. Not only do paintings not write or speak, but they also do not necessarily 'say' anything, and this crucial point or discovery might be reached only by and through attention to those wavering, slightly unnerving 'glitches' that seem to 'pull the rug from under' any certainty that we might have expected to have been provided by such otherwise overtly and purely physical paintings of such prosaic objects.

Yes, it might be said that we finally arrive at our most important and committed writing, and at our most important and committed painting, only when we discover how to paint or to write when or where there is nothing to be said, but also where and when no one wants, needs, likes, or values our art or our art writing. Only then might we write or make art relieved of the burden of appreciation, along with the burden of content, import, discernible value, and more. For the art writer, the art-wordsmith, or for the art orator, might this then be a form of *ekphrasis*, or perhaps the gateway to a form of unabashed rhetoric? Perhaps, but then, I have long suspected (see my 2009 PhD *A Hesitation of Things*) all writing and

speaking to be a form of rhetorical activity about which we should feel no shame. (O’Kane, P. 2009).

Have I here lost touch with reality, materiality, physicality and rationality? Have my feet ‘left the ground’ (to again invoke one of my editor’s own metaphorical criticisms). Is my ‘head in the clouds’ when I write and speak of art and of Morandi’s art in these ways? Does all of this betray a certain unexamined but innate transcendentalism? Perhaps, but if so then that is probably illustrative of my attempts to attain what I have elsewhere in my writing called a ‘holistic relativism’, a postmodernised attempt to grasp ‘the all’, or the whole, without care for conflict, positionality or orientation; a way of referring to the (transcendent? metaphysical?) whole that I have long felt must be considered and must be at stake; that I feel I must address, bravely and without fear of encountering and ‘handling’ a possibly maddening level of complexity and responsibility.

Might this be a way to manage and contain today’s increasingly complex ‘multitudes’ (as Walt Whitman, followed more recently by Bob Dylan, claims), without being tied, like a silent movie starlet to this or that particular, narrow and unwavering editorial ‘track’; to this or that culture or club, whose gateway and threshold it seems I am still not allowed to pass through or remain beyond and within, despite forty difficult years of attempted class-migration, and despite twenty five years of publishing art-writing (plus my PhD, my teaching experience etc.); and even though so many of the peers and colleagues who might pass such judgements on me may have never had to even think about passing through that gateway, simply because they were born into and within the cultural territory that this same gateway bars me from accessing, other than – it seems – as an occasional and slightly exotic visitor, a peculiar, awkward maverick (noting here that, preceding this editor’s accusation of “cleaving to the transcendent in art” I had also had some recent papers and presentations referred to by people whom I think of as my peers as “wry”, and as “hilarious” when I had intended nothing of the sort).

My art writing will, I hope, always respond (and I hope has always responded) honestly and anew to each encounter with each art and artist as well as to each editor and journal, in a way that is informed and shaped, not by any prescribed agenda, not by any cultural club to

which I might or need to belong, and not by any fixed or habitual position or set of prescribed and established rules, but instead informed and shaped by the particular event, the particular encounter, by the work itself, the work as it appears to this particular art writer at this particular moment, as if (and as much as his is possible) pre-washed of all that is supposedly or expertly 'known' about it, cleansed (again, as much as possible) of all that has been previously attributed to and claimed for it, all that has been said, written and established about it. This, to me, approximates a decanonising of canons *per se*, a decanonising of canonism and canonology.

Thus, I hope that my art writing will always be shaped and formed by the art that I write-about just as much as my writing might slightly re-shape and re-form the art it addresses. As I have said above, if any judgement or evaluation occurs in that process, I hope to contain and maintain it as confined within perhaps no more than a particular use of adjectives and adverbs, and my own deployment of whatever other textures and nuances that might shape my sometimes inspired and otherwise carefully chosen language.

In Morandi's paintings (as mentioned elsewhere above) there is often a sense of space around his objects, but often little or no space between those objects, despite the wider space into which they could spread if they or the artist so wished. Are they perhaps agoraphobia-cally scared, or afraid of being different, of being alone perhaps, or standing out? Are they afraid of being singled out as a thing an object (thinking here of the Japanese social maxim: 'the nail that sticks up gets hammered down'), as an identity or singularity? Does Morandi therefore bring into question their ontological status? Do they gather so tightly that, like people and buildings, on trains or other forms of crowd and crush in modern life, they even begin to fuse? This is also the point at which realistically representative figuration begins to become abstract. 'Things' fall apart but only to become forms.

In Morandi's best known paintings we no longer see things or objects, fronts, backs and sides, tops and bottoms of vessels against, on, or within a certain space or place; but instead see planes, tones, hues, shapes and marks contained by the wider vessel of the frame, and by the vessel of the event of painting. This event of painting is not so much metaphysical as

molecular, even quantum-mechanical perhaps; not *meta*-physical but rather *super*- or *hyper*- physical. With an absurd modesty, and extreme passivity, domestic things ‘give-up their ghosts’ and come to Morandi to confess, under the scrutiny of the concentrated eye and the animating brush they admit to an abstract molecularity that makes them anything but familiar, domestic, comforting and reassuring.

Perhaps a form of Surrealism has taken place after all, or rather a ‘*pata*-realism’ – following Alfred Jarry’s ‘pataphysics’ or “science of exceptions” (Jarry, A. 1965). If so, this might confirm Walter Benjamin’s claim or implication that all objects, whether natural or cultural (or objects that are both, or in-between) can – if we approach and explore them in a certain open-minded manner – reveal another value, a greater value (and here they may indeed begin to transcend), a value other than that with which they are routinely awarded in commonplace or strictly scientific and rational experience and explanation, i.e. other than they are awarded by common sense or addressed in common *parlance*.

Morandi’s objects are small, contained by a small table, in a small area, of a small room, and yet he has rendered them in such a way as to be simultaneously both close and distant, both accessible and ineffable, thus purposefully ambiguous, but always in a way that I would prefer to translate as ‘immanent’ rather than as ‘transcendent’.

**END**

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