

Portraiture and Anthropocentrism

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In an age in which anthropocentrism is increasingly under fire, the investment of the artistic tradition in that paradigm deserves particular attention. Portraiture is especially significant, as it seems to be the anthropocentric art form par excellence. It seems to reinforce key features of anthropocentrism: the distinction of the human from the nonhuman and the superiority of the former over the latter. We can pursue these questions most effectively if we distinguish descriptive (“weak”) anthropocentrism from normative (“strong”) anthropocentrism. The former involves some sort of focus on humans, the latter combines this with claims about their superiority over the nonhuman. Certain works by influential portraitists, such as Pablo Picasso, Frida Kahlo, and Ana Mendieta, contest both weak and strong anthropocentrism. Other portraits seem to be involved in weak anthropocentrism, but not necessarily strong anthropocentrism. Considering the artwork of Alice Neel and the philosophy of Judith Butler, I argue that such works have an important ethical role to play in orienting us in our relationships with humans, precisely in resisting strong anthropocentrism even in expressing weak anthropocentrism.

Introduction

In contemporary ethics, the connections among Western religion, Western philosophy, and anthropocentrism are well established and well known. The connection between Western *art* and anthropocentrism has received less attention. No doubt this owes something to a general neglect of art in ethics, but it is not as though art has been removed from ethical reflection altogether. Art is a prime vehicle for the expression and perpetuation of values, including moral and political values. It is a preeminent medium for our moral and political imagination. As such, it deserves (and to be sure has received some measure of) scrutiny and appreciation by ethicists. In an age of pollution and climate catastrophe, the ecological implications of our artistic inheritance warrant increased consideration.

Christianity and Eurocentric philosophy have both historically employed hierarchical dualisms: God over man; man over nature; male over female; mind over matter; spirit over body; and so on. This constellation of binaries has helped perpetuate a variety of attitudes that

are anthropocentric in that they hold that humans are categorically different from and morally superior to the nonhuman world. Privileging the human over the nonhuman has fostered ecological exploitation and instrumentalization to catastrophic results. Political efforts to address climate change in a meaningful way have faltered against the preeminent value we assign to human activities, human economies, and human societies.

The Western artistic tradition for most of its history has been thoroughly intertwined with philosophy and religion and expressed their binaries in compelling, accessible forms that have profoundly shaped the popular imagination.¹ Christian art, obviously, is *theocentric*, but it is so in a way that enforces anthropocentrism: by portraying God anthropomorphically, by depicting humans as the special object of God's concern, and by uniting humanity and God in the incarnation. Rembrandt's (1606-1669) *Ascension* (1636) is a clear example. Christ is in the upper center portion of the canvas, bathed in light, looking upward to heaven and attended by angels. The human and material world surround him from below. Clear hierarchies of divine/human/nonhuman and spirit/matter are depicted both from top to bottom and from center to periphery. In all the most common subjects of Christian iconography, whether creation, the Annunciation, Jesus's baptism, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, or any of the many portrayals of saints and biblical stories, the human figure is central. This is not to say there are no exceptions, but this has been the predominant historical tendency. Outside Christian art, anthropocentrism prevailed in the focus on human figures and human dramas, or in the case of mythological paintings, on gods typically portrayed in human form. Even when humans are not centered, as in landscape painting, the human spectator's gaze is. Landscape painting "places an objectified nature under the gaze of a human subject," implementing a "static, linear view point" that results in an "illusion of mastery over nature."² Indeed, as John Berger argues in *Ways of Seeing*, oil painting characteristically presents its subject matter as available for and accessible to the possessive, mastering gaze of the human viewer. The detail that oil painting makes possible allows for a realism that presents the objects as belonging to the owner of the painting.³ Denis Cosgrove expands on the point: "Realist representation of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface through linear perspective ... gives the eye absolute mastery over space ... Visually space is rendered the property of the individual detached observer, from whose divine location it is a dependent, appropriated object ... The adoption of linear perspective as the guarantor of pictorial realism was contemporary with those other realist techniques of painting: oils, framing and production for a market of mobile, small canvases. In this respect perspective may be regarded as one of a

¹ In speaking of the "Western artistic tradition" I do not mean to imply that the category is unproblematic or hermetically isolated from other artistic traditions, I just mean to signal that I do not mean for my claims to apply to, for example, Japanese, Chinese, or African art, among other traditions.

² Joanna Page, "Planetary Art beyond the Human: Rethinking Agency in the Anthropocene," *The Anthropocene Review* 7, no. 3 (2020): 289. Influential early texts on the implicatedness of landscape painting in the mastering gaze are Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1993). For a helpful overview of the discussion, see Gunhild Setten, "Landscapes of Gaze and Practice," *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift - Norwegian Journal of Geography* 57 (2003): 134-40.

³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin, 1990), chap. 5.

number of techniques which allowed for the visual representation of a bourgeois, rationalist conception of the world.”⁴

With these thoughts in mind, we can speak of an anthropocentric gaze, just as art historians and scholars of visual culture have been speaking of the “male gaze” and other kinds of “gazes” for some decades.⁵ The literature on the gaze is complex, but it has largely been characterized by the idea that the gaze involves a subject position, that of the spectator, and the way in which what it spectates serves to reinforce the privilege of the subject position. Typically the result is a relation of power-over: the subject is exercising power over that upon which they look. So the male gaze involves a presupposed heterosexual male viewer, and a portrayal of a woman under that paradigm will often show her as a passive object for the viewer’s sexual desire, serving to buttress their masculine identity. Importantly, the gaze is a “structural feature” of the artwork, a normative matter, a “kind of response ... that some pictures *prescribe* to their viewers,” which obtains even if it is resisted, ignored, or viewed from the perspective of some other subject position (e.g., a woman or a gay man).⁶

The anthropocentric gaze, then, will be one that depicts humans as the subject matter of preeminent importance. When human figures are involved, they will be shown as inherently valuable and more so than the nonhuman surroundings. Artworks will present nonhuman objects as available for the pleasure, mastery, and ownership of the implied viewer. The anthropocentric gaze is bound up with the male gaze, and specifically the white male gaze. Both instantiate a controlling, mastering disposition on the part of the implied viewer. For example, as Gillian Rose argues, landscape painting often feminized the nonhuman world. “Woman and Nature often share the same topography of passivity and stillness ... the same sense of visual power as well as pleasure is at work as the eye traverses both field and flesh: the masculine gaze is of knowledge and desire.”⁷ Realism and linear perspective, and the resulting ocular mastery over the subject matter, have been and continue to be central devices for the anthropocentric gaze.

If the anthropocentric gaze presents humans as the privileged subject matter, portraiture has a strong claim to be the most anthropocentric genre. Its subject is typically human. Indeed, in some philosophical accounts of portraiture, it is necessary that the subject be human. Cynthia Freeland, for example, claims that portraiture has three essential features. It portrays an actual living being with (1) a recognizable physical body; (2) an inner life; and (3) a conscious presentation of oneself to the artist. This third criterion requires an

⁴ Denis Cosgrove, “Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea,” in *Reading Human Geography: The Poetics and Politics of Inquiry*, ed. Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 328–29.

⁵ Especially influential in these conversations has been Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18. For overviews of the notion of the gaze in art history and visual culture studies, see Margaret Olin, “Gaze,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 318–29; Susanne von Falkenhausen, *Beyond the Mirror: Seeing in Art History and Visual Culture Studies*, trans. Nicholas Grindell (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020), chap. 5.

⁶ Wheaton, A. W., “Feminist Philosophy of Art,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 5 (2008): 878, 889n12.

⁷ Gillian Rose, “Looking at Landscape: The Uneasy Pleasures of Power,” in *Reading Human Geography: The Poetics and Politics of Inquiry*, ed. Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 350–51.

understanding of artistic representation that Freeland doubts nonhuman animals can attain.⁸ Whether or not Freeland is right about this, at least we can acknowledge that humans are the usual subjects of the genre. More so, portraiture typically presents the human as separate from its surroundings and as the focal point of the painting, conveying the categorical differentiation of the human from the nonhuman and the superiority of the human over the non-human.

Ecological Art and Ethics

Ecological ethicists have challenged the anthropocentric gaze by emphasizing the interrelatedness and entanglement of the human with the nonhuman. In contrast to liberal, humanistic, and rationalistic notions of agency as pertaining to individual rational subjects, ecological approaches conceive of agency as pertaining to assemblages that consist of humans, artifacts, objects, and nonhuman animals operating collectively. As Jane Bennett says, “Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within.”⁹ The human has whatever agential capacities it has only in virtue of its participation in ecosystems and collectives. In Jasbir Puar’s words, “Assemblages do not privilege bodies as human, nor as residing within a human animal/nonhuman animal binary. Along with a de-exceptionalizing of human bodies, multiple forms of matter can be bodies – bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on. Matter is an actor ... not a ‘thing’ but a doing.”¹⁰ Assemblage theory undermines anthropocentrism by muddying the distinction between humans and nonhumans. It can acknowledge that this distinction is sometimes relevant, but it does not see humans as categorically separate from nonhumans. Humans are constituted by their interrelationship with the nonhuman. In the absence of some firm ontological dualism between the human and the nonhuman, it does not make sense to speak of human superiority over the nonhuman. Rather than emphasizing capacities of humans that have traditionally been regarded as signs of human supremacy (language, morality, rationality, tool-use, agency, consciousness), ecological thinking acknowledges that not all humans possess these capacities and many nonhumans do possess certain of them. This is not to devalue humans, nor does to evacuate markers such as consciousness and language of their moral significance. But it does situate humans as necessarily existing in relation with the nonhuman in such a way that elevates the value we assign to the nonhuman and sees the value and being of humans and nonhumans as entangled. The ethical ramification is to attend not just to human flourishing, but to the flourishing of ecosystems and all the various beings that inhabit them. The political ideal I associate with ecological flourishing is ecological non-domination. In the history of political thought, non-domination, associated with the republican political tradition, has been an ideal that has been

⁸ Cynthia A. Freeland, *Portraits and Persons: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 23–24.

¹⁰ Jasbir Puar, “‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *PhiloSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* 2, no. 1 (2012): 50.

applied to how humans relate to other humans.¹¹ According to Philip Pettit, an important figure in the contemporary revival of republican thought, republicans understand domination in a particular way, as involving a situation where some party is in a position such that they can interfere with the lives of others, whether they actually do so or not. In Pettit's account, classical liberal thought views actual interference as the relevant political harm, whereas republican thought sees the mere capacity to interfere, whether exercised or not, as in and of itself a harm. A republican society will implement laws and policies to prevent any party from acquiring the degree of power such that they would be in a position to interfere with others, and it will view such laws as a protection of freedom, not an incursion against it. In ecological non-domination, we are concerned not just about human vulnerability to domination but also nonhuman vulnerability to domination by humans.¹² Sharon Krause understands republican freedom as the capacity to "live upon one's own terms" and domination as "to live at the mere mercy of another."¹³ Since nonhuman things "have terms of existence that are unique to them," we can understand living upon one's own terms as opposed to terms dictated by another as an ideal that applies to nonhumans.¹⁴

Contemporary artists express ecological values in artworks in various ways. Many convey the significance of nonhuman entities. Many indicate the interrelatedness of humans and nonhumans. Many attempt to undermine the anthropocentric gaze. Another common motif is to portray the vulnerability of nonhuman beings to industrial production and consumerism. We can consider some examples. For Stephen Gill's *The Pillar* series (2015-2019), the photographer pointed a motion-detecting camera toward a wooden pillar on his Swedish property. The birds in the resulting photographs are in many cases not conventionally framed or poised, thus disrupting the human gaze.¹⁵ Chris Jordan's *Midway: Message from the Gyre* series (2009-present) (which is featured in Paul Schraeder's 2017 film *First Reformed*), shows the hauntingly beautiful outlines of decaying corpses of albatrosses, which encircle the mass of plastic waste that they had fatally ingested.¹⁶ Daniel Lie's installations incorporate organic materials that grow, decay, and die over the course of their exhibition. Human artifacts exist in dynamic and transforming interrelationships with organic and inorganic materials. These and many other ecologically minded art works contest anthropocentrism by turning our

¹¹ See for example, Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1997). Pettit (9-10) acknowledges that many left-liberals will share more with republicanism, as he portrays it, than with more libertarian liberals. He retains the republican/liberal distinction, however, in order to emphasize the different conceptual basis from which republicans of his sort and left-liberals arrive at their common positions: the difference between freedom as "immunity to arbitrary control" and freedom as non-interference. I follow him on this matter.

¹² Sharon R. Krause, "Environmental Domination," *Political Theory* 48, no. 4 (2020): 443-68; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹³ Krause, "Environmental Domination," 454.

¹⁴ Krause, 455.

¹⁵ I owe this example to Michael Putnam, who has written compellingly about Gill's *Pillar* series in his Brown University dissertation, "Reverence the Stones: The Ethics of Environmental Attention" (PhD Dissertation, Providence, RI, Brown University, forthcoming).

¹⁶ Sarah Stewart-Kroeker discusses the problematic aspects of beautifying ecological destruction in relation to Jordan's photographs in *La Terre Martyre* (Geneva, Switzerland: Labor et Fides, 2022).

attention away from the human. In doing so, they are vital contributions to contemporary ethical practice. They dethrone the human either by eliminating its presence or decentering its gaze.

Weak and Strong Anthropocentrism

But what are the prospects for portraiture in these regards? And why might it matter? In order to get at these questions with clarity, we should speak about the nature of anthropocentrism with more precision. Ben Mylius has helpfully drawn a distinction between descriptive anthropocentrism and normative anthropocentrism (and subtypes of each).¹⁷ Descriptive anthropocentrism does not explicitly indicate that humans are of superior value to nonhumans, but in various ways it takes the human as the primary frame of reference. One way to be descriptively anthropocentric is to be anthropocentric by *omission*, which involves considerations of the human that do not include significant reference to the nonhuman contexts in which the human exists.¹⁸ For convenience, I will sometimes refer to descriptive anthropocentrism by omission as “weak anthropocentrism.” Another way to be descriptively anthropocentric is as a matter of *separation*, which is to say, presenting the human as different from the nonhuman not as a matter of degree, but as a matter of kind, which oftentimes implies some sort of metaphysical difference.¹⁹ This categorical differentiation does not necessarily imply superiority (which would be normative anthropocentrism), but obviously it lends itself toward that. Normative anthropocentrism (for our purposes, we can set aside Mylius’s discussion of “passive normative anthropocentrism,” and so I will refer to what he calls “actively normative anthropocentrism” simply as “normative anthropocentrism” or “strong anthropocentrism”) affirms that the human is not just different from, but superior to, the nonhuman.²⁰ We are now in a position to distinguish between gazes that are descriptively anthropocentric and ones that are normatively anthropocentric.

It is not a straightforward matter to transpose the visual features of specific portrait paintings into the specifications of descriptive by omission anthropocentrism, descriptive by separation anthropocentrism, and normative anthropocentrism. But it is safe to say that all three of these have been active in the genre as a whole, and we can be most confident about the two varieties of descriptive anthropocentrism. Nevertheless, there have been examples of portraits that clearly refuse all three of these versions of anthropocentrism. Cubist portraiture is an obvious place to start, as cubism rejects the linear perspective characteristic of the anthropocentric gaze. In Pablo Picasso’s (1881-1973) *Portrait of a Woman* (1910), for example, the figure is barely legible. The fragmented forms of the woman and the background impinge on each other. The distinction between the human and the nonhuman is utterly abandoned. Also consider three of Frida Kahlo’s (1907-1954) self-portraits, all of which depict the human and the nonhuman in mutually constitutive relationship. In *The Wounded Deer* (1946), Kahlo portrays her head on the body of a deer, shot with arrows, her version of the Saint Sebastian motif in Christian art. Here we have not only the vulnerability of Kahlo herself and animal life,

¹⁷ Ben Mylius, “Three Types of Anthropocentrism,” *Environmental Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2018): 159–94.

¹⁸ Mylius, 171–73.

¹⁹ Mylius, 181–83.

²⁰ Mylius, 185.

human and non, but an identification of the human with a nonhuman animal. In *Roots* (1946), her body is depicted with her torso open and her spine as a plant stem that emerges from her. In *The Broken Column* (1944), we see Kahlo's torso, once more opened up, and an architectural column, fractured, in place of her spine. The broken column and the nails piercing her flesh testify specifically to an automobile accident that left her in excruciating pain for the rest of her life, but more generally, signify the vulnerability of the body. We can also take into consideration some of the photographic self-portraits of Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), from her *Siluetas* series. In *Tree of Life* (1976), Mendieta covers her body in mud and stood before a tree, blending into it with camouflage. In another image from that series (1979), she pays homage to Kahlo's *Roots* by positioning her body among the roots of a tree.²¹ In *Image from Yagul* (1973), Mendieta lies nude in a pre-Columbian grave in Mexico, covered in flowers, as though her decomposing body is nourishing the plants. My point is not to reduce Kahlo or Mendieta to a generic ecocentrism. The works of both were profoundly expressive of their Latina identities and their specific biographies of tragedy and trauma. But their expressions of their distinctive identities did take have powerful ecological implications with broad significance. For Kahlo and Mendieta, in keeping with ecological theorists like Karen Barad and Jane Bennett, the human and the nonhuman exist in relationships of entanglement and mutual constitution, as features of larger assemblages, not discrete, self-contained entities.²² As Mendieta said, "My art is the way I reestablish the bonds that tie me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source through my earth/body sculptures, with which I become at one with the earth."²³ The self-portraits in question reject both descriptive and normative anthropocentrism. They do not omit the nonhuman context or portray the human as separate from it. They portray the enmeshment of the human in the nonhuman in ways that refuse any suggestion that the human is superior to the nonhuman.

Nonanthropocentric artworks like those of Kahlo, Mendieta, and Picasso have an important ethical role to play in our cultural imagination, precisely in rejecting both weak and strong anthropocentrism. It is worth considering, though, the status and significance of portraiture that is weakly, but not strongly, anthropocentric. The fact is that in our daily lives, we undertake many activities in a mode that takes place within the weak anthropocentric paradigm. Mylius acknowledges that our cognitive capacities are limited in such ways that we often times have to attend to something without regard to the surrounding context simply in order to register the pertinent information by filtering other things out.²⁴ If I am in an intense conversation with a friend or colleague, listening to a speech, participating in a seminar discussion, or delivering a lecture, my attention is often on my human correspondents to an almost exclusive extent. I am wholly absorbed in what they are saying and/or their reaction to what I am saying. I am not at that moment denying the embeddedness of my interlocutors in a nonhuman context, but neither am I attending to that context, it is all I can do to keep up with what others are saying and how they are responding to me. This is not a unique feature

²¹ See Gambari, Olga, "Magical Body, Political Body," in *Ana Mendieta: She Got Love*, ed. Beatrice Merz, Bilingual ed (Milano, Italy: Skira, 2013), 25, 42–45.

²² Laura E. Pérez, *Eros Ideologies: Writings on Art, Spirituality, and the Decolonial* (Duke University Press, 2019), chap. 12.

²³ Gambari, Olga, "Magical Body, Political Body," 24.

²⁴ Mylius, "Three Types of Anthropocentrism," 173.

of human-to-human interactions, so it is not in and of itself a signal of a general disposition to attend more conscientiously to humans than nonhumans. Many of our tasks and activities, including those involving nonhuman entities, require a kind of attention, an absorption, that is so focused as to screen out peripheral matters.

If absorptive interactions with other humans is a necessary and frequent feature of our daily lives, then it requires ethical reflection, both as a matter of how we relate to humans but also in terms of how those interhuman attitudes relate to our ecological attitudes. If in our relations with other humans we are controlling and mastering, then we will very likely be so in relation to nonhumans. This is not to say that first we must take on the task of relating properly to humans and only subsequently can we consider how we relate to nonhumans. Rather it is to highlight the importance of addressing controlling and mastering dispositions in whatever guise they appear. Thus, even a nonanthropocentric ethicist or artist has a stake in how people relate to other people, an encounter that will often come in the weak anthropocentric paradigm. In order for weakly anthropocentric social interactions not to foster strong anthropocentrism, we must be able to move easily between an absorptive, focused mode and a contextualizing, more holistic mode. We can't let our occasional instances of focusing on the human allow us to lose sight more generally of the ontological entanglement of the human with the nonhuman. This could mean reflecting on the significance of climate change in our conversations and plans, as opposed to proceeding as though everything will continue on its present course. It might mean thinking about and discussing the ecological impacts of our activities and plans. It might mean drawing attention to the various forms of ecological interdependence our lifestyles involve. The fact that some of the time our horizon of concern and attention is limited to humans shouldn't lead to a generalized pattern of living in such a narrow horizon.

In principle, then, we might think that there could be portraiture that is weakly anthropocentric, but not normatively anthropocentric. Is this a possibility? Mylius claims that *"a paradigm that is descriptively anthropocentric cannot be used to develop an ethics that is actively normatively nonanthropocentric ... A descriptively anthropocentric paradigm lacks the intellectual resources to develop anything other than an anthropocentric ethics."*²⁵ Extending this consideration to visual art, we might think then that a weak anthropocentric gaze can do no other than facilitate a strong anthropocentric gaze.

Alice Neel's Unfinished Style

To explore this question, I turn to one of the greatest portraitists of the twentieth century, Alice Neel (1900-1984). Working in an era dominated by abstract art and male artists, Neel remained resolutely committed to portraying the human figure, and she did so with an eye for ordinary people and a style that combined expressivism and social realism. Traditionally in portraiture, the one commissioning the portrait wants to immortalize the sitter's wealth, status, virtue, and power. Thus, portraiture is implicated in the ideology of the ruling class, which, since the dawn of the age of capital, has meant burnishing the sheen of the reputations of those especially responsible for colonialism, patriarchy, and class exploitation. And that is the very group that

²⁵ Mylius, 186. Italics in original.

has proved most responsible for pollution and climate change. Neel in contrast painted ordinary people from her working-class neighborhood, Spanish Harlem, from various races, classes, and walks of life. Prominent among her oeuvre are portraits of labor organizers and civil rights activists. She painted nudes of pregnant women, a virtually unprecedented theme in art history, and a woman giving birth, giving prominence to matters of special concern to women's experience. She also portrayed affirmatively women's, and her own, sexuality, as opposed to the tendency in art history to render the female as a sexual object. She depicted aging and disability with a compassionate eye.

To be sure, Neel was an avowed humanist, not a posthumanist ecological artist. Neel's career spanned a crucial period in American art in which abstract art gained prominence (e.g., Rothko, Newman, Pollock), whereas she remained resolutely engaged in figural painting.²⁶ She explicitly linked this commitment to her humanism. "I am against abstract and non-objective art because such art shows a hatred of human beings. It is an attempt to eliminate people from art, and as such is bound to fail."²⁷ Elsewhere, Neel qualified her estimation of abstraction. "I'm not against abstraction. Do you know what I'm against? Saying that man himself had no importance. ... I am a humanist and that's what I see and that's what I paint."²⁸ Neel's humanism clearly was rooted in a concern for the dignity of human beings, especially those being degraded by social forces of violence and capitalism.²⁹ Her prioritization of the dignity of oppressed people renders her humanism well expressed by Anne Phillips' construal of humanism as fundamentally a commitment to the moral and political equality of humans.³⁰

Neel's portraits are weakly anthropocentric. Not that she entirely omits context, but clearly it is minimal in comparison to the attention she gives to humans. Despite this and despite her humanism, I want to advance the claim that certain of Neel's artworks undermine the anthropocentric gaze by undermining the controlling, mastering disposition that is characteristic of that gaze and by portraying humans as porous and open, as opposed to superior and enclosed. She accomplishes this principally through her use of two stylistic features: partiality and incompleteness. Along the way, I will point out comparisons between Neel's artistic vision and the philosophy of Judith Butler.

To see the distinctive ethical implications of Neel's style, consider how power typically operates in the relation between the subject and viewer of a portrait. We have already broached the topic of the mastering, possessive spectatorial gaze characteristic of oil painting in general. As John Berger says, "To have a thing painted and put on a canvas is not unlike buying it and

²⁶ It is worth noting that Neel herself preferred not to think of herself as a portrait painter, but rather a painter of "pictures of people." This does not indicate that Neel's paintings were not actually portraits (they were), but does give a sense of her critical attitude toward the historical genre of portrait painting. Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey, "Anarchic Humanist," in *Alice Neel: People Come First*, ed. Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021), 14.

²⁷ Quoted in Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Alice Neel's 'Good Abstract Qualities,'" in *Alice Neel: People Come First*, ed. Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021), 104.

²⁸ Quoted in Phoebe Hoban, *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 178. Indeed, Neel's portraits contained striking abstract elements, as explored in Mira Schor, "Some Notes on Women and Abstraction and a Curious Case History: Alice Neel as a Great Abstract Painter," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2006): 132–60; Bryan-Wilson, "Alice Neel's 'Good Abstract Qualities.'"

²⁹ Baum and Griffey, "Anarchic Humanist," 13.

³⁰ Anne Phillips, *The Politics of the Human* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

putting it in your house.”³¹ In Berger’s account, the age of traditional oil painting, which he dates from the sixteenth century until the impressionists (the periodization reflects that Berger regards oil painting as a way of seeing, not just an artistic medium), fosters the possessive gaze of the wealthy in one or both of two ways: First, it depicts in highly realistic presentation objects or domains that the spectator either does own or can own. Or if not own, at least have mastery over. Portraits, still lifes, and landscapes all present a range of objects, including humans, nonhuman animals, artifacts, plants, and terrain as accessible to the viewer. Second, oil painting affirms the social status and values of the spectator. It is art about the wealthy for the wealthy, whether they are the aristocrats or the bourgeoisie that emerged in the decline of aristocracy: “Works of art in earlier traditions celebrated wealth. But wealth was then a symbol of a fixed social or divine order. Oil painting celebrated a new kind of wealth—which was dynamic and which found its only sanction in the supreme buying of power.”³² To be sure, there are plenty of exceptions to this in oil painting over that time range, but the possessive gaze is, for Berger, a primary feature of the medium. To extend Berger’s analysis, we can say that traditional oil painting has an epistemological dimension: it presents its objects as knowable to the viewer. “Knowledge and desire,” as Rose puts it.³³ (Again, there are plenty of exceptions.) We are meant to understand what we behold, it is there for our pleasure. The realistic textures of objects convey their tangibility and accessibility to us. What we see is there for us to touch, taste, see, buy, and know.

Portraiture has two features that distinguish it in relation to other genres. First, as Freeland notes, it typically involves a real person who is conscious of the artist’s endeavor to depict them. Thus, they are conscious that the work will be displayed before an audience. This institutes a dynamic relationship between the sitter and the audience. Second, at least in regard to formal portraiture, the aim of the sitter and artist is to convey the wealth and power of the sitter to the audience. Such portraits are commissioned by the wealthy and powerful to portray wealthy and powerful individuals *as* wealthy and powerful. And virtuous, of course. Thus unlike a still life or a reclining nude, the portrayed subject is not there to be purchased or employed as an instrument of the pleasure of the spectator. They are there to impress the viewer with their status. But nevertheless, they are still available to the gaze of the viewer as much as any painted object.³⁴ The portrayed individual is there for us as a knowable, coherent, bounded whole. And so there is a sort of bidirectional contest for domination between the painted subject and the viewer. “The traces of status in the poses, gestures, and accoutrements of portraiture enabled viewers to respond in a way that tested their own perceived superiority over, inferiority to, or affinity with the subjects of the portraits.”³⁵ The realism of the painting allows us into the intimate space of the powerful individual, as though they are at our disposal, as though we could run our hands across their forearm as easily as we could caress a lemon peel in a Dutch still life. And on the other hand, their status demands distance and wants our deference—at times, seemingly expecting the viewer to cower before them. In any case, the

³¹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 83.

³² Berger, 90.

³³ Rose, “Looking at Landscape,” 351.

³⁴ Berger describes this as a paradox of intimacy and distance that plagues formal portraiture. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 97.

³⁵ Shearer West, *Portraiture*, Oxford History of Art. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 102–3.

result of the contest is to reinforce the ideology of the wealthy and the powerful, both for the commissioner of the portrait who identifies with the superior social class and for the lower-status viewer, who marvels at the authority of the rich. (Informal portraits and self-portraits have a different logic, of course.)

Neel employs two artistic techniques that disrupt this contentious exchange and the possessive gaze characteristic of portraiture. First, in many (but not all) of her works, there is an unevenness in detail across the canvas. For example, in a painting of Nancy Selvage (*Nancy Selvage*, 1967), a friend of Neel's daughter, Neel gives particular attention to the eyes, nose, lips, and chin, in terms of the precision of the lines and shading, whereas the dress and arms are rendered with much less specificity. We don't see much in the way of folds of the fabric of the dress, for example, and the shading of her clothing places each color over broad areas, with hasty, long brush strokes. The details of the individual and her clothes are not uniformly rendered, as they would be in a more realist style. The disparities in detail direct our attention. We are led to focus on the face and engage the sitter's gaze looking back at us. People wear clothes to make an impression on those who encounter them, they seek to convey something about their personal taste and their social status in what they wear. In this portrait, Neel minimized whatever effect Selvage's apparel might have in order for us to encounter her personality in her visage. She looks at us intently, confidently ... perhaps with a slight hint of bemusement. She is young and regards her future expectantly. Her eyes are slightly offset, giving the impression that she is simultaneously looking at the viewer and above them, addressing her spectator as an equal but also looking beyond them.

In contrast to the possessive, mastering gaze, which would have the object of our attention be uniformly and entirely accessible, Neel's technique emphasizes the partiality of our grasp of each other. Our knowledge of the other is always incomplete. Certain features of their character we know with precision, but there are always obscurities and mysteries, unknown qualities. We can never take in the whole exhaustively. When we interact with others, we so often classify them into particular social roles and assume to know their values and perspectives. We come into social relationships with biases and prejudices that operate in accordance with how we classify others. We are talking here about concerning ourselves with others as a though they were, in the words of Jacques Derrida, a "*role that is played* rather than with this unique person whose secret remains hidden behind the social mask."³⁶ A proper appreciation for the partiality of our understanding of the other counsels us to respect the other's irreducible particularity and to adopt a posture of curiosity and uncertainty that allows them to express themselves in ways that unsettle our preconceptions. It counsels a stance of listening and observing in our social interactions. As Emmanuel Levinas says, "The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics ... is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other."³⁷ Rather than idealizing a godlike omniscience by which we would suppose ourselves to know what is best for the other, this sort of encounter idealizes a humble orientation of openness and sensitivity to the other's

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death & Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 36.

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 43.

own account of their preferences and desires. Politically, it invites us not to regard the body politic as a collection of blocs of shared identities, but as an assemblage of complex beings who don't neatly fit into any of the prescribed social or political categories. It invites us to support policies and laws that protect and allow to flourish the unique singularity of others, as opposed to institutions that would dominate, instrumentalize, or reduce them to a social role.

Neel's technique of partiality sets up a very different relationship between the spectator and the painted individual than the possessive or mastering gaze does. Rather than a contestation for domination, there is mutual vulnerability. We do not have a possessive grasp over the subject, nor they over us. We must acknowledge our epistemic limitation, and accommodate ourselves to our imperfect grasp of our social world and all the susceptibilities that such uncertainty entails. The portrayed subject, for their part, exists as incomplete, not fully formed, and present to our gaze as such. We do not encounter each other as two fully formed sovereign subjects, but as imperfect beings trying to sort out our place in this world together.

A second feature of Neel's painting style is that in a good number of her works, including this portrait of Selvage, the painting is intentionally left incomplete. Selvage's right arm and her hands aren't just rendered in less detail than her face, they are not rendered at all, except in bare, sketchy outline, with unpainted canvas underneath. Neel began employing this unfinished technique in her 1965 portrait of James Hunter. Hunter had been drafted into the Vietnam War and was set to leave in a week when Neel encountered him and asked him to sit for a portrait. He never returned for the second sitting, and Neel signed the painting, declaring it finished. In this particular context, the incompleteness obviously evokes the physical and psychological toll that war takes, damaging psyche and body, and each fatality is a person who has been disappeared from life.

But when she employs the unfinished style more broadly, different implications emerge. There is a vulnerability depicted here not just to war, but to the social and material conditions more generally of living. We are not fully formed substances that are impervious to harm, but rather beings who are exposed to and penetrable by the environment that surrounds us. Considering the status of unfinished artworks in the artistic tradition broadly, Kelly Baum, Andrea Bayer, and Sheena Wagstaff make three relevant observations. First, they point out the link between the unfinishedness of a work and mortality, a particular sort of vulnerability that all living beings share. Second, they note the artist's disavowal of their own mastery of the subject that takes place in an unfinished work, which is "unsettled, uncertain, provisional, unresolved, and open to change." Third, there is the way that unfinished works invite the "active engagement of the viewer's imagination."³⁸ These features of Neel's unfinished works reinforce the ideas discussed above, pertaining to the partiality and non-mastery of the gaze that these paintings invoke. But further, the unfinishedness of Neel's works indicates the tenuousness of the boundary between subject and surroundings, between human and nonhuman. We are accustomed to thinking of our skin as the boundary between ourself and the outside world, as a barrier that keeps intact our internal organs. We extend this barrier with clothes, which encircle us with additional protection. In leaving portions of the figure

³⁸ Kelly Baum, Andrea Bayer, and Sheena Wagstaff, "Introduction: An Unfinished History of Art," in *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*, ed. Baum, Kelly, Bayer, Andrea, and Wagstaff, Sheena (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 13–14.

incomplete, with neither skin nor clothes, Neel portrays us as permeable. We are not an intact substance that refuses the encroachment of any and all other substances, rather we exist airily, open to our environment, enmeshed in it and by it. We encounter Neel's portrayed subjects as porous, rather than as coherent and bounded. The subject dissipates into the unpainted canvas, which shows through their invisible body parts. In this respect, these paintings challenge the separation of the human from the nonhuman and thus the superiority of the human over the nonhuman.

I see in these two features of Neel's work some attunements with the philosophy of Judith Butler. Like Neel, Butler displays strong humanistic tendencies, but like Neel, it is a humanism of common vulnerability rather than of rationality or moral prowess. Bonnie Honig describes Butler's ethics as a "universal humanist ethics of lamentation."³⁹ In *Frames of War, Precarious Life*, and elsewhere, Butler has written about precarity as an essential feature of human life.⁴⁰ Butler contrasts the precarity of our existence, which we all share although it is differentially distributed across lines of race, class, and ethnicity, to the ideal of sovereign subjectivity. Idealizing sovereign subjectivity would emphasize the self as a centered, bounded independent subject that takes a self-defensive and often aggressive posture toward the surrounding world. In contrast, what we need according to Butler is a proper recognition of the ways in which we are necessarily relational beings constituted by our interdependence with each other. As such, we are vulnerable to the qualities of these relationships, and to the social frames in which we live our lives. Butler writes, "After all, if my survivability depends on a relation to others ... without whom I cannot exist, then my existence is not mine alone, but is to be found outside myself, in the set of relations that precede and exceed the boundaries of who I am. If I have a boundary at all, or if a boundary can be said to belong to me, it is only because I have become separated from others, and it is only on condition of this separation that I can relate to them at all ... a negotiation in which I am bound to you in my separateness."⁴¹ Butler hopes that a proper recognition of our mutual interrelatedness will foster responsive attention to the ways in which vulnerabilities are unequally distributed across social bodies, resulting in some being more precarious than others; she hopes it will foster non-violent coalitional politics to contest such injustices. Neel's painting, in its partiality and incompleteness, supports just such a politics.

Conclusion

Neel's and Butler's works both involve a special attention to the human. They are weakly anthropocentric. Neither, however, implies a strong anthropocentrism, in that neither advances the idea that the human is categorically different from or has superior value to the nonhuman. This feature of their work challenges the idea that descriptive anthropocentrism can only give rise to a normative anthropocentric ethics. Neel and Butler focus on the human, to be sure, but they do so in a way that emphasizes vulnerability and interdependence, not

³⁹ Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 30–32, 42.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London; New York: Verso, 2009); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004).

⁴¹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 44. See also 18, 23, 31, 43, 44, 52.

supremacy. Given that we necessarily involve ourselves on regular occasions in forms of attention that involve a special focus on the human, it is important to reflect upon how we regard the human when we are doing so. As independent and sovereign? As an abject subject of our desirous gaze and as exhaustively knowable? Or as vulnerable, interdependent, and resistant to an all-knowing grasp? In presenting the latter option, Neel (and Butler) delineate a vision of the human that complicates any simplistic divisiveness between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Their work, while not ecocentric, conduces well to an ecological mindedness that recognizes the special attention we so often give humans without reifying that into an ontological dualism.

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