On opening yourself to distraction

Writer Brian Dillon discusses affinity vs influence, reevaluating what it means to be attentive , and retreating in order to concentrate.

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As told to Maddie Crum, 2646 words.

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Your latest book, *Affinities*, alternates between essays on what it means to have an affinity for something and essays on the works and artists for whom you have an affinity. How, for those who haven't read the book, would you summarize what affinity means to you?

I think it's probably best to try and define it by describing the experience from which the whole book started, which is that of speaking to artists, visiting artists in their studios. The thing that I would always come away with in my mind was the image of the studio wall. The studio wall that's covered in images, fragments of text, objects on the shelves and so on. And thinking about how an artist relates to those images and objects and writings that don't really fit a definition of research or of influence.

They're doing something else, they're kind of going to work on the artist, and they're going to work in the work in some more mysterious fashion. And I wondered whether you could try to describe that relationship that an artist has with other images.

I'm interested in how an affinity compares with something like an influence.

I think they overlap. The interesting thing to me about an affinity is that it describes historically two kinds of relationships that seem not to sit comfortably alongside each other. "Affinity" names something organic or somehow natural, something that we're not quite in control of, and on the other hand, it names a kind of formal relationship, even a legal relationship. "Affinity" is related to words in English like being affianced or fiancé and so on. It describes a kind of formalized relationship, and I liked the ambiguity of that because Whereas, I think we speak far too easily of influence in writing or in art or in any kind of cultural sphere. The reality, the experience for a writer or an artist, is never influence—it's both more active and more passive than that word is capable of describing I think.

You write in the book there's something magical somewhat about an affinity. It's almost as though what's unique about it is that it is tough to pin down or describe. Did writing criticism centered on something more magical present challenges, or are you comfortable in that less concrete space?

I suppose I had an idea originally that I could write a book that was entirely about my slightly stupid love for certain images, that I could somehow bypass the critical voice, the more informed or rational voice and produce a series of almost kind of dumb states of admiration. And I quite quickly realized that that was impossible. You can't undo, you can't unlearn, for me like 20 years or so of writing about art. And so the book is a kind of compromise.

Did you read Merve Emre's piece in *The New Yorker*–a review of a new book by John Guillory–about critics who come from or currently work in academia versus what she sees as this kind of burgeoning alternative, basically pitting academic approaches to criticism against other types of expertise? I wouldn't say it was critical of an academic approach, but it was interrogating its current value and its current state.

There seems to be an idea current, very, very recently in terms of how people are thinking about the condition of criticism and its relationship to the academic humanities. There's an idea that the critical energy has moved outside of the academy or is at least kind of academic adjacent because it's to be found among people who are part-time academics, who are adjunct teachers, who may still hope, but may also have given up on the hope, of having the kind of permanent academic position that used to be available to more critics and writers.

It seems to me, or at least it's my experience, that that process is not recent at all. That was exactly my experience of a kind of flight from academia, from an academia that didn't want me in the first place over 20 years ago, nearly a quarter of a century ago. And I suppose I have tried in a way to build a writing practice and a career of sorts using a lot of what I had learned as an academic writer in my 20s, not giving up on that kind of critique, but taking it somewhere else in terms of its voice, in terms of the texture of a critical writing that's no longer working just within the boundaries of academic language. But also writing for, in a way, whoever would have me in terms of literary magazines, art magazines, and so on. So I agree in a sense with the point that's being made at the moment in pieces like that, but I actually think it's describing a process that is at least a quarter of a century long.

I saw that you are working on a book about education. Will that be related to these questions in some way?

I read these essays and polemics about the current state of education, of universities and humanities and arts in particular, but I think that I'm kind of temperamentally bored to tears by the idea of writing in that register. I'm in a way much more interested in writing something that starts from my own experience of what it meant to have a kind of fantasy about where a literary or artistic education might take you. So it's a book I think that is partly a memoir and partly an effort to think about what that dream might entail now, but without writing a book about the state of the university. Other people do that brilliantly, but I would die of boredom, I think.

A lot of your writing grows out of memoir, and you also write critically. What would you call that genre if you had to label it?

The easy, kind of trite answer would have to be that I would call it essays, right?

Having written a book on the subject. I guess I always have loved those critics who seemed to allow enough of their own vulnerability onto the page. And Roland Barthes is the most obvious, who kind of hovers about in all three of these books that I think of as a kind of loose trilogy, *Essayism*, *Suppose a Sentence*, and *Affinities*. And I think it's not necessarily about a kind of personal narrative, although in some of Barthes it definitely is. There's the story of the loss of his mother, for example. But it's more, I think, to do with the performance.

Allowing yourself to embody an emotional space for the time of writing–I could see how that would be a kind of performance. That makes sense to me. So, a lot of the essays in this book are on the shorter side, and the resonances are across essays, which is a mode with a long history. Would you say you've always had an 'affinity' for these shorter forms? Where does that come from you?

I guess so. It's partly sort of a taste. In fact, just before we got started, I plucked off my shelf Hervé Guibert, who I'm about to start rereading for a conference. And this book, *L'Image fantôme*, which is written in essays that are sometimes half a page, a constellation of thoughts or of moments of apprehension of works of art, or in his case, photographs. I don't think of them as fragments. They're not fragments. They feel relatively formed. They're not really aspiring to the more jagged relationship that the fragment has.

I suppose it also comes out of a writerly constraint, the constraint of temperament that I think in these quantities, I think in certain word counts. I think that's partly temperamental, but it also comes from a kind of professional practice of writing to different lengths. I suppose I see in these three books in particular, more

than most things I've done, a relationship with what I do as a writer of short reviews or short-ish essays. It feels as if there's a kind of continuum between those.

I feel like Substack is a good form for this length.

It reminds me of blog era of the early 2000s. And I started as a freelance writer in that period. For about one afternoon, I considered starting a blog. Partly because exactly as you say, there was something about the length and the kind of format and the idea that you would have a different kind of readership online. And I really quickly, in a matter of hours, realized that nobody was paying me for this, and I just could not afford to have a blog. So it's interesting that we're now in this Substack era that offers a different model for that kind of online writing.

In what way is your writing, and this book in particular, reflective of an inattentive world? Or, on the flip side, in what way if any does your writing resist inattention?

I really like the exercise or the challenge of writing about one thing at a time. I love it when an artist or a gallery asks me to just focus on, say, one work. That feels very liberating to me. Some of the pieces in *Affinities* come precisely out of that kind of challenge. But there's also a way of thinking that fetishizes sustained looking and attention in ways that I'm actually uncomfortable with.

I don't want this book to feel like a simple defense of close looking or a simple defense of attention. In a way, I don't believe in attention. I don't think that these categories of attention and distraction really exist, certainly not in the kind of stark way that they're opposed to each other routinely now, especially when we think about technology. I think that this language that we have for how we use, misuse, or rescue our attention is kind of pitiful and unhelpful and doesn't really describe either the rigors or the pleasures of long sustained looking or the pleasures and rigors and excitements of being distracted and of moving quickly between experiences, between objects, between images.

Putting yourself in a meditative state of close concentration means precisely opening yourself to distraction. It's just that the distraction is at a different level. It's the distraction of your own passing thoughts, reflections, and so on. I suppose in the end, I just feel uncomfortable—not uncomfortable, but bored, I suppose, by the discourse on this. It doesn't seem all that interesting to me.

What's missing from this discourse is any real description of transition between moments of attention or between moments of looking or reading, seeing, thinking, and so on. And the transition is surely what's interesting, the transition is thought. I think there is no real reason to suspect that thought is not happening, reflection is not happening in the transition from one brief, technologically mediated moment of attention and another. There's no reason to believe that is less thoughtful, less reflective, less profound than the state of mind that looks and focuses and thinks about one thing in order to be able to think many other things.

I suppose maybe "affinity" in a way names this in-between, this movement. And I think that we ought to have a better vocabulary for thinking about what happens in time, what unfolds, whether we're looking or concentrating at length or briefly.

I noticed that several of the artists with whom you feel an affinity work at some intersection of art and science or art and what in their time was a new technology. What do you think draws you to artists like these?

Good question. I hadn't really thought about it until the book was finished, and I'd set these pieces and these artists and images alongside each other.

If you think about a figure like Jean Painlevé, the conditions for making his films are extraordinarily complex, and require a whole barrage of technology and really intricate setups, and the acquiring of the specimens and so on. And then at the heart of it, there's something monstrous, really. Not just in terms of the creatures, the sea creatures themselves, but also something visually monstrous happens. It becomes abstract in a way, but the forms are also material. They're matter in its most protean and uncontrollable state.

There is this combination of a kind of formality or rigor that in some cases is scientific. And then there's this other quality, a visual quality or material bodily quality, that's escaping and becoming inhuman, or abstract, or purely material or purely visual.

In the introduction to your latest book, you mention that you started it during lockdown. What effect did that have on your writing life, and why did this feel like a suitable project for that time?

In that kind of shut in, lockdown head space that many of us occupied a couple of years ago, I had an almost monkish notion, an almost ascetic idea that I could make a book out of images that were directly at hand, things that were on my bookshelves. I quickly realized that that was a sort of naive and also precious project. So I began to think instead about something that felt like it was reaching out a bit more, a bit further.

It's taken much longer to come back to the world, and to come back to looking at art, putting myself in rooms, in galleries, and museums, and taking that time and being out in the world. It's taken a lot longer than I imagined it would.

I want to ask about one of the book's more personal essays, which focuses on your aunt, whose anxiety bordered on an obsession with security, and her photos reflect that mindset. In the essay, you draw similarities between yourself and your aunt. So, I was curious about whether a sort of obsessive attitude toward looking might either benefit your work or hem it in in some way.

I wrote a version of that piece almost a decade ago. And I wanted to write about the strangeness of the images themselves. The real peculiarity of photographing the boundaries of her property, photographing the interior of the house when she thought it had been invaded. And it is, I guess, a terribly sad story. But it's also produced a body of work, a kind of practice.

And it struck me quite late in the process of writing that piece that I was absolutely looking at myself. I was looking at exactly the kind of anxious attention to the world that is completely necessary to writing. And that paradoxical combination of looking very closely at the things themselves, and at the same time locking yourself into a kind of mindset, an interior sort of prison, from which you look. This is really hard to describe.

For me, it was a realization that writing involves this kind of retreat in order to concentrate on the thing outside. And that suddenly felt like it was a peculiar, familial inheritance. And it made me feel suddenly that writing was a morbid and afflicted kind of activity. And at the same time, that I was extraordinarily fortunate to be able to turn, in my case, this familial, if it is familial, tendency toward a kind of morbid, anxious looking–to be able to turn that into language.

Brian Dillon Recommends:

Artists—photographers, mostly—with whom Brian Dillon feels an 'affinity'

Jean Painlevé

Kikuji Kawada

Claude Cahun

William Eggleston

Helen Levitt

Francesca Woodman

Rinko Kawauchi

Name
Brian Dillon

Vocation

writer

Sophie Davidson