

On the Holiness of Alice Ding's Drawing

Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, I, 38

Closed on Sunday, you my Chick-fil-A
Hold the selfies, put the 'Gram away
—Kanye West, “Closed on Sunday” from *JESUS IS KING*

There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise.
—Augustine of Hippo, “Of the Eternal Felicity of the City of God,
and of the Perpetual Sabbath” from *The City of God*, Book XXII

1

The purpose of this writing is to put forward, or rather, practice caution for understanding Alice Ding's drawing that I hope will be helpful to those feeling confounded or contented by her works or her being.

To anticipate a taste of caution, I will first rephrase a raw but critical conceptual distinction made by Alice during a private conversation about a public conversation, namely a critique of hers:

There are talks presenting *interesting*, even *good*, observations *about* something [in this case, her works] that could be *productive*, and there are talks that are *simply relevant*.

The former is different from, if not opposed to, the latter, and Alice seems to prefer not the former but the latter. Without immediately diving into etymological, semantic, and comparative analyses of those italicized words—which would be conducted explicitly or implicitly throughout this writing, I risk my literary laconicism to rephrase that rephrased distinction above to boost more clarity: saying—of something—that is itself interesting, productive, and even good could be irrelevant and thus unpreferable. Then I shall start an account of my pilgrimage to the holiness of her drawing.

2

In the middle of a text exchange about artistic-stylistic similarity, the finality of form, and a footnote of Michael Fried introducing a tension between Carl Andre and himself of “fighting for [Frank Stella's] soul,”¹ Alice suddenly sent me a picture of her work followed by her judgement—“one of my best drawing.” I was annoyed. This annoyance consisted of two parts. Firstly, pride in general; secondly, the vandalism I perceived in this drawing with the assistance of some alcohol in a dark bar: it appeared to me that Alice had drawn on an OPC [Open Practice Committee] poster and thus covered some maybe useful information for people who would be interested in those lectures. Then the synthesis of these two parts—a reflective affirmation on a juvenile provocation as

¹ Michael Fried, “An Introduction to My Art Criticism,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 70-71: “... Andre and I represented very different things.’ Following the publication of the Dia Volume, Andre sent me a note gently chiding me for ‘suggesting that Frank’s soul had been put at risk between us’ and reminding me, entirely correctly, that ‘Frank has always been too much his own man to let his soul be swayed so easily.’”

< AD >

Alice >



5 Replies

one of my best drawing

radicalism—amplified my distaste though I decided not to respond to this drawing as well as her judgement for some convoluted personal reasons at that very moment.

Two weeks later, I came back to the picture of this drawing in a bright café. With the assistance of no alcohol but caffeine, I was able to see more: it is a sitting dog—presumably Chihuahua—painted rather sloppily. Or maybe it is some kind of a monkey?² It is also big: the OPC poster is admirably big for visibility. So, a big animal drawing³. But maybe more importantly, I was able to see correctly: though it is an OPC poster, it is not the poster for the current season—it is an expired poster with all the event on it already happened. My initial annoyance was mitigated if not completely transformed into content, which consisted of three parts: Firstly, the natural ambiguity of this animal brought by the sloppiness granted by painting as the medium; secondly, the bigness as a natural beauty⁴ provided by appropriating the OPC poster; finally, the immediacy usually required by radicalism is not met so that the seeming radicalism of this drawing is in indeed “seeming” and thus not literal, and this lateness makes the vandalistic gesture rather comical. My hesitation in her pride yet persisted. Since her pride was communicated to me through an expressed judgement which was ultimately a reflective activity, I asked her to speak of the goodness of this drawing to testify my reflective activity.

Alice reluctantly provided a list of characteristics—“the size, the badly drawn animal, its action and expression in its eyes, the purplish blue [in fact Prussian blue], the context of OPC, words and artists mentioned on the yellowish unprofessional paper”—and “all those [characteristics] were not necessarily related to each other, which, however, makes their coming together achieve a miraculous effect.” She finished her response with a remark on explanation: “It is enough that a person says [“I like this art”] as I believe that is true... I told you [those above] because we are friends. I'd rather not say anything for it is not necessary and *irrelevant*... Good art needs not a single sentence. It is enough to just feel it... *Why is a thing without explanation not valid*, [why] could not let it be...”

Many difficulties shall be addressed regarding this remark as well as the rest of the conversation which I am not including here, but for now I will only focus on two things: Firstly, Alice admitted that her own “explanation” was also irrelevant; secondly, I replied to her question on validity with a distinction between the validity of a work of art and the validity—or rather, quality—of the reception of a work of art. A work of art can be valid or good without an explanation. A good work of art, nevertheless, compels good reception and one form of reception is explanation. To put it in another way, art with good quality compels equality. As a result, risking over-simplification of any saying in real life which would be always more than mere words, a saying like “I like this art” is a misfortune—not for that very art but the beholder—because they fail to be compelled to be better or more beautiful in their expression. That over-rhetorical reasoning, however, can be striped down to its bareness: I cannot identify the truthfulness of the “liking” in “I like this art” without any further evidence, both for any beholder and myself.

Nobody simply said “I like this art” two weeks later during Alice’s critique featuring in total four pieces including the big animal drawing. I divide and simplify this 45 minutes critique into four parts: 1. Alice asked a question—“How do my works look to the public?”; 2. Many attendants provided many observations in a generally positive atmosphere for about 40 minutes; 3. One attendant asked Alice if her question asked in the beginning was addressed and if the conversation

² By searching “pointy ear monkey,” I found that silvery marmoset is indeed a candidate.

³ Though technically it is a painting, I follow Alice’s own categorization in the rest of this writing

⁴ I admit that this “natural beauty” might not be communicated universally. But as a native Chinese speaker, it is technically natural for in Chinese, beauty [美] consists of sheep [羊] (the upper part)—of course another animal—and big [大] (the lower part).



was helpful—thus they more or less simply repeated Alice’s own question, to which Alice replied that this was the only relevant response so far; 4. Some attendants (including myself) got pissed on different levels. The next day, I had a conversation with Alice which you already had a bite before. I will then explicate the subtlety of Alice’s acknowledgement of the person who made the only relevant response (I will address this person as “the relevantor” in the rest of this writing), present a relevant reading of the big animal drawing which might not be achieved without the help of a set of—though interesting—observational failures occurred during that critique, and introduce a difficulty of dualism which is suggested by a truistic observation but would soon go beyond truism itself.

3

As I have mentioned above, the relevantor’s response is more or less simply a repetition of Alice’s own question. When the word “relevant” is used, we often think of a relation between two different entities: p is relevant to q. “p is relevant to p” sounds tautological and thus not informative or even absurd. As a result, speaking only grammatically, Alice’s acknowledgement of the relevantor’s response is a tautology. If we take some social-psychological factors into account, then we can say Alice is just narcissistic: her acknowledgement of the relevantor’s response is nothing but an acknowledgement of herself, which I think would be as irritating as the offense of the unsaid “irrelevant” charge registered by those irritated attendants. But is “relevant” necessarily a praise? Could relevance be “mean” in the sense of “medial”?—in such a case we can at least discard the narcissism charge against Alice. The same charge, however, could be turned and targeted at us as beholders because to a certain degree any interpretative activity upon a work of art could be regarded as masturbatory. Looking at art, thinking—not only feeling—about it bring intellectual orgasm which could be further upgraded to some oral-kinetic orgasm by talking about it plus some voluntary or involuntary body languages as well as some social orgasm from others’ recognition of the expressed intellect.⁵ I believe that is an experience for many of us and I have been sitting comfortably as a masturbatory interpreter since I deemed that is the natural—if not the only—state of being a beholder. Alice’s acknowledgement of the relevantor’s response unsettled me—as a self-sufficient/gratifying masturbator instead of a dismissed helper/comrade which I had regarded as a mere fantasy of many unknowingly pretentious masturbators—because Alice’s acknowledgement suggested that there *is* an alternative mode of interpretative activity which is ordained by the strange concept of “relevance.” But again, to what extent that acknowledged response can be counted as an interpretative activity since it is just a repetition of a pre-existing question? It seems that this very situation would be better described in this way: the relevantor as a beholder surrendered their exploitive intellect⁶ to repeating a given given⁷ by Alice, which is analogous to the “I like this art” situation and thus could achieve an ethical appeasement with the artist. Explanations are not just irrelevant but precisely it is the self-indulgence of the beholder’s interpretative activity that bars them from the artist’s sympathy.

⁵ The first two orgasms could be seen as masturbatory straightforwardly since they can be carried out by a single individual, while social orgasm seems to suggest something reciprocal and thus might not be considered as masturbatory. I need a more developed theory of masturbation to fully account my categorization and here I will speculate a quick argument: in social orgasm, the role of others is more or less sex toy rather than intended recipients of pleasure and the only intended recipient of pleasure is the subject expressing itself. Thus, masturbatory.

⁶ An important fact should be emphasized: the relevantor also offered some interesting observations through his very intellect during the critique which was not acknowledged by Alice as relevant.

⁷ If we are not tired of the tendency towards meta-ness, we shall not forget that this given is a question of beholding.

The sadistic moral and mystic vacuum of this tautological structure of the discursive artist filled me with humiliation and sucked out the supplication I made to Alice: Since no one succeeded in addressing her question positively, I begged her to at least attempt an answer to the question specifically for the big animal drawing. Alice, again, reluctantly suggested that in an *ideal* situation—which has certain friction with the situation suggested by “the public” in the original question—beholders would think those names of artists and institutions are of *no* importance⁸, and she, again, immediately regarded her own suggestion as less relevant compared to the relevantor’s response-repetition. Now, finally, is the time to look at some main content of that critique: a set of interesting but irrelevant observations.

4

The importance of those names of artists [Buck Ellison, Huehuecoyotl (Fernando Palma Rodríguez), Sanya Kantarovsky, Lauren Quin] and institutions [The University of Chicago, Open Practice Committee, the Smart Museum of Art] was brought up by several attendants orbiting the idea of “institutional critique.” It is evident that this drawing is made on an unusual surface which possesses some institutional power and fame, and—to use a word I employed before—vandalizing this surface by covering it with paint could be quickly deemed as a gesture of critique⁹ or contempt. Under this observation, three views were inferred: 1. How would different individuals experience those specific names with their own specific histories?; 2. A descriptor was used to dress this gesture—bitchy; 3. The animal was said to be shitting (I think the yellowish color indeed contributes a lot to this comment). The third view can be easily debunked as wrong, and its fault is due to observational slackness or lack of common sense: when a dog—in fact, according to Alice the animal is a cat but that does not matter here for they behave similarly in this case—shits, her butt would not touch the ground but in the drawing the animal’s butt is flattened by the ground through touching it. As a result, the animal is simply sitting. The first and the second views are a bit difficult to be refuted for they are more speculative and atmospheric than factual, nevertheless, Alice’s reluctant suggestion has left us a clue. If something is of no importance, then it is not even worthy of *critique*—in its ancestral sense of “to separate.” For whom this poster—as a bearer of Grammar—would hold no importance? An animal. It might sound childish, but I invite you to imagine a scene from an almost formalist perspective that I performed in front of Alice: A big piece of paper retired from the wall and was lying on the ground, and a big animal walked onto it, took it as a seat, rested, and warmed this paper with ink on it by her butt—

“It is rather warm than bitchy... There is a feeling of 宽宏大量 [word for word (literal) translation for this expression: wide, magnificent, big, measure].”

“Oh, this is as relevant as the [relevantor]’s response. But how did you jump from ‘warm’ to 宽宏大量?”

“...Maybe because [this drawing] is literally big and wide?”

While I was still in dizziness and disbelief of Alice’s sudden acknowledgement of my response if not interpretive activity, our friend Tommy Lee swung by Alice’s studio and asked if he could join our conversation. I poorly recapitulated some key moments to him and when I tried to

⁸ You might question “If those names are not important, then why not use another piece of paper?” In addition to two decisive formal attractions—size and color, I would add one more argument: they are important only for people to feel they are unimportant. Thus, it is not a literal but representational unimportance.

⁹ Etymologically speaking, “critique” does not entail the sense of negation. It roots in *krinein* “to separate, sieve.”

tell him the expression 宽宏大量, I asked Alice to look up its sense for sense (interpretative) translation. Magnanimity. Several hours later, after I said goodbye to Alice, sat in my apartment by myself, or in fact, by my two cats—the yellow Matthew and the black Bayj, I saw that “magnanimity” is quite literally “big animal”: magna + animus.

I hope I have shown another tautological structure which is, at least seemingly, less hollow and more narratively colorful than the previous one. For now, I will not stop for further reflection on the difference between Alice’s acknowledgement of my response and of the relevantor’s, the relationship between the literal and the interpretative, translatability between languages, and many more things about the state of language as such, but instead turn to the difficulty of dualism.

5

This difficulty was made explicit by a more general observation featuring the idea of “tension.”¹⁰ It would be helpful to describe the actual installation of the big animal drawing and introduce another photo work. The big animal drawing is pinned—in the same way as it used to be pinned—above a slim pedestal which determines the height of the drawing but does not physically support anything. Under the painted surface there is another sheet of the same poster. The moderately sized photo features her friend Tianjiao Wang in a white sweater and a funky colorful crown happily holding a wheel-less skateboard with a picture of Pope.L crawling in a superman suit with a skateboard on his back on the top of the background featuring the Twin Towers showered in sunshine. Some attendants were obsessed with the empty pedestal which could be ascribed with again a symbol of institutional power, a tension between painting and sculpture, and more generally the idea of absence—indicating a tension between presence and absence. Regarding the photo, many tensions have been already implicated in the description above which could be rephrased to make it tenser: it is a printed photo of that the happy crowned living young female artist mentee Tianjiao in white in leisure indoor (posing for a photo) holds an immobile vehicle printed with another photo of the seemingly suffered and recently deceased black male artist mentor Pope.L in work crawling outdoor (though also posing for a photo) in NYC when the two soon-to-be-destroyed-to-ash high towers were still standing.

The literalness of those tense duals is horrifying for its impenetrable superficiality. Alice certainly celebrates Andy Warhol’s self-identification as “deeply superficial” and this oxymoron is just another horrifyingly glamorous dual. I am aware that the word “impenetrable” might cause suspicion or detestation with which I will confront now.

Why do I ever desire penetration? I believe many jarring theories can be said psycho-analytically about me being a paranoid young man, but I would indulge my natural inclination, disregard the lure of, or rather, need for depth all together, and only try to focus on one other characteristic of surface which carries some metaphorical significance: am I penetrating a hole-ly or hole-less surface? The impenetrability of those tensed duals in the Tianjiao-Pope.L photo are formed by those literal contrasts colliding on every inch of the conceptual surface¹¹, and thus, hole-less. In the big animal drawing, however, the seeming collision called “institutional critique” is only a passing episode which would be breathed out through the unifying literal, and this unity, or rather surface, is weaved and filled with the contrast of nothing—“of no importance”—and thus, hole-ly.

¹⁰ This part would be proceeded with more over-abstractions and unaccounted arbitrariness for I have an un-resolved disagreement with Alice regarding the installation of the big animal drawing and thus it is not only about “tension” but is tense.

¹¹ Of course, we can simply appreciate this photo’s form which has every inch of its pictorial surface only colors instead of collisions. But, sorry, actually, can we?

Open Practice Committee

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Monday, October 1, 7-9 PM
Logan Center for the Arts, Room 100

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Handwritten (Lecture by Rodriguez)
Monday, October 1, 7-9 PM
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Visual Arts
Monday, October 1, 7-9 PM
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Lecture
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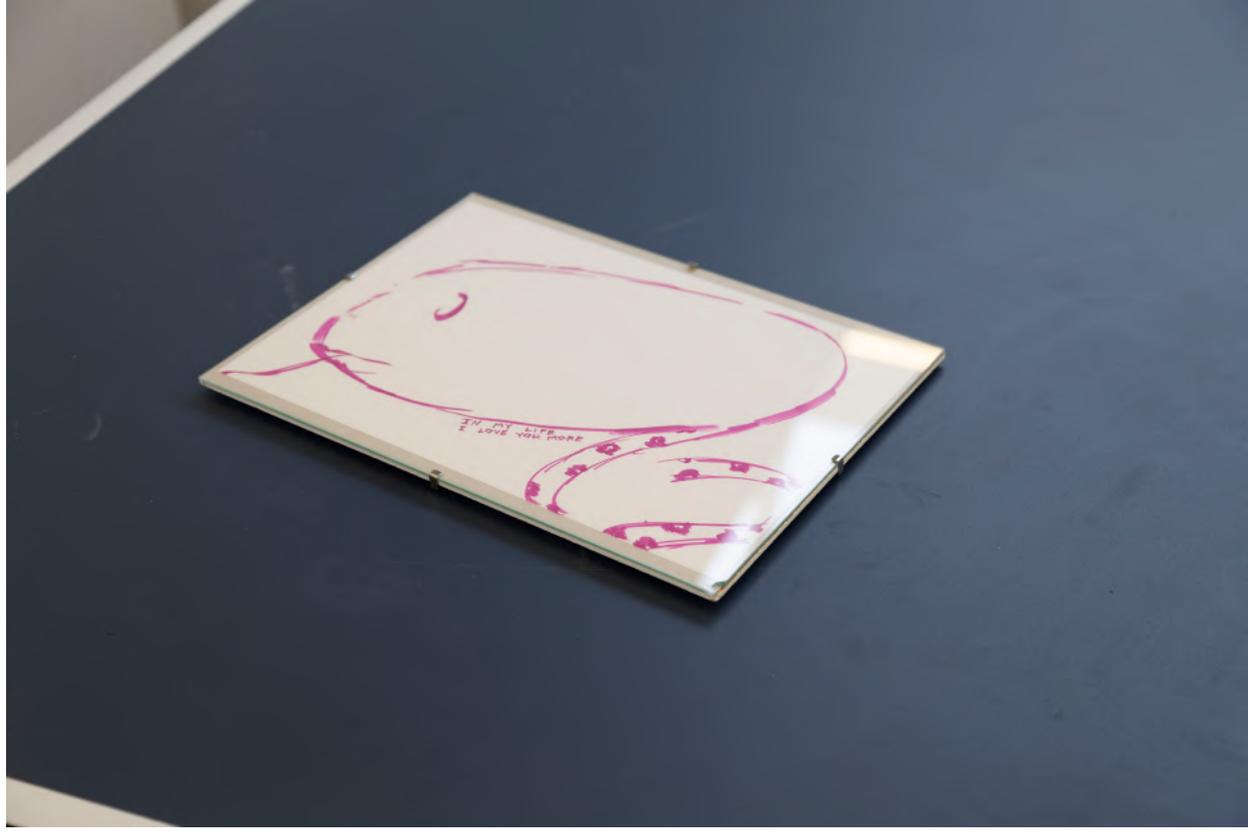
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The horror of this impenetrable superficiality could then be explained physiologically: it is a surface that suffocates. And if the big animal drawing is indeed good, it is good because of it is hole-ly literal. The Tianjiao-Pope.L photo could be interesting, but it is not “good” not because it is bad but because it enjoys the hole-less literalness and thus voluntarily or involuntarily quits itself the aesthetical-ethical decisiveness.¹²

Though the difficulty found a new expression in the previous paragraph, it remains on at least two levels which could be pronounced each through two questions: Firstly, what is the relationship between the hole-ly and the hole-less within Alice’s portfolio or even in one work? Secondly, what is the relationship between the magnanimity of the big animal drawing and the severity if not cruelty of Alice’s being (at least as an artist during her critique)? The dualistic difficulty will keep haunting the rest of this writing, but I will forsake it now and embark on the holy.

6

The holy in the holiness of Alice’s drawing should be approached in the sense of “rest” which itself has two specific senses.

The first sense of rest can be expressed as “uselessness” in the over-used dual of “useful *versus* useless,” which would be exemplified through a sculptural work presented alongside with the big animal drawing, the Tianjiao-Pope.L photo, and a small animal drawing. A white drying rack stands and several white trash bags with blue straps are clipped onto the rack filling all the “slots.” At least five moments of rest are embodied in this single work: 1. A drying rack is usually used for wet and *not-in-use* clothes; 2. This rack is currently used for empty trash bags which are supposedly lighter than wet clothes; thus though it is used, it is *used-less*; 3. Those brand new trash bags are *not used/filled* by trash yet; 4. Trash to be put in trash bags is *after-use*; 5. It is presented as a work of art which should be ultimately, for the most of time, *useless*. And I can add five more moments from the rest of those works for some useless symmetry and pleasure of enumerating: 1. The small animal drawing was placed on a *not-in-use* Ping-Pong table; 2. The big animal was drawn on an *after-use* OPC poster [3.] with a *not-in-use* pedestal installed under and in front of it; 4. Tianjiao is in *leisure* holding a wheel-less thus [5.] *not-ready-for-use* skateboard.—All could be *interesting*, or even, I dare to say, *more or less relevant*, observations, but still, not *simply relevant*. So what is “relevance” in the strictest sense?

It is the second sense of Rest that might relieve all the nerve caused by Alice’s intuitively austere employment of “relevance”—the Rest *after* the Creation. Here tension, let it be either dialectics or the principle of contradiction, is replaced by a temporal hierarchy, or if you want a milder word, order. The wholeness of creation asks us to notice the mark of time: the era of production—an additive progress—has been already passed, and in a new time—the tranquil present *before* the Messiah—we are welcome neither to disturb the creation with our own *desire for the “good”* or *wisdom as the “good”* nor just make it a mere *interest* to us by being *about* it, but to hold it, *re-lieve*—a help neither through addition nor subtraction but move (if not necessarily “praise” without “p”)—it, and most importantly and maybe difficultly, *simply* be it.

Alice once uploaded another drawing on her Instagram and captioned a line from Kanye West’s “Closed on Sunday” which I have quoted together with its following line as one of my

¹² My discovery, understanding and use of the concept of “literal” obviously owes much to Fried. The concept of “hole-ly/less,” nevertheless, found its “consequence” in one strange descriptor—“implosive”—used by Fried to describe the synthesis of theatricality of which the significance I just noticed: “... the arts themselves are at last sliding towards some kind of final, implosive, highly desirable synthesis.” Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 164. I imagine Fried was trying to use the word to describe the destruction of the boundary between each individual art, but it is more than reasonable to also imagine that implosion is due to the hole-less surface of some *kind* of art as a *techne* rather than a category of objects.



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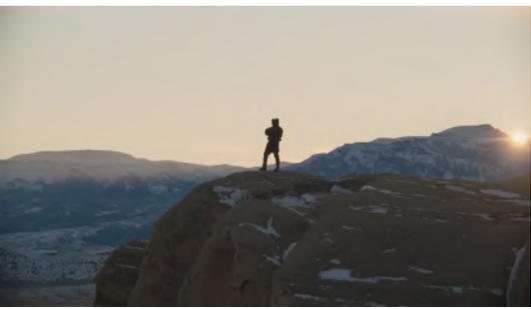
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February 6









epigraphs in this writing. There are in total six comments (by February 25th, 2024) and five of them are irrelevant to me as well as, I believe, the drawing. The only relevant one is from the previously mentioned fellow artist Tianjiao who commented an emoji of a blueish wing without which I might pay no attention to the heavenly color as well as the ambiguity of its shape thus the form all together of this drawing—two blue presumably fried drumsticks, or drumettes (which are the uppermost parts of the wing that resemble smaller versions of the drumsticks from the chicken legs). Of course, Tianjiao is herself an angel-a so that she could, with ease, through another tautology, make two drumsticks-drumettes a pair of angel wings, and raised me to see, for the first time about twenty days ago, the holiness of Alice's drawing. I wonder if she had experienced a masturbatory consummation with this fried animal parts drawing as I had with the big animal drawing, while the falling breadcrumb and the images of Ye standing alone on the tip of a cliff and then in the middle of a group of followers¹³ still made me a non-believer in this case.

7

Yes, I finally decide that they are unambiguously fried drumsticks which are parts of the legs and depart myself from the class of flying angel. As a result, I will finish my masturbation on the ground if not under the ground.

Alice told me that there was one time she was watching videos of dogs being trapped somehow and waiting for rescue. Tommy swung again by her studio and asked if she would like to be on the rescue team and to save dogs.

“I think that I am the dog. Maybe I would like to be saved.”

Despite those unfortunate cases of being very passive, dogs are more often found actively guarding others—fellow animals or private properties. And they are also naturally guardians of themselves like everybody else. Alice the dog unwaveringly guards her animal against many forms of improvidence and together waits for their Ideal public. Plato the dramaturge also minded his Ideal a lot in *Republic*, and he, or rather, his philosopher Socrates recommended a dog—literally a reversed god¹⁴—as a role model for the guardian of his ideal city to his fellow citizen Glaucon because dogs are not only spirited but also philosophical by nature:

¹³ I have included in total four images of Ye here. The first two are screenshot by me from the music video which are disapproved by Alice for they are “not precise.” The other two are picked by Alice which are, according to her, “more accurate photos of ye, also, simply better imagery.”

¹⁴ There is an episode in Jacques Derrida's late animal speech that could be relevant here. Jacques Derrida and David Wills, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 369–418. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344276>. Derrida compared the first and the second narrative of Genesis and lined out several distinctive character of the latter as an alternative beginning of calling the animals by name: “The public announcing of names remains at one and the same time *free* and *overseen*, under surveillance, under the gaze of Jehovah who does not for all that intervene. He lets Adam, he lets man, man alone, Ish without Ishah, the woman, freely call out the names. He let him go about *naming alone*. But he is waiting in the wings, watching over this man alone with a mixture of *curiosity* and *authority*. . . ‘He has them come towards the husbandman *in order to see* what he will call out to them’ (Gen. 2:19). . . God give Ish alone the freedom to name the animals, granted and that represents at the same time his sovereignty and his loneliness. However, everything seems to happen as though God still wanted to oversee, keep vigil, maintain his right of inspection over the names that were about to echo out. . . these [animals] that came into the world before him but were named after him. . . man is in both senses of the word *after* the animal. He follows him. This ‘after,’ that determines a sequence, a consequence, or a persecution, is not in time, nor is it temporal; it is the very genesis of time. . . This ‘in order to see’ marks at the same time the infinite right of inspection of an all powerful God and the finitude of a God who doesn't know what is going to happen to him *with language*. . . This powerful yet deprived ‘in order to see’ that is God's, the first stroke of time, before time, God's exposure to surprise, to the event of what is going to

“... [dog] judges anything it sees to be either a friend or an enemy on no other basis than that it knows the one and does not know the other. And how could it be anything besides a lover of learning if it defines what is its own and what is alien to it in terms of knowledge and ignorance?”¹⁵

occur between man and animal, this time before time has always made me dizzy.” I could not help but making the structure of God-Adam-Animals an analogy of Alice-I-Big animal drawing which could be generalized to Artist-Audience-Artwork. But Alice is not so much a god because she did intervene the “naming” process though minimally by only judging the relevance binarily, just like what another Alice suggested to kittens quoted several pages before: “If they would only purr for ‘yes,’ and mew for ‘no,’ or any rule of that sort, so that one could keep up a conversation. But how can you talk with a person if they always say the same thing?”—Our Alice at least could be acknowledged as an Ideal animal by Alice from the wonderland.

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 375b2-6.