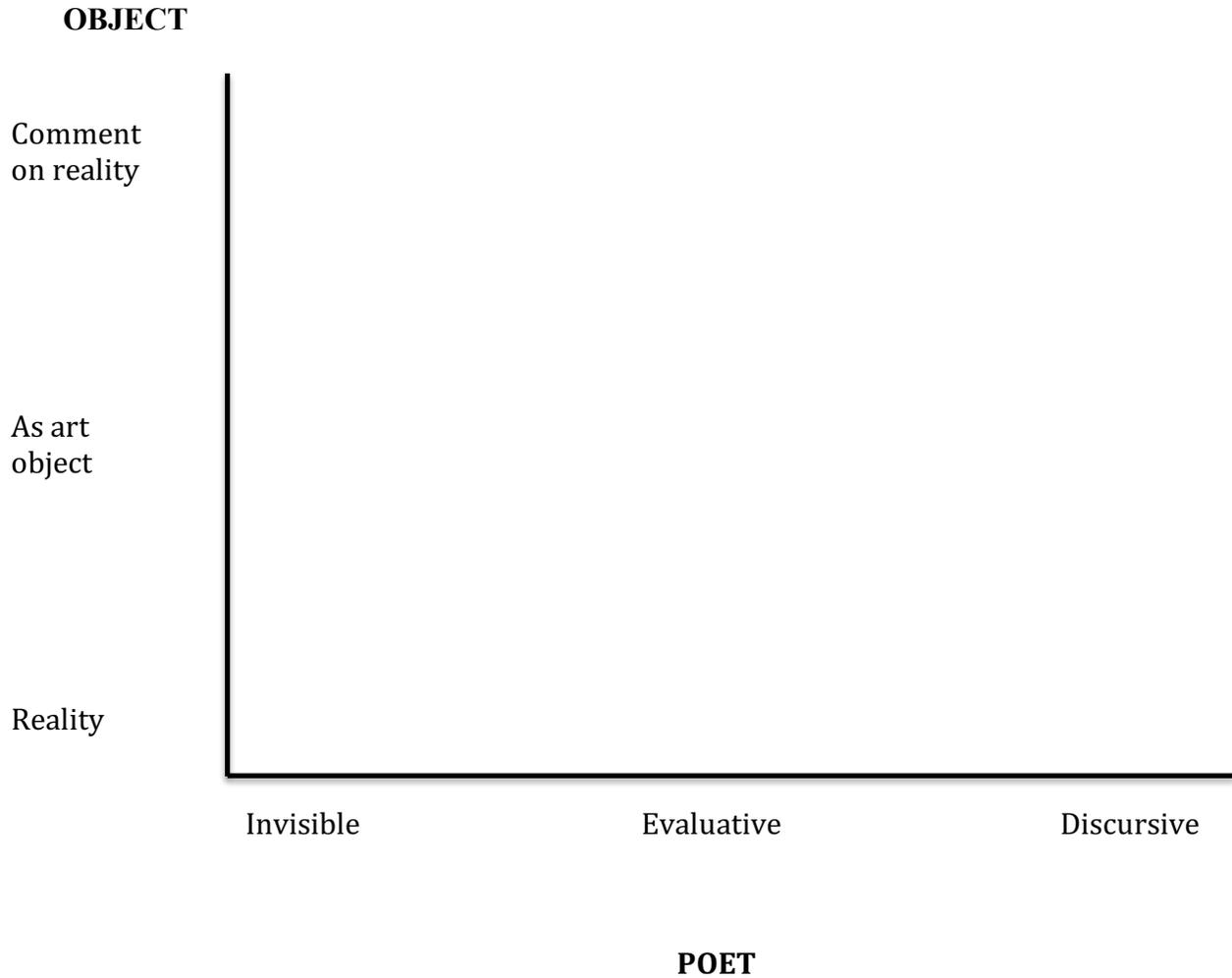


Ekphrastic Modes

“I am taking an existing work of art and rewriting over it. I’m imposing a new narrative on it, one that is partially suggested by the artwork itself and partially by something that comes from within. Sometimes that thing is an autobiographical moment, sometimes it’s a larger concern, social or political or intellectual.”—Mary Jo Bang



MULE TEAM AND POSTER

Donald Justice

After "Mule Team and Poster" by Walker Evans (image available at getty.edu)

Two mules stand waiting in front of the brick wall of a warehouse,
 hitched to a shabby flatbed wagon.
Its spoked wheels resemble crude wooden flowers
 pulled recently from a deep and stubborn mud.

The rains have passed over for now
 and the sun is back,
Invisible, but everywhere present,
 and of a special brightness, like God.

The way the poster for the traveling show
 still clings to its section of the wall,
It looks as though a huge door stood open
 or a terrible flap of brain had been peeled back, revealing

Someone's idea of heaven:
 seven dancing-girls, caught on the upkick,
All in fringed dresses and bobbed hair.
 One wears a Spanish comb and has an escort . . .

Meanwhile the mules crunch patiently the few cornshucks
 someone has thoughtfully scattered for them.
The poster is torn in places, slightly crumpled;
 a few bricks, here and there, show through.

And a long shadow —
 the last shade perhaps in all of Alabama —
Stretches beneath the wagon, crookedly,
 like a great scythe laid down there and forgotten.

Exercise: Using Justice's "Mule Team and Poster" as a model, write a poem that describes every element of a photograph. (Provide students with a bank of photographs)

LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS

William Carlos Williams

After "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by Pieter Brueghel (image available at artchive.com)

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

ENLIGHTENMENT

Natasha Trethewey

After "Thomas Jefferson" by Gilbert Stuart (image available at monticello.org)

In the portrait of Jefferson that hangs
at Monticello, he is rendered two-toned:
his forehead white with illumination —

a lit bulb — the rest of his face in shadow,
darkened as if the artist meant to contrast
his bright knowledge, its dark subtext.

By 1805, when Jefferson sat for the portrait,
he was already linked to an affair
with his slave. Against a backdrop, blue

and ethereal, a wash of paint that seems
to hold him in relief, Jefferson gazes out
across the centuries, his lips fixed as if

he's just uttered some final word.

The first time I saw the painting, I listened
as my father explained the contradictions:

how Jefferson hated slavery, though — *out
of necessity*, my father said — had to own
slaves; that his moral philosophy meant

he could not have fathered those children:
would have been impossible, my father said.
For years we debated the distance between

word and deed. I'd follow my father from book
to book, gathering citations, listening
as he named — like a field guide to Virginia —

each flower and tree and bird as if to prove
a man's pursuit of knowledge is greater
than his shortcomings, the limits of his vision.

I did not know then the subtext
of our story, that my father could imagine
Jefferson's words made flesh in my flesh —

*the improvement of the blacks in body
and mind, in the first instance of their
mixture
with the whites* — or that my father could believe

he'd made me *better*. When I think of this now,
I see how the past holds us captive,
its beautiful ruin etched on the mind's eye:

my young father, a rough outline of the old man
he's become, needing to show me
the better measure of his heart, an equation

writ large at Monticello. That was years ago.
Now, we take in how much has changed:
talk of Sally Hemings, someone asking,

How white was she? — parsing the fractions
as if to name what made her worthy
of Jefferson's attentions: a near-white,

quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave.
Imagine stepping back into the past,
our guide tells us then — and I can't resist

whispering to my father: *This is where
we split up. I'll head around to the back.*
When he laughs, I know he's grateful

I've made a joke of it, this history
that links us — white father, black
daughter —
even as it renders us other to each other.

Exercise: Identify a poet's position to their subject. (In other words, place the poet at a point in the chart on the first page.) Write a poem based on the same art object occupying a different point on the chart.

THE SMUDGE IS NOT DESCRIBED, NOR IS IT ERASED

Elizabeth Hoover

After "Stella" by Glen Brunken (image available at transactionsartandpoetry.wordpress.com)

The protagonist in *The Wages of Fear* watches a woman scrubbing the floor of a small cantina, her breasts sway in her labor. He clicks his tongue and she crawls over, nuzzling his hand. Her haunches tip up to the camera, to us, to our watching.

Come on you're not really hurt, a parent crouches by a child. The doctor can suggest certain words—*piercing, achy, tender, dull*. He even has a line-up of faces from smile to scream, but where does performance fall on that spectrum?

The proper question is not *is it real?* The nerve wailing its elegy for the lost limb, the child's cries as rapacious as a bruise. The smudge remains next to words that describe sensations, but not this one. There is no language for this.

When looking at a woman on screen, do you ever think of her body? I mean her real body: ball sliding inside the socket as she crawls, streams of lymph and blood, churn of stomach, elbows yellowing as they heal? Somewhere on the cutting

room floor is a shot of her stretching her quads, rubbing blood back into her hands. What is it to be *really hurt*? The phrase *the stove is in pain* means nothing because the stove can't cry out. My knees are not bruised, but—*believe me*—I hurt.

Revision exercise: Chart your position in regards to your art object using the above chart. Rewrite the poem so that it occupies a different position on that chart.

Book-length ekphrastic projects or books with a strong ekphrastic element

This list focuses on books that either respond to conceptual/abstract art or use conceptual art techniques in their form.

Mary Jo Bang. *The Last Two Seconds*. Greywolf Press, 2015.

Amy King. *The Missing Museum*. Tarpaulin Sky Press, 2016.

Rickey Laurentiis. *Boy with Thorn*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015.

Robin Coste Lewis. *Voyage of the Sable Venus and other poems*. Knopf, 2015.

Dawn Lundy Martin. *Life in a Box is a Pretty Life*. Nightboat, 2015.

Claudia Rankine. *Citizen*. Graywolf Press, 2014.

* Rankine created a series of video art pieces with John Lucas, which can be seen on www.claudiarankine.com