On Fire
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She watches intently as a shark glides before her eyes, with only a tall glass pane as a barrier. The arresting sight of the shark’s deadly eyes and swift, sleek body captures her full attention. Terry Tempest Williams recalls this particular visit to the Monterey Sea Aquarium in “A Shark in the Mind of One Contemplating Wilderness”: as she stares at the shark, she is so immersed in the moment that her senses pick up every movement the shark makes. When the shark passes by again, she “feel[s] [her] own heart beating against the mind of this creature that kills” (480). Similarly, at the American Museum of Natural History, Williams gazes at a mounted tiger shark. She imagines the life of the shark before it was taken as a “trophy” for the museum—how it preyed on seals, sensing their electrical fields before darting toward them with impossible speed, ripping the helpless seals into pieces—skin, cartilage, bone (486). In that moment, the shark becomes something more than a display or an exhibit to Williams. It comes alive. Whether they’re in a tank or mounted on a wall, Williams empathizes with the sharks; she thinks of their stories, their behaviors, their power; and she suggests that we, too, approach such sharks as more than just exhibits in a museum or aquarium.

Perhaps, like Damien Hirst, we can view animals as conceptual art. Hirst’s A Thousand Years displays a severed cow’s head surrounded by flies laying eggs on the cow’s rotten flesh. The eggs turn into maggots that grow into flies that then drink the blood that has dripped from the cow’s head. Hirst’s unconventional installation leads Williams to consider the “designation of wilderness” (482). If Hirst can classify his severed cow’s head as art, Williams wonders why wilderness cannot be designated as an installation. What can better be described as art, Williams argues, than something that evokes sensations reaching far beyond sight? Take the sharks, for instance, or wilderness in general with all of its animals and plants, constantly changing and moving and breathing—“a painting in motion” (482). Compared to the ordinary, static painting—a more commonly accepted form of art—the moving canvas of
wilderness draws the viewer closer, deeper. Not only do her eyes see it, but her mind understands it, and her heart feels it.

Williams recalls that when she was a docent at the American Museum of Natural History, she brought schoolchildren to the great blue room, where they would all lie down and gaze up in awe at the wondrously large blue whale. Now, the space where they used to lie is a food court, filled with visitors too preoccupied with eating and chatting to notice the magnificent creature above their heads. The recently installed theater lights point not to the whale above but to the refrigerators below, which gloriously display an assortment of fast food. Meanwhile, at Brighton Sea World, killer whales are trained to leap through hoops or carry humans around solely for our species’s amusement. The once-treasured creatures of the sea have become nothing more than decoration, even wallpaper, in a world overcome by human desires.

“Everything feels upside-down these days,” Williams remarks with regret (484). Humans are taking the natural world for granted, letting their own dramas overshadow the ever-present but often-ignored glory of nature. “Perhaps,” Williams suggests, “if we bring art to the discussion of the wild we can create a sensation where people will pay attention to the shock of what has always been here” (484). A passionate environmentalist, Williams asks us to view wilderness as art, hoping that we will join her in preserving it. In doing so, she believes, we will learn to regard nature as we regard art, as something to cherish and care for. Yet, as legitimate as Williams’s intentions are, by designating wilderness as art or something more likely to be appreciated, her approach risks losing sight of what wilderness is.

Walker Percy, in his essay “The Loss of the Creature,” specifically implores us to avoid such an act of designation. Except for “the rare man who manages to recover” a certain sight, Percy finds that most people fail to see things for what they really are (751). By “recover,” Percy means to restore the sight to a state in which the viewer’s perception is not tainted by any expectations or pre-formed images. Using the example of the Grand Canyon, he explains that although García López de Cárdenas was amazed by the sight of the Grand Canyon when he first discovered it, the tourists visiting the Grand Canyon thereafter are not able to feel the same degree of amazement because, unless they realize the need to recover the sight, they will only compare the Grand Canyon to postcards, geography books, travel brochures, and other pre-formulated images of the landmark. Instead of confronting the Grand Canyon as one would “a strange object from one’s back yard,” tourists merely seek to assess whether the sight lives up to their pre-formulated images, and consequently fail to form a reaction of their own or to experience
the true pleasure of seeing something for the first time (751). To achieve the
difficult task of “recovering” a sight, then, Percy argues that viewers must aim
to return to a mindset wholly unaffected by pre-formed images and expecta-
tions; they must claim sovereignty as viewers, taking full responsibility for the
way they perceive things.

Williams may not be consciously following Percy’s advice to “enter into
a struggle to recover sight from a museum” (760). But she does, in fact, see
the sharks for what they are in nature. She does not approach them with the
conscious goal of avoiding the presentational package of each exhibit; howev-
er, she does appear to be aware that pre-formed images exist in each sight-
seer’s mind, as she acknowledges the appeal Hirst finds in “ideas of trying to
understand the world by taking things out of the world” (qtd. in Williams
481). Through Hirst, Williams acknowledges that one way of understanding
the world is by removing objects from the contexts—the packaging—that
humans have created for them. She questions the pre-formed images in her
own mind, asking, “As a naturalist who has worked in a museum of natural
history for more than fifteen years, how am I to think about a shark in the
context of art, not science?” (481). Though the effects of pre-formulation are
particularly strong for Williams, who has constantly been bombarded with
scientific images of sharks in her work, the empathy she experiences—her
imaginative understanding of the sharks on their own terms—demonstrates
that she is still able to break through these walls of pre-formulation as she
admires the sharks.

Whether such pre-formulation be Percy’s “symbolic complex,” or
Williams’s “received idea,” it is a perception that has been planted into a view-
er’s mind before she even has a chance to see a sight and conceive her own
impression of it (Percy 751; Williams 482). Perhaps it is Williams’s awareness
of pre-formulation, of the potential limitations of the scientific perspective,
that lets the mounted shark in the American Museum of Natural History
become so much more than a mere figure on a wall to her. As she observes its
large mouth and row upon row of teeth, she envisions the shark’s story—in
her mind, it dashes around in the ocean, prepared to shred powerless seals
into pieces of flesh. She connects to the shark on an emotional level, in an
interaction not between scientist and subject but between two fellow animals,
each with its own way of life to share. In that frozen moment of time, the dead
shark comes alive out of the rigid presentational packaging of the exhibit, and
Williams succeeds in claiming sovereignty as a viewer. She transcends the
context that designates the shark as an exhibit, a specimen, in the first place,
and comes to view the preserved shark as a piece of art expressing the expe-
rience of another independent being. And because these sharks of the wilder-
ness become such meaningful art to her, Williams implores us to see as she
sees in hopes that we, too, can value wilderness as art.

But by pleading for her readers to join her in designating wilderness as
art, Williams unintentionally takes away their sovereignty as viewers, for their
instinctive reaction may not be to perceive wilderness as art. She indirectly
robs her readers of their unique, individual responses when she asks them to
adopt her impression of wilderness as their own—and she knows it. She even
quotes art critic Thomas McEvilley, who states, “The fact that we designate
something as art means that it is art for us, but says nothing about what it is
in itself or for other people” (qtd. in Williams 481). Williams understands the
value of experiencing art as an individual and concedes that the subject mat-
ter of art may hold vastly different meanings for different people, but because
of her greater goal of preserving wilderness, she overlooks the ramifications
of her proposal. She places the viewer’s sovereignty second to wilderness, a
subordination that Percy would undoubtedly reject. For Percy, the viewer’s
sovereignty is of primary importance; it is perhaps even essential to the view-
er’s existence as an individual—for what distinguishes the individual, if not his
unique perceptions of the world?

Then again, perhaps E. M. Forster, who admits that he is “bad at looking
at pictures,” maintains his individuality despite relinquishing some of his sov-
eignity to others (706). In “On Not Looking at Pictures,” Forster, who often
visits galleries with his friend Roger Fry, believes that Fry is a better viewer
than he is because Fry can, for instance, find “some structural significance” in
the mountain-back or the “sack of potatoes in the foreground” (707). Yet
Forster does have an opinion of his own. In fact, the mountain-back reminds
Forster of a peacock, and the dragon in a fifteenth-century Italian predella
makes him laugh because of the dragon’s dread-filled expression. To Forster,
then, being “bad at looking at pictures” means not being able to assess the
diagonals, the structure, and other technical elements of a painting—the
aspects of composition “that [help] us to keep looking” (707).

Despite Forster’s self-proclaimed inability to look at pictures, he recog-
nizes the rich satisfaction one may acquire when “the mind takes charge . . .
and goes off on some alien vision” (706). But in one instance, he writes of how
paintings by Van Gogh, Corot, and Michelangelo, though they are very dif-
ferent painters, may evoke the same mood from a viewer if his “mind is indis-
ciplined and uncontrolled by the eye” (706). As a “bad” viewer of pictures, this
is the exact problem Forster himself experiences. His undisciplined mind,
constantly distracted by his surroundings and his thoughts, is unable to focus
on a piece of artwork. “Something is sure to intervene . . . to draw us away,” Forster claims (707). In other words, he cannot freeze for a moment, as Williams does, to let the sight before him take over all of his faculties. He cannot sense his heart beating against the artist’s mind or feel the images come alive before his eyes. His failure to capture this moment of engagement is partly what makes Forster believe himself to be “bad” at looking at pictures.

Having accepted that fact, however, he still believes that he can be “helped . . . to the appreciation” of art (708). His friend Charles Mauron teaches him, for example, how to view Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*. He learns from Mauron the themes of the painting: this wave here and that half-wave there emphasize the depth and the air in the room; at the same time, the easel in the left foreground and the dog’s paws in the right foreground bend the composition back to the child-princess, the central figure of the painting. Through the guidance of his more artistic friends, Roger Fry and Charles Mauron, Forster discovers that he is improving as a viewer. He is “learning to get [himself] out of the way a little, and to be more receptive, and [his] appreciation of pictures does increase” (708). Just as Forster “receives” and accepts his friends’ perceptions of and methods for viewing different paintings, Williams wishes that her readers would receive her suggested perception of wilderness.

If, as in Forster’s case, “receiving” others’ opinions and viewpoints may lead to appreciation and better understanding of art, perhaps a viewer having sovereignty is not truly imperative. In spite of Percy’s stringent advocacy of the viewer’s sovereignty, Forster is living proof that formulating an individual response to a piece of art is not necessarily the only way to gain satisfaction from and develop appreciation for an artwork. Forster can appreciate a piece of art simply by digesting another viewer’s perception of it—and these experiences with Mauron and Fry perhaps begin to teach him how he might look at art on his own. In this light, Williams’s call for her readers to designate wilderness as art may not be as problematic as Percy might have us believe. While her suggestion does deprive her readers of their sovereignty as viewers, she does not strip them of their ability to appreciate wilderness, and perhaps guides them to a new and better way “to be more receptive” (708). Forster might even be glad to have the guidance of a new artistic friend to help him appreciate pictures he would not otherwise be able to appreciate. If a viewer like Forster fails to claim sovereignty despite repeated attempts to do so, is it not the next best thing for him to be guided to a particular perception of an artwork? In that way, he may at least appreciate a work of art that he cannot understand for himself.
Yet there is a distinction between appreciation, on the one hand, and individual comprehension and experience on the other. Often, a viewer comes across only one or the other, just as Forster appreciates a painting without arriving at an understanding of it on his own terms. Without this internal grappling for meaning—specifically, for a meaning unique to a particular individual—the viewer becomes a mere “consumer of experience”; this experience is presented to him in a nice box with the instructions printed clearly on the back (Percy 761).

In my case, the box and instructions came in the form of an over-excited tour guide—and with him, the choice of what to do with the coming experience and his instructions about it. When I visited Malaysia a few years ago, I stayed at the Genting Highlands, a resort that rested right at the peak of the Titiwangsa Mountains. After landing in the country, my family and I boarded a small van and prepared to drive up the mountains to this enchanting place called Genting. In retrospect, I’m not even sure if the man telling us all about the wonderful things we would find in the mountains was an actual tour guide; regardless, he filled the hour-long drive with colorful descriptions of the world we would soon enter: tall mountains piercing the sky, thick trees lining the mountains, and white clouds grazing the buildings.

Hearing these descriptions, I thought that magical things would happen at 6,000 feet in the air—but they didn’t. Not really. As soon as I entered my hotel room, I rushed to the floor-length window and pressed my hands against the glass. Sure enough, just as the tour guide had described, clouds floated by right before my eyes. And that was exactly everything that I saw. Clouds. It was beautiful for about ten minutes. I spent the next two days of my trip eating potato chips I had bought from the small convenience store in the hotel lobby.

I had certainly appreciated the lovely sight outside my window, but where was that thrill that Williams encountered at the museum or the aquarium? Where was that moment of exhilaration that Percy desperately wished for his readers to experience? Why was my experience no richer than that of Forster with his paintings? Surely the problem could not have been with the sight itself, for how could someone not be blown away by wispy clouds swirling against his window, so close that he could almost touch them with his hands? How often does anyone get to literally be amongst the clouds? I would like to blame the exasperating tour guide for limiting me with his account of the experience, but in the end, it is my own responsibility, my mindset; his words could have had very little effect on me if I had chosen to ignore them.
I, myself, determine my response to any sight. If I had only made an effort to go beyond simple appreciation of the clouds, if I had only immersed myself in the moment, I could have created an unforgettable experience of the wilderness, and perhaps, according to Williams, of art.

Every time we perceive something, there is tremendous potential for creation, whether or not we’ve been told what to see and how. Our responses to any sight are distinct to us and can only be sparked within ourselves. The value of the viewer’s sovereignty ultimately lies in this creative act, this crafting of an experience as it happens. If we let someone else guide us to a particular perception of a sight, this moment of creation can disappear: to find the creativity of seeing despite this guidance requires an insistence on individual participation that responds to what we’re told, but does not depend on it entirely. Williams may try to convince her readers to see wilderness as art, but once, as viewers, we yield to her persuasion and go no further, we immediately lose our power to create—to create a reaction, a response, a feeling particular to us and only us.

The moment I entered my hotel room, I could have dropped my bag on the floor and flung myself at the floor-length window. The evening’s sunlight could have trickled away, only tints of it trapped here and there between the gentle clouds. My breath of awe could have fogged the glass at the tip of my nose, and I could have hastily wiped it away with my sleeve and once again let my heart and mind sink into the unbearably pink skies before my eyes. That could have happened, but only of my own volition. While I cannot alter the physical world around me in any way I wish, my experience of the physical world is by no means beyond my control: it begins with an act of choice.

So let Williams attempt to persuade us to see wilderness a certain way—she may lead us to a better way of seeing for ourselves and to a deeper appreciation for wilderness than we could achieve without her. But this attempt at persuasion has its limits. Beyond appreciation for something is understanding it for ourselves, feeling it in our hearts and minds, and living it in our lives. The ultimate goal is not to live through books or videos or other people. It is to live as though we are the creators of our experiences. It is to live as though our five senses are on fire, aflame from the shocking discovery of each and every thing as it reaches our fingertips, grazes our eardrums, melts onto our taste buds, rushes up our nostrils, and pierces our pupils.