SECOND CHANCE

My Life in Things

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WAYS OF SEEING

Based on the BBC television series with

JOHN BERGER

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.

The Surrealist painter Magritte commented on this always-present gap between words and seeing in a painting called The Key of Dreams. **The way we see things is affected by what we**

Still

The thingliest of things inhabit our daily lives. How beautiful such objects are in certain still life paintings, or as details in genre painting: a jug in Vermeer, a coffee pot in Chardin, a glass vase in Manet. Weight, texture, surface, light, grain.

Contemporary Spanish artist Joseba Sánchez Zabaleta paints arrays of everyday objects on tables: a pile of small plates, an old silver spoon, an empty sardine can, its lid peeled open. Rendered in subdued tones and in the kind of precise, blocky brushstrokes that suggest sustained acts of looking, the objects are steeped in an atmosphere of muted abandonment. A sense of abandonment similarly pervades the work of Canadian photographer Laura Letinsky. In off-kilter compositions, she captures the remains of meals, each as the exquisite, melancholy aftermath of refined commensality. On crumpled and wine-stained white tablecloths, these decentred images evoke endings, recorded in the lambency of the morning after.

These tableaux are, in a sense, the muted hyperboles of still life as the genre of 'the culture of the table,' as art historian Norman Bryson calls it. It is a culture that, in Bryson's formulation, displays simultaneously a 'rapid, volatile receptivity to its surrounding culture,' and 'a high level of resistance to innovation in the forms themselves.' Bryson's words, unpacking the ethos of still life painting as a genre and exposing its relationship to table habits, articulate for me something about the quality of Letinsky's images, at once contemporary and archaic.

A still life is a framed tableau of objects which have been deliberately assembled, arranged and composed by the painter or photographer: in other words, objects that have been both looked at and touched. As an art form, still life is a sedentary art connected to the business of keeping a home. That idea was first planted in my mind by John Berger. It is also, Berger says in his celebrated *Ways of Seeing*, an art form that establishes

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a link between seeing and possessing on the one hand, and possessions and oil painting on the other. The term *oil painting*, as Berger's work illuminates, describes more than simply a technique: it refers both to an art form and a tradition with social and ideological underpinnings.

Much of still life as a genre in both painting and photography is steeped in melancholy. It bears the evidence—or augury—of decay and ruin. The solid objects of still life are frequently made of materials that will crack, break, tarnish, fray, evaporate. They find their moment of poise alongside ephemeral things: lemons half peeled, oysters ready to be slurped, grapes whose bloom displays the artist's skill, a bunch of asparagus or one lonely sprig, overblown peonies, irises upright as sentinels: organic things on a cusp between ripeness and rot.

Traditionally the genre that shines a light on objects plucked from the material world, still life was considered to be destitute of significant action and narrative, and was historically the lowliest category of picture making. It is for that very reason that it has always called to me, since I generally prefer the fragmentary to the uniform or monolithic, the minor to the major key. Indeed, I have always felt that still life, in both its painterly and photographic iterations, has afforded me rich glimpses into worlds. The histories that still lifes contain are suggested rather than spelled out: of trade, of transportation, of extraction, of class, of labour, of gender, of domesticity and yes, even of cruelty to humans and animals: in short of all the relations that brought those items to this table. In *This Dark Country* (2021), a brilliant and methodologically innovative book on still lifes made by women artists (either queer or 'living awry to heteronormativity in some key sense') in the early twentieth century, Rebecca Birrell tenderly unpacks the narratives contained by the still lifes she scrutinises. Her words are applicable across the genre when she speaks of works that take 'the rough, raw material of a life' and reissue it 'as compacted, densely coded dramas on the trials of intimacy and of needs hungering at the seams of quotidian concerns.'

But in addition to this, still life artists frame the chosen objects conceptually and formally in such a way as to emphasise not only the concerns and the pleasures of the everyday, but also the vexations and delights of painting itself, of photography itself. Such works outline, as Birrell says of one still life painting by Vanessa Bell, 'how aesthetics might absorb the ephemeral idiom of the everyday.'

As a genre, still life slows you down, unhooks you from explicit causality and coincidence, immersing you in the experience of perception and a contingency that remains close to the domestic realm. Thick with story, still lifes are satisfyingly devoid of plot. What I mean by this distinction between narrative—or story—and plot, is articulated by art historian Michael Baxandall in a discussion of eighteenth-century painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, considered one of the great masters of still life painting. 'He narrates,' writes Baxandall, 'by representing not substance—not figures fighting or embracing or gesticulating—but a story of perceptual experience masquerading lightly as a moment or two of sensation.' How beautifully expressed. Crucially, Chardin is a painter who, for Baxandall 'can make a story out of the contents of a shopping bag.' More even than the story told by a bag of shopping, by the contents of a wardrobe, by the spill of condiments on a table, Baxandall sees Chardin's still lifes as essays on acts of attention.

While Chardin's still life paintings invite finely honed, drawn-out acts of observation, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings, freighted with symbolism—the melancholy of memento mori seeping out of skulls, worm-infested fruit, and extinguished candles—are not merely arrangements of things seen, so much as explorations of forms of knowledge and craft. Objects as things to think with. As catalogues of natural materials—with their pearlescent, lustrous or pitted surfaces—and their transformation by humans, they probe the attributes of the material world (shells, fruit, pewter, glass, stone, linen). Often sensuous, sometimes sinister, they invite viewers to query how nature is at once revealed and betrayed, first in the making of things, and then in the painted representation of those natural and fabricated things. With minute and voluptuous attention to surface and detail, texture and light, still lifes by Dutch and Flemish painters such as Pieter Claesz, Jan Davidsz. de Heem, Willem Kalf and Clara Peeters stand for the very artifice that informs coeval notions of 'Art.' Art historian Svetlana Alpers quotes Francis Bacon (the sixteenth-century scientist, not the twentieth-century artist), for whom a working definition of art or craft (the two were twinned) was 'seeing that the nature of things betrays itself more readily under the vexations of art than in its natural freedom.'

Being vexed is what many contemporary painters do in and with museums as they examine the work of other painters for prompts, cues, assistance, resistance. More than nature, it is art that feeds art. And still life amply, if quietly, displays this to us. Leaping across three centuries from Dutch still life to Picasso, we notice how actual things—physical things (vases, sculptures, candlesticks, coffee pots, mirrors, drapes)—can be dense with allusion to the history of the *painting* of those things. Guitars, chairs, bottles, sheet music and newspapers now oscillate in their status: between being the things alluded to, and the material stuff out of which those things are fabricated—paper, string, charcoal, wood.

And then, there is Giorgio Morandi, a painter John Berger called 'the metaphysician of Bologna.' In his paintings, the irregular edges of a small range of objects jostle together, their contours abutting or almost touching, all within a shallow space. Our gaze is blocked from moving in or away. Now, it is invited to linger on the facticity of luscious, opaque, always-visible brushstrokes. The tonalities are muted and close in range: ash, dove and bone grey; agapanthus and duck-egg blue; calamine and blush pink. The contiguity and sheer repetition of vases, bottles and jars creates simplified cities of objects and arouses in the viewer—in me—a recognition that things are never entirely self-same.

Still life is a category of art, not of life. But as in still life paintings, the objects that lodge in our daily lives over time—a frequently used saucepan, a burnished wedding ring, a chipped mug, an old toy or a favourite pen—are rarely *simply things.* Art nuzzles into life and informs the ways in which we might arrange or think of objects. Alan Bennett speaks in *Untold Stories* (2005) of 'how personalized and peopled the material world is at a level almost beneath scrutiny.' He is thinking, he tells us, 'of the cutlery in the drawer or the crockery I every morning empty from the dishwasher. Some wooden spoons, for instance, I like, think of as friendly; others are impersonal or without character.' Bruised by use and marked by our personal narratives, objects are also enmeshed in webs of cultural signification. 'Even the humblest material artefact,' writes T.S. Eliot in his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1949), 'which is the product and symbol of a particular civilization, is an emissary of the culture out of which it comes.'

But such objects are also moveable pieces in human interactions—things shared or retracted, gifts, bequests, wilful or careless

destructions—ensnared in common histories and animated by the minds of users, by our minds. As such, objects inhabit us almost as though they were envoys from within: 'but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?' Rhoda asks in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.

It is not only vessels and utensils, clothes, and trinkets, that touch us. Books are objects of overwhelming attachment and association; heavy tomes or paperbacks, notebooks or albums in which the riches of content are allied with specific materialities. This, then. An unsent postcard—a Bonnard interior, light-brindled—slips out of the pages of a book of Neruda poems which is inscribed with my name and the year 1975, bringing with it a whiff of the ardent, aching person I was at that time. Along with the inscription of my own name and dedications on frontispieces, other postcards greet me when I return to old books: I've long enjoyed the habit of using postcards as bookmarks, and finding them later adds substance, a dusty coating of connotation to the time or times invoked by the book. Here is Roberto Calasso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (1988) which I never read, and which bears a postcard and a dedication, both from R, now dead, a much-loved lover married to someone else, whom—after a four-year affair, stunned in the aftermath of discovery and rupture—I described to my friends as *lost in action*. The quirky drawing of an 'Odder-Lisque' by the mercurial Nick Wadley slips out of the book of e.e. cummings poems that took my breath away when I first read them in the 1970s. I made sure to salvage this book from the wreck of my marriage to J, since so many of the poems reminded me of the best of us. Later, once we had become the kind of friends who examine each other's bookshelves, he snuck in a retroactive dedication *legitimising theft.* I cried when I found it.

Then there is John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, a book I now think of as having owned since I was old enough to consider reading not only as a pleasure, but also as a mission of self-improvement. I pull it out of its position, ranked in my theory section between Walter Benjamin and Lauren Berlant. Placing it on my white desk and photographing it, I enable its transformation from thing, tool and prompt to still life. It is scuffed and battered in a familiar way.

Right now, I am trying to think through my attachment to my books—as treasure, as objects, as portals, as snapshots—and I am also trying to account for my need to sort and tidy. The pull to keep things, the push to

throw things away. I've read that people who can tolerate mess in their homes and work environments have a great sense of inner structure; we tidiers, contrariwise, are just attempting to build barricades against tsunamis of inner chaos.

Declutter

It is those for whom tidiness *could* be an ideal—whether dimly or constantly pursued—that the contemporary decluttering industry targets. This formulation does not account for the complex dialectic of love and loathing that informs the hoarder's obsession, but I also assume that the fashion for decluttering is not aimed at chronic hoarders or committed collectors. Rather, the rash of manuals and the incrementally growing popularity of television programmes, YouTube channels and Instagram feeds devoted to getting rid of things speaks of an age of compulsive, yet replaceable, acquisition. Not addressing the toxicity of immoderate affluence—not, in other words, overtly political in their aim—these helpers are at once the symptom and the ultimate exploiters of cycles of perpetual consumption promoted by the machinery of late capitalism. 'The desire to consume is a kind of lust,' writes Lewis Hyde. 'But consumer goods merely bait this lust, they do not satisfy it. The consumer of commodities is invited to a meal without passion, a consumption that leads to neither satiation nor fire.' It is a consumption that leads simply to more consumption. This, in 1979.

In the midst of the decluttering fervour, Marie Kondo burst onto screens advocating the joy of minimalism and capsule wardrobes to generations of shoppers sooner or later looking for the next big thing in interior decorating: mid-century geometries, vintage chic or seaside boho. Kondo, a neat and winsome person, caused an explosion in the collective psyche of would-be minimalists. I think I was late in hearing about her in the context of folding T-shirts and socks, but I know she came into soft focus for me in 2017, when I was on a clearing binge. This was before she hit Netflix, but still, people were talking about her. On social media, where life is equated with lifestyle, tidying seemed to require consultants, gurus.

In the spring of 2017, my need for a deep clean was linked not to the season, but to an inner propulsion in the direction of discombobulation.

Contributing factors: work had never gone so badly and shifting away from art-historical and art-critical writing to a new practice of personal essay writing, I had not yet found friends or allies, except in books. Other than occasionally translating art-related texts from Portuguese to English, my sources of income had withered; I had done my back in and joined the battalions of osteopath-consulting, anti-inflammatory swallowing self-helpers; I had left G, the lover for whom I had finally cleared away the contents of Ian's desk. While I had a wide circle of wonderful friends, my work and romantic attachments felt flimsy and unmoored. And then Louise, a dear friend, who only six months earlier had been diagnosed with Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease, was dead. Louise's death was a catalyst that made my own seem not only possible, but also imminent. We had often celebrated our December birthdays together; we'd known each other since we were eighteen.

Though I felt as energetic as I had ever done, and though my arms were more toned than they had been twenty years earlier, I was not enjoying the effects of time and mortality on my thoughts, my joints, my prospects, my friends. I had not yet met P, the last man whose presence in my life changed my sense of the time to come. In the spring of 2017, with a view to an eventual downsized future on my own, I began thinking that I had better get a grip. I started sorting, clearing and cleansing, lugging bags of infrequently used items to charity shops. I had already heard of the Swedish method of tidying, *döstädning,* or 'death cleaning.' Decluttering Scandi noir style. This appealed to me. Clean up your shit before you evaporate, so that no one should have to do it for you, after you.

In an operation of uncharacteristic ruthlessness, and folding away my sentimentality, I found myself doing away with possessions I impulsively felt I would no longer use; things that I was suddenly mercilessly capable of demoting to mere stuff. I have noticed that at times of internal disarray, I get an obsessive, pernickety satisfaction from organising stuff.

But while arranging and tidying things leads me to the archivist's delight, it also provokes in me the archivist's anguish. How to categorise things? Categorising is an activity that can easily become compulsive. Perhaps this is because it has something to do with staving off death, keeping at bay the knowledge that eventually, everything returns to

the condition of matter. Though I've always been a sorter, harbouring the heart of a librarian in a body given to some measure of disorder (I overpack for every eventuality when I travel; I lose my mobile phone and keys and glasses and notes to self every day; I file papers safely and irretrievably), it became obvious that I was now also acting out a cultural trope. That like many other virtue seekers in the developed world, I was burdened by consumption guilt, weighed down by relentless accumulation. Bombarded by advice on how not to be possessed by our possessions, I had joined the fray. The Japanese and Scandinavian styles—which, as far as interior decor was concerned, I had always admired for their minimalist, clean lines, their uses of daylight and monochrome—were now mainstream, the *ne plus ultra* of lifestyle designers who arranged objects in pristine interiors for photo-shoots in grainy light—pared down still lifes curated for the well-heeled—and who saw me coming.

Since I first heard of Marie Kondo, she has forged a brand and built an empire around the fact that, in the developed world, we don't know what to do with all our things. Googling to learn more about the Kondo phenomenon, I read that the rise of professional declutterers in Japan coincided with the earthquake and tsunami in 2011. I wonder if there is a link between loss of lives and a re-evaluation of *stuff*, or if this is mere coincidence. Certainly, the notion that a desire for control in the small areas where one can exert it at moments of collective malaise makes sense. The Covid-19 pandemic brought a self-isolating crowd of DIY enthusiasts into focus. They get a mention on an NHS web page, along with trampoliners, with warnings of accidental injury during the Easter weekend of 2020.

Marie Kondo is a petite, exquisitely groomed woman, canny and telegenic. But one of the things that irks me about her is the fact that she is a woman. I understand that this is mostly beyond her control, but all I can think of is how gender-specific tidying a house has always been. The Instagram 'cleanfluencers' are also, it seems, exclusively women, adopting saccharine blog titles and hashtags such as 'Queen of Clean' and 'The Organised Mum,' reinforcing depleted gender stereotypes. I am curmudgeonly about Kondo's blithe and buoyant manner, and I feel churlish about her 'joy.' We should discard anything, she tells us, that does not spark joy. The tyranny of joy!

How to take into account the vicissitudes of joy itself, its temporal dimensions, its fluid contours, its evanescence? The occasional pleasures of melancholy? Reasons to keep possessions are knotted into our life stories and are profoundly linked to the ways in which we think of our losses, the ways in which we regard memory itself. There is something tautological about a decision to keep only those things that bring us joy. Surely even the hoarder's every item—in succession and in tandem—brings her or him a drop of curdled *tokimeku*?

When I think of rescaling my possessions in preparation for the inevitable downsizing, I am filled with dismay at the enormity of the task. And when I contemplate the possessions with which I identify most powerfully, those that define me, it is my books I think of. The accumulation and volume of these books is not conducive to Scandi-style, minimalist interior design. Books amble through my large house. In addition to the many bookcases—I would love the sleek Tylko or Vitsoe, but Ikea's ubiquitous Billy was all I could afford—there are also casual piles of books on tables and all over my study floor.

The bookshelves ostensibly hold distinct classes of books. These categories—despite my every effort at precision—remain porous, ill-defined, crammed with parentheses, overlaps, exceptions, exclusions. My favourite line in Walter Benjamin's essay 'Unpacking My Library' (1931) is the one where he says that the best way of acquiring a book is by writing it oneself. My second favourite sentence summarises how the classificatory systems we improvise for our books balance order against chaos: 'what else is such a collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?' he asks. And as I fret about whether Benjamin himself should be kept under *essays,* or should be his own category of cultural criticism, I know—I do know—that construing an order for books has vexed many a mind. I know, too, that the organising principles for such collections—inevitably imperfect—must accommodate their open-endedness. 'One of the chief problems encountered by the man who keeps the books he has read or promises himself that he will one day read is that of the increase in his library,' writes Georges Perec in his arch essay, 'Brief Notes on the Art and Manner of Arranging One's Books' (1978). The increase of the library, the promise of books still unread: how to organise it all?

Unread books enjoy a special status among my evocative objects. They are not secreted in drawers or tucked away as precious rarities in muslin or tissue paper. Rather, they are dispersed, lurking in plain sight among the read and partially read books on shelves and tables in my home. Unread they may be, but they are familiar, even as new acquisitions join their ranks: they are distinctly held by that possessive pronoun that links them to me.

Bibliophiles frequently find themselves called upon to justify the existence on their shelves of the unread. Umberto Eco famously derided the question 'how many of these books have you read?' preferring his library to exist as testimony to that which was still-to-be-known. I assume the question is, in part, a question of resource management: space, time, money. People are curious. But also, there is a certain puritan severity to the ways in which we are enlisted to explain how we use or squander those reserves. In the category of unread books, each stands as the marker of something—a thought, a question, an impulse, a desire—radiating out of a whorl of nested trajectories, (in)roads as yet not taken.

Thinking of my unread books leads me to that old tease, things unwritten. But I only glancingly make space for this thought. It is a thought that ushers in humiliation and frustration: ideas not brought to fruition, manuscripts (if they still go by that quaint term) summarily dispatched by publishers, projects ill-formed or hijacked by others. George Steiner, who had the courage and wiliness to write a book about his unwritten books, speaks of the consequences of negation and privation, the journeys not taken: 'consequences we cannot foresee or gauge accurately. It is the unwritten book which might have made the difference. Or not.'

But unlike the unwritten, the unread stands not for dissatisfaction, but for potential: the future reeling out into distinct vectors, unanticipated trajectories. Not a single one of my unread books is inert or inexpressive: together, they emerge (they continue to emerge) from a tangled web of interests and concerns that somehow, at times fortuitously, finds more direct expression in some other act of reading. Each, in other words, is the end point of an act of wandering—meandering—and occupies a position in an imaginary, freshly mapped constellation. If I gathered together all my many unread books, I would recall why each entered my

possession: not the circumstance or even the year of its acquisition, but where it fits in with my writing, how it links to my other reading.

In her essay 'I Murdered My Library,' novelist Linda Grant describes the process of moving to a smaller home and having to cull her vast collection of books, acknowledging her position within a certain demographic. 'Downsizing' is a concept as steeped in melancholy as in practicality, signalling the end of an active, socially participative period of our lives through the shrinkage of our personal space. We take on the contraction of our world for the convenience of it—less cleaning, less bother—but hers is an embrace that accedes to a subsiding of vitality too.

In divesting herself of many of her books, Grant feels she has committed an act analogous to destroying books. And once she has moved, to her dismay, she finds she has got rid of too many: 'the truth was, I now had empty shelves. Fewer books than space for them. The shame.' Grant misses her books when they've gone, and fears that her cultural capital—her status among literary peers and friends—has diminished. But more than this, she recognises that the downsizing as a presage, a memento mori: 'it is death that we're talking about. Death is the subject,' she says.

Writing to Moyra Davey, an artist who frequently photographs the books on her shelves, novelist and essayist Ben Lerner describes trying to scale down his library when moving to Brooklyn from a big house in Pittsburgh. Among his first considerations are books 'that I'd acquired but still hadn't read.' With the prospect of moving into a more restricted space, these books had become 'a little thinglier, heavier,' more insistent as objects.

To think about books as objects is to think about them in terms of value, editions, of new or second-hand purchases, but it is also to consider their status as gifts, tokens, prizes, special finds in charity shops or unusual, iconic book shops (Ler Devagar in Lisbon, Barter Books in Alnwick, Shakespeare and Company in Paris, Strand in New York, the Marylebone branch of Daunt Books in London.) Books exchanged; books as letters. Geeta Kapur—a beautiful, brilliant writer and curator living in New Delhi—once told me how, sometime in the 1960s, Vivan Sundaram, the artist who has been her partner and then her husband for over half a century, copied out a whole volume of Rilke poems and

sent them to her in a letter. How does one take the pulse of such a book, a transcribed object exchanged between lovers?

Books as objects in the history of thought and the history of design, but also objects with a history of readership and ownership, with a history of lurking too long on bedside tables, of supporting cups or buttressing other books.

Though the idea of tidying my bathroom cabinets and rolling up tea towels makes sense and gives me a certain pleasure, I feel that anyone who advocates that I abandon those books that I have not read does not understand the part that books can play in narratives of self-esteem, as Linda Grant's shame on having dispensed with too many of them reveals. More importantly, they serve as fortifications against the death-dealing finitude of the completed collection. As materialisations of a state of potentiality, my unread books suggest to me that there still is a future, that I still have a future. They nudge me to ignore my age.

I know that I cannot follow the example of Lerner's triage, much as I love his writing, and love his love of Moyra Davey's work, which I also love. I need my unread books. They stand in a state of perpetual invitation: a little daunting in their virgin status, they require a pencil and wad of luminous Post-It flags to feel a little more welcome in the world.

Each of these books, in its unread status, is a proxy, marking the location of an idea, halting upon a little clearing in an undergrowth of (other) ideas. By the same token, the books I have read, completely or partially—those I've alighted upon, like stepping stones—are arrived at circumstantially. They've captured me through a particular turn of phrase, or chapter heading, or index listing, throwing a slanting light on something else that is already holding me.

Now, I'm particularly taken by the idea of a *proxy.* Proxy: 'a stand-in, an agent, an avatar, a functionary,' writes Brian Blanchfield, also 'expresses a kind of concession to imprecision, a failure.' An approximation, an almost-but-not-quite. The almost-but-not-quite books lurk in waiting, richly suggestive.

I ignore them constantly, and then through some chain of associations, I pick out one of them, I dip in, I measure its relevance: something is ignited. I pay attention, I focus. I read on, or not. I need all these books,

not for 'sparking joy'—the very idea is kitsch—but for the states of potentiality they embody.

Who, I muse, wandering around my book-lined rooms, might ever want this particular conglomerate of novels, memoirs, art books, theory, anthologies of essays charting every phase of my reading life and enthusiasms, volumes of poetry dusty and new, exhibition catalogues, pamphlets, literary and art journals… Who would value this as anything other than a disassembled jumble of titles, a kind of material portrait? Taken together, my books—read and unread—are deeply personal. They not only map my intellectual history, they also track my loves in all their variegated morphologies, testifying to vagaries and obsessions, but also to the disruptions and discontinuities in my life: the stops and starts, the brief fads, the caesuras and redirections.

Ways of Seeing

John Berger's discussion of how we look at paintings and photographs—of the social and cultural norms we bring to bear on acts of looking—has had an effect as profound as it is widespread. Based on the TV series whose name it bears, *Ways of Seeing* was published in 1972 and appeared on my intellectual horizon in 1973, when I was a first-year fine arts student at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. The book, with its workaday appearance, its matt pages, its poor-quality black and white reproductions (degraded images, more like photocopies than the traditional greyscale photographic reproductions printed on glossy paper of 'art books'), and boasting the bold font of a manifesto, was bold in its claims too. With the simplicity of its enunciations, it was a game changer for my generation.

'The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe,' Berger announces at the outset, establishing his Marxist credentials, hinting at the ways in which viewing subjects are embedded in material circumstances, in bodies, in worlds: class, gender, status. This embeddedness in what is nothing short of ideology, Berger argues, has worked in favour of the ruling classes, a privileged minority that has invented a history of art to justify its own powerful role. Against such ideological mystification—and mystification, Berger concedes, may well also be 'pseudo-Marxist'—he proposes an examination of the

relationship 'which now exists, so far as pictorial images are concerned, between the present and the past.' He suggests that if we can see the present clearly enough, 'we shall ask the right questions of the past.'

Berger was a manageable, readable practitioner of a kind of social art history that was immensely engaged and engaging, countervailing the formalism that triumphed when I was an undergraduate. He was a first in many things. It was he, before Germaine Greer, who first threw light for me on the innate asymmetry of gendered representation in Western art, with his simple formulation: 'men act, women appear.' Marvellously—poor reproductions notwithstanding—two out of the seven pieces in the book are photo-essays, making their point simply by visual juxtaposition. And though I had by then already read André Malraux's *Museum without Walls* (1947), it was first through Berger that I began really thinking about the relationship between original works of art and their photographic reproduction in books. To me, Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935) which I first read in the mid-1970s too, was a series of brilliant, fragmented thoughts positioned at a tangent to one another. I sensed a coherence that was too theoretically complex for me to grasp at that time. But with Berger, I began really thinking about what happens when works of art are photographically reproduced, and I began, for the first time, to explore analogies between photographic conventions and those of the Renaissance painters I was studying in Art History, *only connecting* in the most satisfying way.

I would come to use such comparative methods in my own teaching, whether regular (in the 1980s and '90s) or sporadic (after those decades). A few years after encountering Berger, I would be equally affected by Susan Sontag's then recently published *On Photography* (1977) and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida,* more or less simultaneously, but it was Berger who began the process of dismantling for me the hierarchical distinction between what I then thought of as the discreet fields of painting and photography, art and documentary.

Berger was not alone in recognising that photographs (especially documentary ones) need words to anchor and contextualise them: importantly, Walter Benjamin (to whom Berger acknowledges an obvious debt at the end of the first essay of this book) had already done that, and Barthes examined these links in a systematically semiotic

fashion. But Berger was personal in his didacticism, and if his writing on photography is no longer something I frequently reach for, to the young person I then was, this book opened an array of possibilities of looking and of reading.

Now, however, I am considering this book not only for its contents, but also as a material object. Its pages are stiff, amber-edged, and several seem to have once been wet and now buckle, sticking together as a result. Gingerly, I try to separate them without causing damage. The cover—with a purposefully tacky reproduction of Magritte's painting *The Key of Dreams* (1927) illustrating the disconnect between images and words—is imprinted with faint, overlapping circles where cups of coffee and glasses of water once rested.

In thinking about books as objects, I read Michel Butor, who speaks of the sequentiality that is one of the principal advantages of books over other forms of recording, and who anatomises in detail material aspects of the book that might become naturalised in the act of reading: the signatures that constitute the book as a physical object, its margins and characters, the figuration of the page as a whole and the partitioning of pages into diptychs. I also read a wonderful essay by Nicholson Baker about books as furniture, though strictly speaking, this is about the use of books as props in mail order catalogues selling furniture. The use of books as coasters, however, has not been explored. The idea of a book as a coaster—my *Ways of Seeing* supporting so many beverages—points my attention to the very idea of thingness, and the annoyances that things can occasion. 'Tripping over the dog's water dish,' writes Bill Brown, 'touching a glazed jug that doesn't feel the way it looks, using your paperback copy of *The Imperative* as a flyswatter to nail an angry wasp: these are momentary encounters—scenes of accident, confusion, emergency, contingency—wherein thingness irrupts.'

In my home, books used as coasters have usually been arrested at some station along their route from table or desk or armchair or bedside table, back to the bookshelf that is their formal abode. The book-as-coaster is a book I can't quite put away. The embossed rings on this volume evoke student life in various iterations. I remember—I do specifically remember—buying this book in 1974 in Johannesburg, but when I open it, to my surprise I see that the name that has been scrawled in large, loose, inky letters, is not my own, but that of a friend. *JMS Nov. 73*, it says.

JMS—Julie—and I met in 1977 on the first day of our MA course at the Courtauld, straining to understand each other's accent, but we connected. There was something cool about her: impish, stylish, organised, but in a relaxed kind of way, different from my frantic sense of being all over the place and trying to over-organise everything as a result. Her hands were bony and agile, and she hid behind a wispy blonde fringe. Back then, we often worked on our essays together at her bedsit in Willesden Green. She cooked and sewed well and made any place seem like a beautiful home, while my room in a grimy flat-share in Cricklewood was dismal, beyond the succour of Indian block-print bedspreads and daffodils in glass jars. She later married a Norwegian man and moved to Oslo. She and I now see each other infrequently (three times in Oslo, once in Stockholm, once in Lisbon, several times in England), but we keep in touch.

I seldom feel tempted to re-read *Ways of Seeing* now, though I have, over the years, dipped into it when writing; the blue index flags are from one of those readings and highlight some of the book's much-quoted phrases: 'men act, women appear,' 'the surveyor of woman in herself is male; the surveyed male.' If the book no longer seems urgent, this is partly because I now take its considerations for granted: they have been absorbed and internalised. But it is also because the binaries that structure its arguments are no longer precise, and not always apposite. But this does not mean the book stops being a landmark publication, for me and for many others too.

I do not remember borrowing this book from Julie, and I wonder now if perhaps, through some mistaken swap, she has mine; wonder if, after so many years, I should still consider this book to be her property.

I wonder whether books—if not the more luxurious, costly ones, then the trade books upon which we possibly do not lavish any special attention—might not be best suited to having nomadic, transient lives, passing from hand to hand. Yet I remain too attached to my books and bound to the idea that together, they bear the imprint of my trajectories, my productivities and my very personality, to give them away casually. I have, of course, offloaded books at charity shops. But overall, I'm a keeper where books are concerned. Even novels, often read only once, make a claim on my acquisitive attention, my desire to annotate and possess: they keep an eye on me; they keep track of me. I reckon that, after forty years on my shelves, this *Ways of Seeing* won't be missed in Norway.