

A Letter to Vincent

An Art-Historical Affirmation of Homosexuality

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Introduction

Vincent is real. So was the coffee, and so was the table we drank it at, and so was the question he put to me across it. This was a real letter, written to a real friend, and I have spent every year since trying not to improve it.

I write for the ones who were told that what they are is a matter of consent: a thing they agreed to, and could therefore disagree to, and were selfish for not disagreeing to. I write for the ones who were told they were made wrong, in a room where nothing wrong had ever happened to them, by a maker who kept no record. I write because I have been in that room, and I have learned that the room has a door.

I. On the Word “Made”

To say that art made me gay is not to describe a cause. It is to describe a moment of legibility.

Nothing in any museum ever reached into me and rearranged the furniture. What happened is subtler and harder to litigate. I walked into a building full of things made by people who had been told the same things I had been told, and I saw that some of them had gone ahead and been themselves anyway — had put the private thing on the wall in front of a guard and a gift shop and a wall label, and let it stay there, and let it be looked at. That is not causation. That is recognition. But recognition feels like being made, and I will not pretend it does not. You spend a life being told you are an error, and then you stand in a cold room in front of a warm painting, and something in you is quoted back to you in a language you did not know you spoke.

Call it grace, if you like. I will not object. I have stopped quarrelling with the word. Whatever it was, it did not ask my permission, and it did not require my shame, and it did not go away when I left the building.

II. The Museum Is a Cathedral

Look at the building. The steps, so that you climb to enter. The vestibule, where you are asked for money before you are allowed to be moved. The nave, with its high ceiling and its careful

light. The chapels off the nave, each with a single doctrine and a single artist to deliver it. The reliquary, climate-controlled, where a scrap of cloth is treated as a body. The ushers — attendants, they call them, though their job is exactly the job of an usher: to keep you from touching what you worship. The clergy, who do not wear collars but do write labels, and whose little essays are read with more attention than most people give scripture. The gift shop: indulgences, in every price band.

And the calendar, of course. The calendar is the whole thing. The art world keeps a liturgical year, and we all know it, and we all pretend it is merely marketing. Advent is the fair season. Lent is the dead run between shows. Easter is the spring auction. The high holidays are the ones where you are seen, and the low holidays are the ones where you are billed. Every religion has a tithe. Ours just invoices.

I am not being ironic. I am being grateful. A cathedral is a large building in which a small person is not alone, and that is what the art world has been for me: the single institution that did not require me to sign anything before it let me in.

III. The Canon Says Nothing Against Us

You will be told that the tradition is against you. Read it. Read it all, not the leaflet.

You will find that the tradition is not merely tolerant of us; it is drenched in us. The devotion that dare not speak its name is the entire engine of the Western figure. The studio as a room you are not supposed to leave. The apprentice who never quite leaves the master. The nude, held up as the highest subject of painting, on the reasoning that the body is the only thing worth looking at for the rest of your life. The long, unbroken line of the ones who loved in ways their own labels could not admit, and made the work anyway, and made it so well that the people who condemned them had no choice but to hang it in the front room.

Eros is not the exception in art history. It is the weather. The museums are not neutral about this; they are simply quiet about it, in the way that institutions are quiet about the things that keep them alive. The canon does not say what they told you it says. The canon says: look closer.

IV. On Patrons and Indulgences

We are not new here. We never were.

Ours is not a young presence asking to be let in from the cold. Ours is a presence that has been funded, hung, collected, catalogued, and occasionally quietly resold by the very people who would not have invited us to dinner. The closet has a market cap. Every institution that has a policy about us also has a storage room about us, and the storage room is fuller than the policy

admits.

I do not write this to shame anyone into a statement. I write it because it means we are not guests. When you are told you are a guest, you are polite, and you are brief, and you leave when looked at. We have been in this house longer than the house has had a name for us. Sit down. Stay.

V. On Suffering, Which Is Not Required

There is a lie dressed as a compliment, and it goes like this: that our pain is our authenticity, that we make because we hurt, that the wound is the work.

I believed it for years, and it nearly killed me. Here is the correction. The work is the proof. The pain is a tax — a tax levied by other people, and by no means payable forever, and never, not once, the purchase price of the thing you make. You do not owe the world your suffering. You owe it only your looking, and your hand, and your hours.

The ones we lost were not made better by being lost. They were made lost. Do not confuse the two, and do not let the sentence be finished for you. There is no version of this story in which the ending is supposed to be sad.

VI. The Six Points

There are six of them. I have set them out plainly, on their own page, because an argument that cannot be shortened has not been understood. If you read nothing else, read the six, and read them as though they were being read to you by someone who loves you and has no time.

Read the Six Points →

VII. What Art Wants Us to Do About It

It wants three things, and it has never wanted more.

Look. Look at the work, not the wall label; look long enough that the first idea you had about it dies and the second one arrives. Looking is not passive. Looking is the whole job, and most people never do it once.

Make. Make the thing that embarrasses you, in the size it actually wants to be, and then leave it in the room with the door open. The closet is a studio with the light off. Turn the light on. Someone in the next room is waiting to find out they are not the only one in the building.

Leave it open behind you. You did not get here alone. Somebody painted a picture before you were born and hung it where you could find it. Pay that debt the only way it can be paid: make

it easier for the next person than it was for you. Take their name. Give them the wall. Hand the letter on.

Benediction

Go and look at something made by a person who was not supposed to make it. Stand there longer than is polite. Let it quote you back to yourself.

You were not made wrong. You were made, and you were seen, and you are not alone in the building.

Go well. Look well. Make something anyway.

The Six Points

One. Art made me gay, and I will not be argued out of it.

Not as a cause — as an encounter. I was not changed; I was named. I walked into a building full of other people's secrets and found my own secret already framed, already lit, already hanging. Whatever did that to me is the only thing that ever has, and it did it without asking permission, and I am not sorry.

Two. The canon is on our side, and the leaflet is a lie.

The tradition is not quiet about us, it is only quiet around us. Eros is the weather of the Western figure. Anyone who tells you the history condemns us is telling you about the leaflet, not the archive. Read the archive. It is full of us, in the good frames.

Three. The museum is a church, and its god does not run a closet.

Steps, vestibule, nave, chapel, reliquary, clergy, calendar, tithe. All of it is right there, in daylight, in every city we have. If that is the church, then we are not outsiders asking in — we are the standing congregation. A god that made the building does not then disown the people it lets inside.

Four. They already knew. The closet is a business model.

Every institution with a policy about us also has a storage room about us. The works exist; the catalogue exists; the market exists. What is missing is not our presence. What is missing is only the sentence that admits it.

Five. Suffering is not required of you.

Your pain is not your authenticity. Your work is your work. The wound was done to you by other people, and it is not the price of admission, and it is not the secret ingredient. Make the thing and keep your life. Both are allowed. Both are, in fact, the point.

Six. You are not alone, and you never were.

Someone painted the picture you found. Someone hung it where you could reach it. Someone kept the door open long enough for you to walk through, and paid for it, and did not sign it. That is the whole lineage, and you are in it now. It is your turn. Hand the letter on.