

# NEAR PAINTING

CARAVAGGIO, BEUYS, AND UNFORMED STYLE

Joost Keizer

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## ABSTRACT

This essay proposes a new definition of style by thinking it apart from form. It takes the concept of air – a formless substance that exists between artworks and between them and their makers – to what contains style. Some artworks collapse the difference between what exists within their border or frame and the life around them; they redirect the place of style from the material container of the artwork to life itself, more specifically the life of the artist. The essay argues that Caravaggio and his early seventeenth-century critics were instrumental in defining air as that which flows in and out of depiction. Caravaggio's works functioned as a score from which style could be “played” or enacted. But the essay concludes that this interpretation of Caravaggio's art and life gains focus from the perspective of Joseph Beuys, whose scores for performances, too, pointed to the position of style *near painting*.

## KEYWORDS

Air; Environment; Theory of Style; Theory of Authorship.

## I. Introduction

*Let us, in view of this, consider what takes place in air where for the sake of a form with a well-defined surface and of light material, I want us to take an inflated bladder, in which the air when surrounded by air will weigh little or nothing, since it can be only slightly compressed; its weight then is small being merely that of the skin which does not amount to the thousandth part of a mass of lead having the same size as the inflated bladder.<sup>1</sup>*  
Galileo Galilei, *Dialogo* (1632)

Air nestles in between forms, in the space left unfilled by anything else. It fills cracks, hollows, and idles. But air itself is formless. Air can merely be pressed into a form, as when Galilei cast it into the form (*figura*) of a pig's bladder. And even there, surrounded by thin skin and the seemingly limitless amount of air filling the atmosphere, air amounted to very little. Galilei explained that its weight could only be measured in non-air, in a vacuum. In the late winter of 1614, he reported to his friend Giovanni Battista Baliani about measuring the weight of air by inclosing it in a glass flask. Air weighed about four hundred times less than water.<sup>2</sup>

Formless, colorless and without substance, air is beyond depiction. It can only be represented indirectly. Fluttering drapery, hair waving in the wind, someone blowing out a candle, a tree bending in the wind, a boat sailing. Air carries. A bird, smoke, light. Air moves, in and out of bodies and between them. Air transmits. Sound waves, energy, cold, heat. The sky consists of air. But do painters ever *think* of depicting air when painting the heavens? The atmosphere lacks both surface and contour and therefore has no form. The blue of the afternoon sky might count as a representation of air, but blue can never pass as air's proper color. Because of the mimetic challenges air posed, early modern European artists took air as a subject to rethink representation. "Beyond the sun and us there is darkness," wrote Leonardo da Vinci, "and so the air [*aria*] appears [*pare*] blue."<sup>3</sup> The difference between the sky's actual lack of color and its colorful *appearance* is crucial here. Leonardo again:

The blueness we see in the air is not its proper color, but is caused by warm vapor evaporated in minute and insensible atoms on which the solar rays fall, rendering them luminous against the infinite darkness of the immense sphere that lies beyond it and includes it.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Galileo Galilei, *Opere*, Milan 1811, vol. VIII, 123: "Per tanto consideriamo ciò, che accade nell'aria, dove per avere una figura di superficie ben terminata, e di materia leggerissima, voglio che pigliamo una vescica gonfiata, nella quale l'aria, che vi sarà dentro, peferà nel mezzo dell'aria stessa niente, o poco, perchè poco vi si potrà comprimere tanchè la gravità è solo quella poca della stessa pellicola, che non sarebbe la millesima parte del peso di una mole di piombo grande, quanto la medisima vescica gonfiata."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., vol. XII, 33–36.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, London 1939, vol. II, 140 (\$868).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., vol. I, 161 (\$300).

Air's blue is a mere illusion, not its actual color. Air is colorless, next to being formless.

In early modern Italy, air also meant style. Leonardo wrote that painted figures somehow carried the style (*aria*) and form (*figura*) of their maker.<sup>5</sup> Note that Leonardo, writing around 1500, distinguished style from form. *Figura* described the form of a person, *aria* the formless aspect of a person's being. *Aria* was near to a person, coming from that person, but never really part of a person's solid form. Both air and form left traces in an artwork's appearance, unwillingly and unconsciously if you asked Leonardo.<sup>6</sup> *Aria* was a quality of a person that nestled in and around the objects she made, but only when an object contained a human figure – a semblance to its maker. Closer in meaning to a living being than dead form, air could not be measured or understood in rational terms. It defied formal analysis. Air named a felt or sensed relationship between humans, both depicted and real. Petrarch, who first used the term to name style, attributed its use to the vocabulary of painters. He wrote that *aria* described the relationship between the appearance of a father and his son, an immeasurable resemblance that was felt, not described or expressed.<sup>7</sup>

Air was spatial. It named the sort of style that only existed in the plastic arts, not in texts.<sup>8</sup> Air fills the neutral space between forms with a sense of presence that is hard to put in words yet is felt immediately. It does not work on you, like in most climate theories, nor is it a medium.<sup>9</sup> *Aria* charges the neutral space near forms and near people. This paper will posit some ways in which the concept of air supplies a framework for rethinking the value of what is *near painting*, rather than what is within a picture's form. That space around the picture, I submit, is filled with life itself, a particular kind of life, including the artist's lifestyle. Life and lifestyle are included in the work's style but not in the work's form. My main point is

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Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting (Codex Urbinas Latinus 1270)*, ed. and trans. by A. Philip McMahon, Princeton, NJ 1956, vol. I, 208 (§574), 111–112 (§273), vol. II, fol. 61r (§273). I have slightly changed the translation by McMahon.

6

Leonardo's ideas about the body impressing itself in images had an extensive reception in early modern writing on style; see, among others, Paolo Pino, *Dialogo di pittura. Nuovamente dato in luce*, Venice 1548, fol. 29r.

7

Francesco Petrarch, *Letters on Familiar Matters. Rerum familiarum libri XVII–XXIV*, trans. by Aldo S. Bernardo, Baltimore, MD 1985, 301–302 (= *Familiares*, 23.19).

8

This point needs emphasis because European concepts of style still owe much to stylistic categories developed for writing, speech, and rhetoric by Cicero, Aristotle, and others. The strongest work on literary style is formal: it retrieves style as a combination of social formalism – by Mikhail M. Bakhtin and others – and narratology, focusing on the way in which texts mobilize sub-styles into a formal whole that emerges in time through reading. For example, Daniel Hartley, Style in the Novel. Towards a Critical Poetics, in: *Poetics Today* 39, 2018, 159–181.

9

The pre-modern definition of air that I work with here therefore slightly departs from the definition in Eva Horn, Air as Medium, in: *Grey Room* 73, 2018, 6–25.



that style and form are not only two distinct analytical categories; they are also dissimilar. Form, Caroline Levine reminded us, is a bounded whole, a fact most formalists tacitly acknowledge but don't practice in their formalism. Levine wrote that life itself is structured as the collisions of bounded wholes, some small, others big, all working according to definable rhythms.<sup>10</sup> A pure formalist – the kind Levine takes stock of – does not involve extra-formal aspects in her analysis of a work of art.<sup>11</sup> Which is why pure formalism cannot name style. For in the theory advanced here, style names the space in between forms, what is outside of form. Style is what Jeff Dolven called interested, *inter-est*, in between humans and between humans and things. Form, Dolven wrote, “is the name for how we encounter the beautiful object when interest is suspended”, when what is near form has disappeared.<sup>12</sup> Style teaches us that parts of the work remain in the air.<sup>13</sup>

My case studies are Caravaggio and Joseph Beuys, both artists whose works blurred the boundaries between the form of the work and what lies near it. The term “*near painting*” that I develop in this essay relocates style from the materiality of the object to the air around it. The model of *near painting* is not historical, nor confined to a seventeenth- and twentieth-century artist. It is still current today.

## II. Air and Being

Towards the end of his long dialog on the nature of love and beauty, published in Venice in 1628, Caravaggio's former patron Giovanni Battista Manso paused on what exactly constituted a person's air. Manso wrote on real people, not depicted ones. He acknowledged that Petrarch was foundational for understanding the term *aria* and cited the last lines of Canzone CXLIX, which describe the appearance of Laura, the poet's imagined partner: her angelic form (*figura*)

<sup>10</sup>

Caroline Levine, *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Princeton, NJ 2015.

<sup>11</sup>

Margaret Iverson and Steven Melville, What the Formalist Knows, in: id. (eds.), *Writing Art History. Disciplinary Departures*, Chicago, IL 2010, 60–89.

<sup>12</sup>

Jeff Dolven, *Senses of Style. Poetry before Interpretation*, Chicago, IL 2018, 96.

<sup>13</sup>

This definition of style therefore adjusts Roland Barthes's idea that part of style always remains behind in the depths of the artist's person; Roland Barthes, *Style and Its Image*, in: id., *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard, Berkeley, CA 1989, 90–99. It is also at odds with modern connoisseurship, which takes morphology as a point of departure to diagnose style. Style in modern connoisseurship is the name for seeing the same form differently by comparing it to another form or by relating form to processes of making, technique, and to an artist's preferences and convictions. Style, as Richard Neer elucidated, instead effects an aspect-shift in our perception of form: a movement from seeing one thing in form to seeing another; Richard Neer, *Connoisseurship and the Stakes of Style*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 32, 2005, 1–26.

and the air (*aria*) of her beautiful face.<sup>14</sup> The separation of *figura* and *aria* was key in Manso's thinking regarding his own historical position in debates about the meaning of *aria*. The ancients, wrote Manso, had no real concept of beauty except for a formal one: the beauty related to the color of skin and to the reflection of light on someone's face. These were aspects that belonged to the substance of the body itself, not to the air around it. They were tied up with bound form. *Aria*, Manso submitted, was not simply the sum of the colors of someone's face, eyes, and cheeks, because those colors were fixed to form, like pigments attached to a statue. Air instead described a mobile, unfixed aspect of a person's appearance. Hence its independence from form, because form is stable. Manso concluded that *aria* was an effect of a person's soul (*spirito*), which made its way from the body's inner cavities, through skin and into the air surrounding someone's face. *Aria* thus described how a person's character and conduct, which emerged from the soul, filled the space around a person. Once released from the body's proper form, *aria* could be perceived by another person.<sup>15</sup>

Painters, too, could possess air. It was what bound the painter's body to a painted body. In 1553, Ludovico Dolce wrote that the good Raphael (*buon Raffaello*) painted figures in a style (*aria*) that was soft and gentle, a quality that belonged to both Raphael and his painted figures.<sup>16</sup> Air made a painter's way of doing, including her behavior when not painting, part of the effect artworks had on other people. That effect was not just the result of the physical work but also of what filled the air near the work. Caravaggio first gathered fame as a painter in Rome, where he appeared in numerous court documents that tell of fights and brawls in the city's inns and on its squares, of harassing a landlord at night, of the day he killed a man after a lost game of tennis. Frederico Borromeo, one of Caravaggio's early patrons, called Caravaggio the opposite (*lo contrario*) of Raphael, whose good manners were still the talk of the day in early seventeenth-century Rome.<sup>17</sup> It wasn't the contrast in form

## 14

Francesco Petrarca, *Rime, trionfi e poesie latine*, ed. by F. Neri, G. Martellotti, E. Bianchi, and N. Sapegno, Milan 1961, 168 (no. CXXII); 386 (no. CCC); 215 (no. CXLIX).

## 15

Giovanni Battista Manso, *Erocallia ovvero dell'Amore e della Bellezza*, Venice 1628, 534–536. Manso knew Caravaggio well. Some twenty years before the dialog went to press, he was one of the founding members of the Pio Monte della Misericordia, the organization that commissioned Caravaggio's *Seven Acts of Mercy* in 1607, immediately after Caravaggio had arrived in Naples. Even before Caravaggio came to Naples, Manso had patronized the poet Giambattista Marino, who wrote poetry on Caravaggio. On Caravaggio and Manso, see Alessandro Giardino, *The Seven Works of Mercy. Love between Astrology and Natural Generosity in the Naples of Tommaso Campanella*, in: *Aries* 17, 2017, 149–170.

## 16

Mark Roskill, *Dolce's Aretino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento*, New York 1968, 164–165.

## 17

Federico Borromeo, *De delectu ingeniorum*, Milan 1623, MS, cited in Barbara Agosti, *La Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Aperture e chiusure*, in: *Prospettiva* 87/88, 1997, 175–181: "Narra a simile de Michel Angelo Caravaggio: in illo apparebat l'osteria, la crapula, nihil venusti; per lo contrario Rafaello. Etiam aspectus indicat scriptor: Titianus, Michael Angelus, Caie-

between the works of the two painters that interested these critics, but the way in which both artists made their work in tune with two distinct social worlds. Cesare Malvasia understood Raphael's large narrative scenes, with many people interacting to bring the story across, in light of Raphael's social life in Rome. Raphael interacted with the intellectuals at the court of Pope Leo X and knew how to unite all and everything he knew in Rome.<sup>18</sup> Malvasia added that the appreciation of Raphael's art depended on the perspective of the viewing public, on how much the viewer's social status allowed him to appreciate networks of people, both depicted and real. The *intendenti*, the men of intellect who were themselves embedded in powerful social networks, saw the bond between people that mattered to them in real life mirrored in the historical narratives Raphael painted in Rome. The masses (*volgo*), on the other hand, had no taste for the depiction of social interaction. They rather preferred an art of isolation and truncation, in the shape of their own lives. Caravaggio painted half-length figures, Malvasia knew, "without thighs or legs", in isolation from one another and failing to unite in the service of story-telling. Caravaggio was a socially isolated producer of fragmented bodies, entirely different to Raphael.<sup>19</sup>

What structured the difference Malvasia observed between the works of these two historically distant painters is a perceived distinction between two different lives – the one embedded in the city's elite and the other not – that their works seem to give rise to.<sup>20</sup> Armed with information about Caravaggio's person, Malvasia saw his works differently.<sup>21</sup> Information on how Caravaggio lived his life existed close to discussions of his work. In 1604, the Dutch

tanus: e contrario Caravagius." For the substantial written reception of Raphael's life and art up to 1602, when Caravaggio began the climb towards the height of his Roman career, see John Shearman, *Raphael in Early Modern Sources (1483–1602)*, New Haven, CT 2004. And for Raphael's visual reception, see Cathleen Hoeniger, *How Copies May Shed Light on the Reception of Raphael*, in: Sharon Gregory and Sally Anne Hickson (eds.), *"Inganno". The Art of Deception*, Aldershot 2012, 99–121.

18

Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice vite de' pittori bolognesi*, Bologna 1678, vol. II, 258: "Ma appresso gl'intendi si lascerà conoscere per pittore molto differente da Raffaelle da Urbino, il quale seppe unire il tutto ne'servigi in Roma dai Pontefici in Vaticano, e ardirò dire che ebbe del miracoloso, bechè fu umano, poichè ebbe grand'ingegno nell'accostarsi coi primi letterati della gran corte di Leone X. e per le cui pratiche acquistò tanto in 27. anni di età, che ardirò dire fu pittore divino."

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Ibid., 258: "Ma appresso gl'intendi si lascerà conoscere per pittore molto differente da Raffaelle da Urbino, il quale seppe unire il tutto ne'servigi in Roma dai Pontefici in Vaticano, e ardirò dire che ebbe del miracoloso, bechè fu umano, poichè ebbe grand'ingegno nell'accostarsi coi primi letterati della gran corte di Leone X. e per le cui pratiche acquistò tanto in 27. anni di età, che ardirò dire fu pittore divino."

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Lorenzo Pericolo recently demonstrated that a formal comparison between Raphael and Caravaggio in fact demonstrates that Caravaggio was concerned with ideas about narrative painting, just like Raphael. Caravaggio's own works were in fact ambitious variations on the narrative structure of the classic *historia* introduced by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435. See Lorenzo Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative. Dislocating the Istorica in Early Modern Painting*, London 2011.

21

For this aspect shift in literature, see Liesbeth Korthals-Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation. The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*, Lincoln, NE 2014.

painter Karel van Mander described Caravaggio's bad working ethics, the fact that "after a fortnight's work he will swagger about for a month or two with his sword at his side and with a servant following him [...] with the result that it is most awkward to get along with him" in tandem with the artist's working methods.<sup>22</sup> A year later, Caravaggio's patron Cardinal del Monte was quoted as saying that Caravaggio had "a twisted brain", which accounted for his bad manners both in work and in life.<sup>23</sup> In 1623, thirteen years after Caravaggio's death, Federico Borromeo wrote that Caravaggio's dirty habits drove him to paint tavern-goers, jesters, gypsies, unwashed porters, and men who spent the night sleeping in Rome's squares. "His habits [*costumi*] [...] were similar to his works."<sup>24</sup> Giovanni Baglione – a fellow-painter in Caravaggio's Rome – wrote that Caravaggio had a "satirical" (*Satirico*) and "haughty" (*altiero*) character, which meant that he disdained contemporary and past painters, and which thus accounted for what Baglione and others saw as the painter's remarkable departure from artistic traditions and styles.<sup>25</sup> Baglione added that Caravaggio lacked the ability to distinguish between good (*buono*) and bad (*cattivo*) in the people he represented.<sup>26</sup> Filippo Baldinucci said that Caravaggio handled the brush in a way that conformed with the saying "Every Painter Paints Himself": arrogant and extravagant.<sup>27</sup>

Air was what carried and contained these stories near the work. And according to some, Caravaggio himself filled the air with talk and action. In the summer of 1604, the painter Federico Zuccaro reported to his patron Ascanio Cesarini on Caravaggio, then

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Karel van Mander, *Het schilder-boeck waer in voer eerst de laerlustighe iueght den grondt der edel vry schilderconst in verscheyden deelen wort voorgedraghen*, Haarlem 1604, fol. 191r. Bellori echoed this sentiment, adding that Caravaggio only worked for a few hours a day and then went into the city with his knife; Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti moderni*, Rome 1728, 124.

## 23

Letter from Fabio Mansetti to Giovan Battista Laderchi, August 24, 1605, published in: Antonio Bertolotti, *Artisti Lombardi a Roma nei secoli XV, XVI e XVII. Studi e ricerche negli archivi romani*, Milan 1881, vol. II, 73. See Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio, the Artist and His Work*, Los Angeles, CA 2012, 177–178 for a discussion of this episode.

## 24

Borromeo, *Musaeum*, Ms. Milan, 1625, fols. 118–119: "Nei mei di conobbi un dipintore in Roma, il quale era di sozzi costumi ed andava sempre mai con panni stacciati e lordi a maraviglia, e si viveva del continuo fra i garzoni delle cucine dei signori della Corte. Questo dipintore non fece mai altro che buono fosse nella sua arte, salvo il rappresentare i tavernisti ed i giocatori, ovvero le cingare che guardano la mano, ovvero i baronci ed i fachini, e gli sgraziati, che si dormivano la notte per le piazze; ed era il più contento uomo del mondo, quando avea dipinto un'osteria, e cola entro chi mangiasse e bevvesse. Questo procedeva dai suoi costume, i quali erano simiglianti ai suoi lavori."

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Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII del 1572. In fino a' tempi di Papa Urbano Ottavo nel 1642*, Rome 1642, 138.

## 26

*Ibid.*, 139.

## 27

Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua*, Milan 1812, vol. X, 218–219.

approaching the height of his Roman career. “I’m not surprised”, Zuccaro wrote,

that Caravaggio has so many champions and protectors because the extravagance of his character and painting [*la stravaganza del suo carattere e del suo dipingere*] are more than sufficient to give birth to these effects [*partorire questi effetti*].<sup>28</sup>

Caravaggio could thank for his fame rich and influential men who “judge beauty only by its air of novelty [*un’aria di novità*] and its ability to surprise”.<sup>29</sup> In this assessment, the air carried a false novelty that Caravaggio had himself constructed out of the extravagance of his person and his picture-making. Zuccaro used the verb *dipingere*, to paint (not the noun *pittura*), in order to distinguish painting as a performance (a way of doing) from the finished, formed object that is a picture. Separating doing from form, Zuccaro tried to describe how performance could cause an effect that had an impact on the reception of form. The way Caravaggio performed his persona and staged his painting practice created an air of newness that proved false if it were subjected to formal analysis. The actual objects Caravaggio produced, Zuccaro knew, easily fitted a history of form that stretched back to Giorgione, to the art of about a century earlier. Zuccaro saw nothing other than Giorgione’s thought in Caravaggio’s *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, a picture that indeed relies on the same dark background and strongly lit figures as works by Giorgione [Fig. 1].<sup>30</sup> A formal comparison re-contextualized Caravaggio’s work as a moment in a diachronic succession of forms. The concept of air introduced an irrational rupture in the succession narrative. It made the seeing of an artwork dependent on the life happening in the air around the picture instead of the forms that lie in its past.

### III. In Painting’s Proximity

In Caravaggio’s *The Crowning with Thorns* of around 1603 air finds substance and color, if no form [Fig. 2]. In the picture’s upper left corner light enters the dark space in which the crowning unfolds. It illuminates the figures: reflecting off pale and tanned skin, fabric,

28

The letter is dated July 28 with no addition of a specific year; for the date of the letter and the identification of Cesarini, see Stefano Pierguidi, *Le lettere di Federico Zuccari* pubblicate da Stefano Ticozzi. Un esempio di interpolazione ottocentesca, in: *Atti e studi. Accademia Raffaello* 1, 2012, 57–66.

29

Giovanni Gaetano Bottari (ed.), *Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, scultura ed architettura. Scritte da’ più celebri professori che in dette arti fiorirono dal secolo XV. al XVII*, Rome 1754–1773, vol. VII, 514–515.

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Baglione, *Vite*, 137.



[Fig. 1]

Caravaggio, *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, 1599–1600, oil on canvas, 322 × 340 cm. Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome (artwork in the public domain).





[Fig. 2]  
Caravaggio, *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, 1607, oil on canvas,  
127 × 165.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna © KHM-Museumsverband.

thorns, feathers, the metal of a harness. Light helps distinguish the materials of which the crowning is made, differentiating skin from stone. It is diffused throughout the picture's space. Bright at the top and gradually losing intensity as it makes its way to the lower right corner of Caravaggio's canvas, it never touches the rear enclosure of the picture's space. Released of its responsibility to illuminate the contours of this dark space – walls, windows, doors – light helps the air to be depicted. The air is brownish, apparently of some substance. Down in the space to the right of Christ, Caravaggio applied reds and browns with irregularly placed brushstrokes over the picture's gray ground, applied with a broad brush that sometimes follows the direction of the light pouring in and at other instances moves about erratically. The red of Christ's robe reflects upon parts of the atmosphere. The brush's lack of direction helps to avoid any suggestion that Caravaggio was painting some fixed form, like a wall or other backdrop. The limits of the air are determined by figures filling all space not filled with air, for air lacks its own contours. Caravaggio's effort to depict what air is *qua* air – formless yet of some, undefined substance – marked a first, an unprecedented and hard to repeat attempt.<sup>31</sup> Even his own efforts were often stranded on the illumination of materials and forms: a wall, some fabric, a cloud, sunrays, like in the early *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* in London [Fig. 3], painted around 1595, and in *The Calling of Saint Matthew* of 1599 [Fig. 1]. Caravaggio had begun exploring the representation of air's substance in *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, the picture installed opposite the *Calling* some four years before he finished *The Crowning* [Fig. 4]. Beneath the cloud billowing over the altar the air thickens; air's transparency slips into a light-brown color that sits in front of the cross-marked antependium suspended from the altar. Caravaggio's broadly applied, skirmish-like brushstrokes clearly make no effort to describe the texture of the antependium. These strokes do not belong to the fabric. Instead, they describe the air's unruly texture, formless but felt.<sup>32</sup>

Caravaggio's contemporaries, too, saw that he depicted the air differently, in a new way, in spite of Zuccaro's observation that Caravaggio was just repeating Giorgione in his picturing of darkness. They saw it as the effect of the painting environment Caravaggio

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There is no study of Caravaggio's air; for a solid attempt to define the texture of the space surrounding Caravaggio's figures, see the excellent Itay Sapir, *Ténébres sans leçons. Esthétique et épistémologie de la peinture ténébriste romaine, 1595–1610*, Bern 2012.

32

Caravaggio's efforts to depict the substance of air were short-lived; they began around 1599 and ended some four years later with the *Christ Being Crowned*. In later works, such as *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, painted in the spring of 1610 in Sicily, four months shy of Caravaggio's death, the depiction of air is made entirely dependent on the shape of the sunbeams entering. The air takes the form of the beams, long diagonal lines running over the picture's surface. It took time and energy to paint air, to render the formless visible. *Martyrdom* shows the traces of haste. For the physical state of the picture, see Piero Boccardo, *L'ultimo Caravaggio. Il martirio di Sant'Orsola restaurato*, Milan 2004, 91–111. Caravaggio was not the first artist to try to depict air; for more examples, see Alessandro Nova, *The Book of the Wind. The Representation of the Invisible*, Montreal 2011. But nobody had tried to depict air's substance like Caravaggio tried.





[Fig. 3]  
Caravaggio, *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*, 1594–1595, oil on canvas,  
66 × 49.5 cm. National Gallery, London (artwork in the public domain).



[Fig. 4]  
Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, 1599–1600, oil on canvas, 323 × 343 cm.  
Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome (artwork in the public domain).

created. The physician Giulio Mancini, who had known Caravaggio well and who was among the first critics to write extensively on the artist, observed around 1618 that Caravaggio had replaced the traditional, well-lit painter's studio with a dark room, painted black with just a single light source above.<sup>33</sup> Mancini added that the effect of Caravaggio's new method was that his pictures looked unnatural, the result of a performative act that was unprecedented and that set his pictures apart from those by Raphael, Titian, Correggio, and others.<sup>34</sup> For Mancini, Caravaggio enacted the new performance for the sake of the performance. The new studio environment limited the possibilities of painting because the single light source prevented Caravaggio from seeing more than one model in his studio: it halted the possibility of painting full narrative scenes from life.<sup>35</sup> The German painter Joachim von Sandrart, who had been staying with Caravaggio's great Roman patron Vincenzo Giustiniani between 1629 and 1635, had heard that Caravaggio painted in dark vaults and other gloomy rooms with just one light source above.<sup>36</sup> Pietro Bellori, who drafted his biography of Caravaggio around 1645, noted that Caravaggio had swapped the clear air of the traditional artist's studio for the stuffy atmosphere of underground vaults and basements. "He never brought any of his figures out into open sunlight," wrote Bellori, "but found a way [*una maniera*] of setting them in the murky air of a closed room [*l'aria bruna d'una camera rinchiusa*]." Caravaggio's critics, he added, believed that the artist "didn't know how to come out of the cellars [*cantine*]]."<sup>37</sup>

The term *aria bruna* carried strong negative connotations. It meant more than just *dark*, *brown*, or *dusky* air. It also referred to air with an unhealthy substance: muddled, murky, unclear, heavy.<sup>38</sup>

33

Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura*, ed. by Adriana Marucchi, Rome 1956, vol. I, 108.

34

Ibid.

35

Ibid., 108–109.

36

Joachim von Sandrart, *L'Academia todesca della architettura, scultura & pittura. oder Teutsche Akademie der edlen Bau- Bild- und Malerey Künste*, Nürnberg 1675, vol. II, 189: "Erhebung desto bäßer herfür bringen möchte/ bediente er sich fleißig dunkler Gewölber/ oder anderer finsterer Zimmer/ die von oben her ein einiges kleines Licht hatten damit die Finsterniß dem auf das model fallenden Licht/ durch starke Schatten/ seine Macht lassen/ und darmit eine hoch-erhobene Rundirung verursachen möchte."

37

Bellori, *Vite*, 121. For the date of Bellori's *Life of Caravaggio*, see Pasquale Sabbatino, *La scrittura dell'arte nelle 'Vite' di Bellori e la pittura di Caravaggio*, in: Vittorio Casale (ed.), *Storia della lingua e storia dell'arte in Italia*, Florence 2004, 257–274.

38

As in Petrarch, Sonnet 82: "Ricuopre con la vista, or chiara, or bruna." Or Petrarch, Sonnet 196: "Tal nebbia cuopre di gravosa, a bruna." Giordano Bruno used the wording *aria bruna* in order to describe the way in which "blind error, greedy time, adverse fortune, deaf envy, vile rage, hostile zeal, cruel hearts, perverse spirits, bizarre passions" were not capable of "making the air obscure before me", *non bastaranno a farmi l'aria bruna*; Giordano Bruno, *Cause, Principle and Unity. And Essays on Magic*, ed. by Richard J. Blackwell and Robert de Luca, Cambridge 1998, 15.



Giambattisto Marino, a Neapolitan poet who had joined Caravaggio in Rome in 1600 and who wrote some laudatory verses on the painter, found that brown air (*l'aria bruna*) was tainted by shadow (*ombra*). It was above all *indistinct* (*indistinto*). *Bruna* described less the color of the air than a certain impression of it, difficult to see but clearly felt.<sup>39</sup> In another poem Marino described *aria bruna* as a dense veil (*denso velo*), as air that could only be sensed, not seen.<sup>40</sup> Displacing the act of painting from broad daylight to the dark vaults of early seventeenth-century Rome, Caravaggio had created a new air where he enacted a new way of painting.

No physical evidence of Caravaggio's Roman, Neapolitan, Maltese, or Sicilian studios survives. The house Caravaggio rented between 1604 and the summer of 1605 from Prudenzia Bruni in the Vicolo di San Biagio in Rome included a studio on the second floor of which Caravaggio removed (or damaged according to Bruni) the ceiling in order to move big pictures around, not necessarily to let light in.<sup>41</sup> The studio itself, with long narrow windows situated in a small, dark alley, perhaps already produced the effect Caravaggio was looking for.<sup>42</sup> The inventory also mentions that the house had a large cellar (*cantina*), which Caravaggio perhaps used to study the effect of a single light source in a dark room.<sup>43</sup>

Mancini wrote that the city's young painters imitated Caravaggio's practice of working in dark rooms with a single light source.<sup>44</sup> In the summer of 1612, two years after Caravaggio's death, the Spanish painter Jusepe Ribera asked his landlord permission to cut a window in the roof of a studio he had rented on the top floor of a building close to the church of Sant' Ambrogio, "in order to accom-

39

Giovanni Battista Marino, *La Sampogna del Cavalier Marino, divisa in Idillij favolosi, & pastorali*, Venice 1621, 72 (*Arianna*, Idyll 3). For the relationship between Caravaggio's art and Marino's poetry, see Elizabeth Cropper, 'The Petrifying Art: Marino's Poetry and Caravaggio', in: *The Metropolitan Museum Journal* 26, 1991, 193–212.

40

Giovan Battista Marino, *Epitalami*, Venice 1620, 103.

41

For the lease agreement between Caravaggio and Bruni, see Riccardo Bassani and Fiora Bellini, 'La casa, le 'robbe,' lo studio del Caravaggio a Roma. Due documenti inediti del 1603 e del 1605', in: *Prospettiva* 71, 1993, 68–76. Recent archival findings by Daniela Soggiu have demonstrated that Caravaggio had opened part of the ceiling in order to maneuver big pictures around, like the *Entombment*, the *Death of the Virgin*, or the *Madonna of Loretto*. Bertolotti, *Artisti*, vol. II, 74. Maurizio Marini (Un'estrema residenza e un ignoto aiuto del Caravaggio in Roma, in: *Antologia di Belle Arti* 17–20, 1981, 180) already suspected that Caravaggio had not cut a whole in the ceiling to let the light in, a suspicion now documented by Alessandro Zuccari, 'Caravaggio in 'cattiva luce'', in: Michele di Sivo and Orietta Verdi (eds.), *Caravaggio a Roma. Una vita del vero*, Rome 2011, 124–129.

42

Bassani and Bellini, *La casa*, 70.

43

For Caravaggio's studio environment, see Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, 'Caravaggio e la luce nell'atelier', in: id., Pietro Roccasecca and Andreas Thielemann (eds.), *Lumen, imago, pictura. La luce nella storia dell'ottica e nella rappresentazione visiva da Giotto a Caravaggio*, Rome 2018, 39–64.

44

Mancini, *Considerazioni*, vol. I, 108.

modate his painting”, which Ribera was to make at his own expense and was obliged to close before the end of his lease.<sup>45</sup> Ribera and others believed that they needed to re-enact the site of Caravaggio’s environment in order to paint like him. Imitating Caravaggio’s works, visible in many Roman churches and some accessible private collections, wasn’t enough to know and paint in Caravaggio’s style.

This emphasis on restaging an artistic performance cut right through traditional models of stylistic succession.<sup>46</sup> Early modern European artists, including Caravaggio himself, learned to paint in a style by copying the works of established masters, to render new form on the basis of existing form. It prioritized the imitation of dead objects over everything else. Still paint served as the point of departure for learning about a maker’s ways of doing or the author’s individual style. Cennino Cennini wrote around 1400 that the imitation of an object could lead to a maker’s *maniera* and *aria*, manner and style – qualities that were somehow locked inside pigments, binders, and wood.<sup>47</sup> The idea that a thing carried part of a person’s being with it still structured theories of imitation in Caravaggio’s time. In his *De veri precetti della pittura*, published in 1587, Giovanni Battista Armenini advised young artists to always copy artworks that looked like the works of ancient sculptors because these things shaped the young artist’s *way of doing (habito)*. “Imitation,” Armenini wrote, “is nothing else than a diligent and judicious consideration that one applies in observing in order to become similar to other excellent [people] [*simili agli altra eccellenti*].”<sup>48</sup> The Roman doctor Francesco Scanelli wrote that painters imitating pictures by Correggio retrieved the painter’s enthusiasm (*gusto*) with it. A character trait belonging to an individual could be retrieved from a thing through imitation.<sup>49</sup> This theory of imitating objects (and not lives) sustained style as an autonomous development of form.

45

Silvia Danesi Squarzina, New Documents on Ribera, ‘Pictor in Urbe’, 1612–1616, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 148, 2006, 244–251.

46

Whitney Davis called the formal succession stylisticality, a special kind of style that relied on the conscious placement of an artwork in a succession of forms. Whitney Davis, *The Stylistic Succession*, in: *A General Theory of Visual Culture*, Princeton, NJ 2011, 75–119.

47

Cennino Cennini, *Il libro dell’arte*, ed. by Gaetano and Carlo Milanese, Florence 1859, 17. For the terminology of *aria* and *maniera*, see David Summers, *Aria II. The Union of Image and Artist as an Aesthetic Ideal in Renaissance Art*, in: *Artibus et historiae* 20, 1989, 15–31, who claims that the two words roughly mean the same thing. A similar claim is made by Philip Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge 2000. For the difference between *aria* and *maniera*, see Joost Keizer, *Style and Authorship in Early Renaissance Art*, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 78, 2015, 370–385.

48

Giovan Battista Armenini, *De’ veri precetti della pittura*, ed. by Marina Gorreri, Turin 1988, 76–77.

49

Francesco Scanelli, *Il microcosmo della pittura*, Cesena 1657, 99, 343–344. For Scanelli and seventeenth-century painting, see Lorenzo Pericolo, *The Liver, the Heart, and the Brain. Francesco Scanelli and the Body of Painting*, in: *RES. Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 2019, 178–191, 71–72.

Artistic personas were only visible insofar as they lodged inside brushstrokes, within the frame of the work. Because makers became what objects dictated, they were as much part of the chain of artistic succession as the objects they made. The theory controlled life by having it dictated by objects.

Imitating Caravaggio interrupted the chain.<sup>50</sup> One first had to create the circumstance in which the work was made and start *doing* and *being* like Caravaggio to then be able to *work* like him. The assumption underlying the interruption was that Caravaggio's style proved not entirely retrievable from the still objects he left behind. It created some of the most remarkable experiments in the history of re-enactment. Bellori wrote that Bartolomeo Manfredi, who worked in Rome when Caravaggio did, adopted the same manners (*li modi stessi*) as Caravaggio, which allowed him to become Caravaggio, a way of being that allowed Manfredi to see the world through Caravaggio's "eyes".<sup>51</sup> As Caravaggio, Manfredi was finally able to work in a dark palette and to paint half-length figures out of which he, like Caravaggio, created narrative pictures.<sup>52</sup> Giovanni Baglione told a similar story about Carlo Saraceni, who in his quest to imitate Caravaggio's way of painting, abandoned his traditional artist's training (copying the works of other artists) and instead began copying Caravaggio's life.<sup>53</sup> Saraceni even purchased a dog similar to the one owned by his role model. "And because he had committed himself," Baglione wrote,

to imitating Michelangelo da Caravaggio, who always had with him a black poodle, called Cornacchia [black crow], who could play beautifully, Carlo also began taking with him a black dog, who he also called Cornacchia, like the other.<sup>54</sup>

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Bellori emphasized that the new practice short-circuited traditional models of imitating the works of other artists and refocused attention instead on Caravaggio's singular artistic performance – a way of doing intimately bound up with Caravaggio's person; Bellori, *Vite*, 121.

51

The Bartolomeo mentioned as part of Caravaggio's Roman circle in the libel suit Giovanni Baglioni filed with the legal court of Rome in 1603 is probably identical to Manfredi; Bertolotti, *Artisti Lombardi*, vol. II, 58–59.

52

Bellori, *Vite*, 129.

53

For younger artists imitating Caravaggio's lifestyle, see Olivier Bonfait, *Après Caravage. Une peinture caravagesque?*, Malakoff 2012.

54

Baglione, *Vite*, 146–147. See Philip Sohm, Caravaggio the Barbarian, in: Lorenzo Pericolo and David M. Stone (eds.), *Caravaggio. Reflections and Refractions*, Farnham 2014, 177–198, at 185, for the story and the observation that Benvenuto Cellini believed that Michelangelo had called a prostitute he knew Cornacchia. And see Bellori, *Vite*, 234–235, for a slightly adjusted version of the story.

## IV. Air, Medium, Site

Air enabled the convergence between paint and life. Contemporaries saw a semblance between the depicted air inside the frame and the air of Caravaggio's painting environment. Air made painting transitive, a form of picture that depicts the transition from what lies within the frame to what exists besides it, life itself.<sup>55</sup>

In this kind of transitive painting, the life depicted is always *near painting*; it consists of fragments of the artist's biography and of traces of people who lived close to the artist. Real people posing in Caravaggio's studio environment began to preserve their own individuality when they appeared in paint instead of ceding their identity to the roles they modeled for. The English traveler Richard Symonds had heard that the boy who had lent his body for the god of love in Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia* was Cecco, Caravaggio's "boy [...] that lait with him" [Fig. 5].<sup>56</sup> Live models transgressed the boundaries between art and life; they blurred the distinction between the world inside the picture and life beside it. Their presence made it possible to switch the temporalities of seeing between a distant mythological or biblical figure and a near, contemporary of the painter.<sup>57</sup> This possibility is key to the new painting; it made pictures into first-person narratives, even when their subjects were old biblical and mythological narratives, and made the life *near painting* part of the work. Caravaggio's pictures proved incomplete without involving what surrounded them. Caravaggio's paintings were not just site- and time-specific; they also *depicted* the synchronicity of time, space, and object.<sup>58</sup>

The men and women who populated the Roman neighborhood of the Ortaccio, the hodgepodge of alleys pressed between Piazza di

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I borrow the term transitive painting from David Joselit, *Painting Beside Itself*, in: *October* 130, 2009, 125–134.

56

For the Symonds passage, see Michael Wiemers, *Caravaggios 'Amore Vincitore' im Urteil eines Romfahrers um 1650*, in: *Bruckmanns Pantheon* 44, 1986, 59–61; Helen Langdon, *Caravaggio. A Life*, London 1998, 220–221. Baglione had already reported that Caravaggio had painted the cupid from life, and Von Sandrart, who had been staying with the picture's owner between 1629 and 1635, wrote that Caravaggio had used a twelve-year-old boy as a model for the Amor, information that aligns with Cecco's age around 1601, when Caravaggio painted the *Amor*; Baglione, *Vite*, 137; Von Sandrart, *L'Academia todesca*, 190. The wings suspended from the boy's back were probably there when Caravaggio painted; the trial testimony of 1603 mentions a pair of such wings Caravaggio had borrowed from Orazio Gentileschi; Walter Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies*, New York, NY 1955, 279 for a transcript of the case.

57

For the concealed intimacy in Caravaggio's art, see Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets*, Cambridge, MA 2001.

58

As Michael Fried and Todd Olson have emphasized, Caravaggio lived in the century of the portable artwork, of objects that are less site-specific than traditional altarpieces and frescos; Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, Princeton, NJ 2010; Todd Olson, *Caravaggio's Pitiful Relics*, New Haven, CT 2014. Few objects remained in their original location; Caravaggio never tried his hand at painting fresco, the least moveable of all painting materials, a fact emphasized by Bellori, *Vite*, 127, 129, 138. My argument does not contradict these ideas. It rather offers a framework for thinking about the style of Caravaggio's pictures as embedded in a specific historical location.



[Fig. 5]  
Caravaggio, *Amor Vincit Omnia*, 1601–1602, oil on panel, 156 × 113 cm. Gemäldegalerie Berlin © Foto: Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz.



Spagna and Piazza del Popolo that included Caravaggio's residence in the Via di San Biaggio, emerged in Caravaggio's pictures. The Ortaccio (or Hortaccio, literally "bad garden") had been walled off from the rest of the city since 1566 in order to house and contain the city's prostitutes. Mancini reported that "some dirty prostitute [*meretrice sozza*] from the Ortaccio" had modeled for the dead Virgin in the altarpiece for Santa Maria della Scala, a woman Caravaggio much loved.<sup>59</sup> Giovan Battista Passeri knew of another prostitute who had made it into *Madonna di Loreto*. This time a whole narrative unfolding around the corner from Caravaggio's house in 1605 wove around Caravaggio's picture. Passeri knew that Lena, the daughter of a young widow, had modeled for the Madonna; she is probably identical to the Lena mentioned in a court document of July 1605, a prostitute who was reported in that document as Caravaggio's woman and who could be found "standing in Piazza Navona".<sup>60</sup> Both Passeri and the court document mention that Caravaggio had hit a notary, a man named Mariano Pasqualone, in defense of Lena's honor. Passeri explained that the jealous notary had been angry with Lena's mother for allowing the young woman to join a villainous and cursed painter like Caravaggio in his studio.<sup>61</sup>

The drama and violence of the whole episode leave no trace in the picture's form. A cross-legged woman towers over two kneeling pilgrims with dirty feet, Caravaggio's dark studio replaced by an evenly dark corner on a Roman street. It is difficult to prove that Caravaggio indeed used Lena as a model for his picture; nor is it possible to know for sure that he used a local prostitute for the dead Virgin.<sup>62</sup> The comments by Mancini, Symonds, and Passeri offer a matrix for understanding Caravaggio's pictures as works that include what is near them and are incomplete without the inclusion of their near environment. *Near painting* had become a point of convergence between life and pigment. The style of Caravaggio's pictures exists in the aerial zone between object and life, the space occupied by a localized version of life with Caravaggio at its center.

59

Mancini, *Considerazioni*, vol. I, 224 (marginal note to the main text).

60

Bertolotti, *Artisti Lombardi*, 71–72.

61

This is a passage not published in the edition of Passeri's work of 1772; see Jacob Hess, *Nuovo Contributo alla Vita del Caravaggio*, in: *Bollettino d'arte* 26, 1932, 42. For a discussion of the episode reaching a different conclusion, see Estelle Lingo, *Luke, Lena and the Chiaroscuro of the Sacred. Caravaggio's Madonna di Loreto*, in: *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 71–72, 2019, 162–177.

62

For a weighing of the historical evidence for the identification of Caravaggio's models, see Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Caravaggio e la cortigiana. Aspetti sociologici e problemi artistici*, in: *Bulletin de l'Association des Historiens de l'Art Italien* 15–16, 2010, 59–74.

## V. Un-painted

The term “*near painting*” refers to the kind of art that includes actual life as part of the work. It therefore also defines painting as not entirely its own physical object. Painting is nearly painting because its completeness asks for the atmosphere around it to be taken as part of the finished work. Caravaggio’s contemporaries in fact noticed this lack of medium specificity. Caravaggio’s real-life figures looked remarkably un-painted. They resisted the kind of liveliness and animation that made pre-modern painting into painting. Caravaggio’s pictures looked lifeless, unanimated and unnatural, too much subjected to real-life circumstance than the life-endowing function of the pre-modern brush. Pietro Bellori was perhaps most outspoken about Caravaggio’s lack of investment in painting *qua* painting, what Bellori called *arte*, a profession or discipline. He wrote that because Caravaggio didn’t want to exit the cellars he worked in, he lacked invention, decorum, and drawing (as a means to make pictures look planned and composed).<sup>63</sup>

Invention and drawing were art theoretical concepts meant to ensure that depicted figures looked like breathing people enthralled in narratives and conversations, people who acted on their own emotions and responded to those of others. Together with the imagination – considered an actual organ by Caravaggio and his contemporaries – invention and drawing required that a painter understands the lives of her subjects. Mancini, a doctor by training, knew that the imagination (*fantasia*) helped the artist to paint affect (*affetto*), the particular painter-like faculty to paint not just what people look like but how they feel as humans.<sup>64</sup> He also found that Caravaggio lacked an imagination and therefore painted pictures deprived of human interaction. The artist’s practice of placing figures in a dark studio with a single light source further restricted the main goal of painting to imagine the unfolding of narratives on panel, wall, or canvas.<sup>65</sup> The imagination served to cast the formless stuff of life into neatly formed wholes that listened to well-defined artistic concepts. Vincenzo Giustiniani, Caravaggio’s former patron, wrote that long experience in drawing and painting from the imagination allowed artists to form (*forma*), with the help of good design and a disciplined handling of paint, what the painter produced in his imagination (*fantasia*).<sup>66</sup> To imagine was to give shape to the interaction of people and to place figures in meaningful constellations.

<sup>63</sup>

Bellori, *Vite*, 121.

<sup>64</sup>

Mancini, *Considerazioni*, 180.

<sup>65</sup>

*Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup>

Bottari, *Raccolta di lettere*, vol. VII, 249. For the date of the letter, see Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, New York, NY 1983, 345–346.

Human skin was the membrane marking the difference between life and death. It provided a semiotic field indicative of a person's being or not.<sup>67</sup> Francesco Scanelli, another doctor in Caravaggio's circle, wrote that the painter's work should overlap with that of the physician, for both diagnosed the state of the body by looking at skin. The painter occupied himself with the habits (*habiti*) of a person's soul (*animo*), and how these habits surfaced visually when the underlying blood showed through transparent skin. The medical doctor aided the painter by teaching him to interpret changes in skin color with the help of medicine. Both worked in order to sustain and preserve human life, the doctor to preserve and cure people, the painter "to make multiples [of people] by way of imitation".<sup>68</sup> Both the painter and the doctor defied death.

Scanelli found that Caravaggio embraced death. Caravaggio's painted skin evidenced no blood beneath the surface. The *Magdalene* of around 1595 was singled out for particular criticism [Fig. 6]. No blood colored Magdalene's skin red or pink where it should. Her complexion is pale, her cheeks lack blush. Instead, her hands are colored red, particularly her fingers, exactly where, Giovan Battista Manso had argued, the skin should not give evidence of the blood beneath it.<sup>69</sup> Scanelli found her skin an opaque container of the body that did no semiotic work. Caravaggio's pictorial investment in "the pure appearance of her surfaces", the lack of energy he spent on giving her life, as he was expected to do as a painter, made her look soul-deprived, to lack grace and expression. Caravaggio failed to animate her (*animarla*). "One might well say that she looks dead." Scanelli compared Caravaggio's *Magdalene* to the Magdalene in Correggio's *Pieta*, who "demonstrates on the outside her inner sadness".<sup>70</sup>

The hands of Caravaggio's Magdalene instead had the air outside to thank for their color. They had tanned in the sun of Rome's squares, where Roman prostitutes stood. Her body had been formed and colored beyond the agency Caravaggio should have allocated her as a painter. Seventeenth-century logic attributed tanning to the medial qualities of the air. Air carried local soil and water and brought them inside the bodies of humans. It made skin index place

67

Carlo Ginzburg, Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes. Clues and Scientific Method, in: *History Workshop Journal* 9, 1980, 5–36; B. K. Nance, Determining the Patient's Temperament. An Excursion into 17th-Century Medical Semiology, in: *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 67, 1993, 417–438; Todd Olson, Caravaggio's Coroner. Forensic Medicine in Giulio Mancini's Art Criticism, in: *Oxford Art Journal* 28, 2005, 85–98; Frances Gage, *Painting as Medicine in Early Modern Rome. Giulio Mancini and the Efficacy of Art*, University Park, PA 2016; Frances Gage, Complexion and Palette in Giulio Mancini's Theory of Beauty and His Critique of Caravaggio, in: Maurizio Calvesi and Alessandro Zuccari (eds.), *Da Caravaggio ai caravaggeschi*, Rome 2009, 391–423, 589–595.

68

Francesco Scanelli, *Il microcosm della pittura*, Cesena 1647, "A lettore", unpaginated.

69

Giovan Battista Manso, *Erocalia, ovvero dell'amore e della bellezza*, Venice 1628, 513–514.

70

Scanelli, *Microcosmo*, 277–278.



[Fig. 6]  
Caravaggio, *Penitent Magdalene*, 1594–1595, oil on canvas, 122.5 × 98.5 cm.  
Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome (artwork in the public domain).

rather than the emotions of the bodies it contained. Skin darkened because the vapors of rivers mixed with the air (*aria*) and then joined “with the color of the sun”, just like smoke tanned wood, wrote Camillo Baldi. “The composition of a particular site”, he knew, “changes the human qualities [*le humane qualità*]”.<sup>71</sup> There is no doubt, wrote Alessandro Petronio in *On the Way of Life of the Romans* published in 1592, just before Caravaggio would move to Rome, that “the air is the most potent of all inanimate things to change a human being”.<sup>72</sup> Petronio didn’t mean to say that air itself changed people, like a long history of geo-humoralism prescribed.<sup>73</sup> He rather believed that air was medial: it carried the local soil and water to human beings, influencing peoples’ behavior and being, a theory that in its treatment of people as deprived of agency and completely subjected to their living environment comes close to Caravaggio’s environmentalism.<sup>74</sup> For Petronio, air dictated the lives of the Romans, and more so in the Ortaccio, where Caravaggio and his live models lived, than anywhere else in the city.<sup>75</sup> Lying low in the Tiber valley, enclosed by Monte Cavallo, Monte Trinità, and the walls built to enclose the prostitutes, the air there had nowhere to go. It carried bad vapors to people’s heads and affected the precarious balance of the humors during the hot days of summer. Petronio still recalled the summer of 1566, when humid air had caused an unprecedented outbreak of fever in the neighborhood. Some people thought that the bad air had something to do with the Trevi Fountains nearby, but Petronio blamed it on the winds blowing the vapors of the Tiber right into the alleys of the Ortaccio.<sup>76</sup> “The air one doesn’t see”, wrote Petronio, but its effect was felt in how people acted. “Those who live there or stay there for a long time, become ever lazier and weaker, and their heads feel increasingly humid and full of phlegm [*pituitose*]”, Petronio concluded.<sup>77</sup>

71

Camillo Baldi, *Trattato come da una lettera missiva si conoscano la natura e qualità dello scrittore*, Carpi 1622, 27–28.

72

Alessandro Troiano Petronio, *Del viver delli Romani et di conservar la sanità*, Rome 1592, 5.

73

Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1327b.

74

Petronio, *Del viver*, 1–2.

75

When he visited Rome in 1581, Michel de Montaigne was struck by the Roman obsession with air; see Michel de Montaigne, *Journal de voyage de Michel de Montaigne*, ed. by François Rigolot, Paris 1992, 131. For this passage, see Gage, *Painting as Medicine*, 174–175. And for the Roman focus on air, see Gage, *Chasing ‘Good Air’ and Viewing Beautiful Perspectives. Painting and Health Preservation in Seventeenth-Century Rome*, in: Helena Cavallo and Tessa Storey (eds.), *Conserving Health in Early Modern Culture. Bodies and Environments in Italy and England*, Manchester 2017, 237–261.

76

Petronio, *Del viver*, 12–14.

77

*Ibid.*, 5.



## VI. Un-painter

Caravaggio's skins exchanged a willed depiction of inner emotions for a passive discoloration of skin, and his painted figures looked subjected to their local environment. The dust of the local streets stuck to their feet and hands. Caravaggio didn't tidy up his figures. He didn't imagine what life could look like, but instead depicted life at a base of common, human experience. There was a remarkable withholding in Caravaggio of all that was painter-like. His behavior as a painter was unlike that traditionally expected of painters. And that was probably the reason why Caravaggio's un-painter-like persona drew so many imitators. Critics grappled with where to situate his painterly act. Some conceded that he completely withheld his agency as a painter. Bellori wrote that Caravaggio put so much faith in the real-life models he used that he did not claim "so much as a single brushstroke as his own [*faceva propria ne meno una pennellata*]"'. Caravaggio said that the traces of making on his pictures did not belong to him as a maker but to nature (*non essere sua, ma della natura*).<sup>78</sup> Much of what Caravaggio did was to depict changes in form that happened without human intervention. He depicted clothing subjected to the wear and tear of agentless material change.<sup>79</sup> Skin responded to the color of the sun that the air carried to humans, like the man on the right in *The Crowning*, used to living his life outside, with tanned neck and arms. The painter Giovanni Baglioni noted that the dead Virgin's body in Caravaggio's picture at Santa Maria della Scala looked "bloated [*gonffa*]"'.<sup>80</sup> Such was the effect of unwanted processes in dead bodies whose equilibrium between the body's moisture and its natural warmth had been disturbed by death, or so pre-modern doctors like Mancini believed.<sup>81</sup> Caravaggio treated bodies as things, subject to erosion, decay, and loss of form. He once went on record saying that "it took as much manual labor [*manifattura*] to make a good picture with flowers as one with figures", a statement made against the common assumption in early seventeenth-century Europe that the painting of humans took more effort than the depiction of things because the painter's imagination needed to animate humans and endow them with emotions and movement.<sup>82</sup>

78

Bellori, *Vite*, 127.

79

Todd Olson, *The Street Has Its Masters. Caravaggio and the Socially Marginal*, in: Genevieve Warwick (ed.), *Caravaggio. Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, Newark, NJ 2006, 69.

80

Baglione, *Vite*, 138.

81

Giulio Mancini, *Consultazioni mediche*, Ms. BAV, Barberinano Latino 4317, fol. 40r.

82

Bottari, *Raccolta di lettere*, vol. VI, 248–249. For the art theoretical purchase of the letter, see Rudolf Preimesberger, *Motivi del 'paragone' e concetti teoretici nel Discorso sopra la*

Instead of replicating the early modern ideology of painting to sustain life, Caravaggio made pictures that replicated life's cycles of erosion, decay, and death – exactly the kinds of natural processes the art of making pictures had been invented to resist. In his *Still Life of a Basket with Fruit* of around 1596, fruit and leaves have lost their proper form [Fig. 7]. They are arid and wrinkled, their color has changed. The dried fig leaf on the right has lost its former contours. Its appearance is now fragmented. The different parts – stem, veins, lamina – are all there but appear in a different order, relation, and scale. Caravaggio's leaf defines identity in spite of form – substance without a fixed shape; it is a leaf slowly on its way towards disappearance. Caravaggio's picture was one of the first to depict such processes of decay in a still life.<sup>83</sup> Painting was not supposed to embrace deterioration, not even a picture of dead flowers and plants. Still life was there to preserve the image of nature in the face of seasonal change. Still life painting was invented to champion over natural processes. Federico Borromeo, the first owner of Caravaggio's still life, praised the stability and durability of painted flowers compared to real-life flowers. Painted flowers are “not fleeting, as some of the flowers that are found [in nature], but stable and very enduring”.<sup>84</sup> The picture by Caravaggio in Borromeo's collection fell out of tune with the owner's own ideas about the function of art to depict durability and steadiness of form.

Another way of saying this is that Caravaggio's pictures lacked style. Or at least that they lacked style in the way his contemporaries understood the concept. Painting with style (*di maniera*), wrote Vincenzo Giustiniani, was reserved for artists who combined long experience in the art of drawing with painting from the imagination. Painting *in style* meant forming images from the imagination on panel or canvas without having life itself in front of you. Stylistic pictures included heads of people, half-lengths, and narratives.<sup>85</sup> Several of Caravaggio's contemporaries claimed that he lacked an imagination, an organ that would have helped him to create life-like narrative pictures full of affect.<sup>86</sup> It was also a way of saying that Caravaggio painted as a human being enmeshed in unformed, uncoded life. The imagination sorted information received through the senses, transforming unfiltered images of reality into reasoned

*Scultura* di Vincenzo Giustiniani, in: Silvia Danesi Squarzina (ed.), *Caravaggio e i Giustiniani. Toccar con mano una collezione del Seicento*, Milan 2001, 50–56.

83

For the unique historical position of Caravaggio's still-life, see among others Alberto Cottino (ed.), *La natura morta al tempo di Caravaggio*, Milan 1995.

84

Vincenzo Borromeo, *Pro suis studiis*, Milan 1628, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Ms. S.P.II.262, no. 5, 1628, fol. 255r. For this passage and Borromeo's ideas about still-life, see Pamela Jones, Federico Borromeo as a Patron of Landscapes and Still Lifes. Christian Optimism in Italy ca. 1600, in: *The Art Bulletin* 70, 1988, 261–272.

85

Bottari, *Raccolta di lettere*, vol. VII, 249.

86

In addition to the authors cited above, see Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, vol. II, 258.



[Fig. 7]  
Caravaggio, *Still Life of a Basket with Fruit*, 1599, oil on canvas,  
46 × 64.5 cm. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan (artwork in the public domain).



form, recasting unruly life as ruled style. Without the filtering effect of the imagination, wrote Francesco Scanelli, people were like animals, acting exclusively according to their “natural instinct [*instinto naturale*]”.<sup>87</sup>

It is this instinct-driven, un-artist-like and formless kind of life that Caravaggio took to be existing as the style of his artworks. Style resided beside the artwork, in the look of life itself. And in Caravaggio’s case that life looked unformed, untargeted, and indecorous.<sup>88</sup> In 1597, a Roman barber called Luca described the style of Caravaggio’s look during a court hearing. Caravaggio was dressed in black clothing of poor quality; he wore a pair of black stockings that were torn; his hair long at the front. This was a deliberately unkept appearance, a strange combination of fake stylish, black clothing unraveled as cheap by a local barber and subject to life’s residual processes.<sup>89</sup> Contemporaries did not see Caravaggio’s life as the formed lifestyle of a painter but as that of a common young man whose appearance depended on his reputation, which spread over Europe fast enough to be published in van Mander’s *Schilder-boeck* in 1604.

What I have been arguing so far is that Caravaggio’s pictures do not come full circle without including the life near them. The material objects now preserved in museums and churches are only part of the work. The rest existed beside it. It helps to think of Caravaggio’s pictures as scores that once needed to be carried out in real life, spilling into their immediate environment. David Joselit first coined the idea of painting as score in order to describe the unique way in which artworks, particularly pictures and drawings, are able to replay and enact experiences stored inside pictures. Painting is always live, constantly “On the Air”.<sup>90</sup> Joselit’s theory helps to think what pictures do as they circulate beyond their moment of creation. This idea of painting only works when we let go of the idea of a painting as picture, as a unique object that stands on its own, i.e. the kinds of image theories defended by formalism. The value of painting as score lies in what exists in between objects as they circulate

87

Bartolomeo Pietrigrassa, *Politica medica per il governo conservativo del corpo humano*, Pavia 1649, 151.

88

For the way in which Caravaggio mobilized subject-matter in order to use art as an (ironic) supplement to his lifestyle, see David M. Stone, Self and Myth in Caravaggio’s *David and the Goliath*, in: Genevieve Warwick (ed.), *Caravaggio. Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, Newark, NJ 2006, 36–46; Philip Sohm, Caravaggio’s Deaths, in: *The Art Bulletin* 84, 2002, 449–468; and Sohm, Caravaggio the Barbarian, 177–198. The argument forwarded in the present essay lives uneasily with irony and self-fashioning (that Stone and Sohm borrowed from Stephen Greenblatt) because both make objects into ironic representations of the artist’s life. In the theory forwarded in this essay, artworks do not re-present life (suggesting a hierarchy between objects and world) but rather pose life itself as a determinant of style.

89

Sandro Corradini and Maurizio Marini, The Earliest Account of Caravaggio in Rome, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 140, 1998, 25–28.

90

David Joselit, Marking, Scoring, Storing, and Speculating (on Time), in: Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burchard (eds.), *Painting beyond Itself. The Medium in the Post-medium Condition*, Berlin 2016, 11–20.

throughout the world. Painting that scores is not a picture, not a noun, but closer to a verb, *paint-ing*.

Joselit's idea of painting centers on *who* controls the circulation of artworks. Rather than claiming with scholars like Horst Bredekamp that a singular picture would itself exert power on us, Joselit finds the power in what exists between the sum of images as they make their way through the world.<sup>91</sup> He calls the power "buzz".<sup>92</sup> With his mobilizing of air, Caravaggio had found a way to affect painting's leap into the space around it, and he understood how he could fill that space with his voice, performance, and presence – all non-material aspects that still counted as part of the work. These non-material aspects counted as life itself. What makes Caravaggio's definition of painting so radical and still useful today is the way in which Caravaggio's life is stored inside the work and then flows out of the work again. The priorities between life and work as a before and after are no longer in place. The artist not only stands at the origins of the work; his presence also continues to exist near the work. In most cases the presence was virtual, not real; it was a reputation that had formed next to and out of his picture-making.

The nearness of the author's presence as part of an extended definition of the work is modern. It emerged in early modern Europe, witnessing the enormous industry of artists' biographies – the preferred critical framework for the understanding of art in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – and the way in which these artists styled their lives. At the end of the still unwritten history of artists' lifestyles lies Joseph Beuys, who had made the spilling of art into life itself into a subject of art making. We will see that Beuys stands in a logical yet unnoticed relation to Caravaggio, although my aim is not to show that Beuys knew or quoted Caravaggio's work.<sup>93</sup>

## VII. Beuys's Score

Beuys's painting on paper *Für Sibirische Symphonie, 1. Satz* is a score of sorts, an object waiting to be performed [Fig. 8]. The drawing is dated 1962, the year before Beuys performed the action *Siberian Symphony* on February 4, 1963 at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, where he had just been appointed Professor of Monumental Sculpture, for which the work was prepared.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup>

Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*, Frankfurt am Main 2010.

<sup>92</sup>

David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton, NJ 2013.

<sup>93</sup>

For Caravaggio's modern reception, see Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio. Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago, IL 1999.

<sup>94</sup>

For the drawing, see Stephanie Straine, Joseph Beuys, *For Siberian Symphony*, 1962, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/beuys-for-siberian-symphony-ar00655> (19.12.2020).



[Fig. 8]  
Joseph Beuys, *For Siberian Symphony*, 1962, oil paint and water color on paper, 63.6 × 63.3 cm. London, Tate Galleries, AR00655 © DACS, 2021.

A dark-brown square enclosing a green blotch of paint is connected to the shape of a hare at the top and at the sheet's bottom to a piano with its lid raised. During the performance Beuys had tied a hare, the artist's totem figure in many of his performances, to a blackboard on which he sometimes wrote texts (which he no longer remembered years later). On the piano during the same performance he had played a self-composed song with fragments of a composition by the avant-garde composer Eric Satie. A wire and some pine twigs tied the hare to the piano, creating a kind of electric system with Beuys himself at its center.<sup>95</sup> He later called it a "sort of electric pylon system", a transmission tower of sorts.<sup>96</sup>

A broken, brown line connects the shapes on the picture to an outside that is marked by the ruffled edges of the torn sheet of paper, where along the edges the remains of a green shape emerge – remains that cast the sheet as incomplete, part of a bigger whole that lies beyond the sheet's physical boundaries. European artists had tested the boundaries of their works for centuries, introducing cut-ins and off-scenes that conveyed the impression that a picture or drawing was just a fragment of a larger whole.<sup>97</sup> Caravaggio placed his figures close to the surface of his pictures, creating an unprecedented nearness. In his *Christ Being Crowned with Thorns*, brightly lit men emerge from a dark background and are pushed towards us standing in the air before the picture [Fig. 2]. The frame cuts off their limbs.

Beuys took this spilling of the work into its environment as painting's scoring capability. How exactly Beuys's painting prepares for the action in Düsseldorf is unclear, however. Its structure is far removed from the neat, replicable scores earlier Dada and Fluxus artists produced, which were meant to allow other artists to re-enact the performance. Beuys rather insisted on a unique, singular performance that was above all tied to his own individual persona.<sup>98</sup> The drawing not only scored the performance in Düsseldorf; it also centered on the need for Beuys's presence alongside the work. Without Beuys the work scores without knowing what it scores.

Beuys's continuous presence beside his work is well-known. In the many interviews he gave, wearing his feature black hat like he wore during his performance, he consistently avoided explaining his work, creating a kind of bywork that existed next to the material objects he claimed responsibility for. In 1966, he returned to creat-

<sup>95</sup>

For the performance and its context, see Götz Adriani, Winfried Konnertz, and Karin Thomas, *Joseph Beuys*, Cologne 1973, 54–60.

<sup>96</sup>

Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, New York 1979, 88.

<sup>97</sup>

See Lorenzo Pericolo, The Invisible Presence. Cut-In, Close-Up and Off-Scene in Antonello da Messina's Palermo *Annunciate*, in: *Representations* 107, 2009, 1–29.

<sup>98</sup>

For Beuys's relationship to Fluxus performances, see Chris Thompson, Silence and the Savant-Garde. Beuys, Fluxus, Duchamp, in: *Performance Research* 7, 2002, 15–25.

ing more bywork for his 1963 performance in Düsseldorf. He now made a work he called *Score for Siberian Symphony*, a collage that consists of two cards with typed text of different size added to two pieces of cardboard of almost equal size [Fig. 9]. The first card dates the performance between 1962, the date of *For Siberian Symphony*, and 1963, the date of the actual performance, and therefore defines the drawing as part of the performance. Such a claim was a typical Beuys move. It obliterated the hierarchy between object and performance, between still thing and moving life. Beuys understood his objects as playing real-life performances that could be endlessly re-enacted in the future without saying how. Avoiding any claims to what or how it scored, *Score for Siberian Symphony* is about the work of scoring. “A score”, Beuys later told the critic and art historian Caroline Tisdall, “gives information without giving information”.<sup>99</sup> On the left-hand card, below the word Program Beuys typed “ö ö ö”, the guttural, animal-like sound, which avoided communication, that he repeated throughout many of his performances and that he would later claim to be the sound of a stag. Beuys found the sound pre-semantic, nothing more than a carrier wave that moved through the air without communicating meaning. Beuys: “The wave is *unformed*; semantics would give it *form*.”<sup>100</sup>

In *Formless*, Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois argued that Beuys’s work showed a too powerful impulse towards form and meaning to qualify as *informe*, the term Georges Bataille used for the kind of work that aims for a base level of no rights and no meaning – the world of spiders and spit that gets trampled by the ordered world of forms.<sup>101</sup> For Beuys, the formless existed outside of the work, in his own biography: a collection of fragmented statements about his life that insists on formlessness in its complete lack of narrative development and its disciplined resistance to the attribution of meaning to life-events. *Pace* Krauss and Bois, Beuys’s avoidance of form resided in what existed near his work and not in it. For the catalog at the Städtische Haus Koekkoek in Kleve in 1961, Beuys filled in a questionnaire that the brothers Van Grinten, who curated the show, had handed him. Beuys used the questionnaire as a kind of alternative format for an artist’s biography. The aim of the *Notizzettel* (Engl.: memo), he declared in the document’s introduction, was to resist the conventional form (*Form*) of biography that he found in catalogs and newspapers. Instead he compiled a list of biographical fragments that included places he “touched” during his time as a pilot for the Luftwaffe during World War II

99

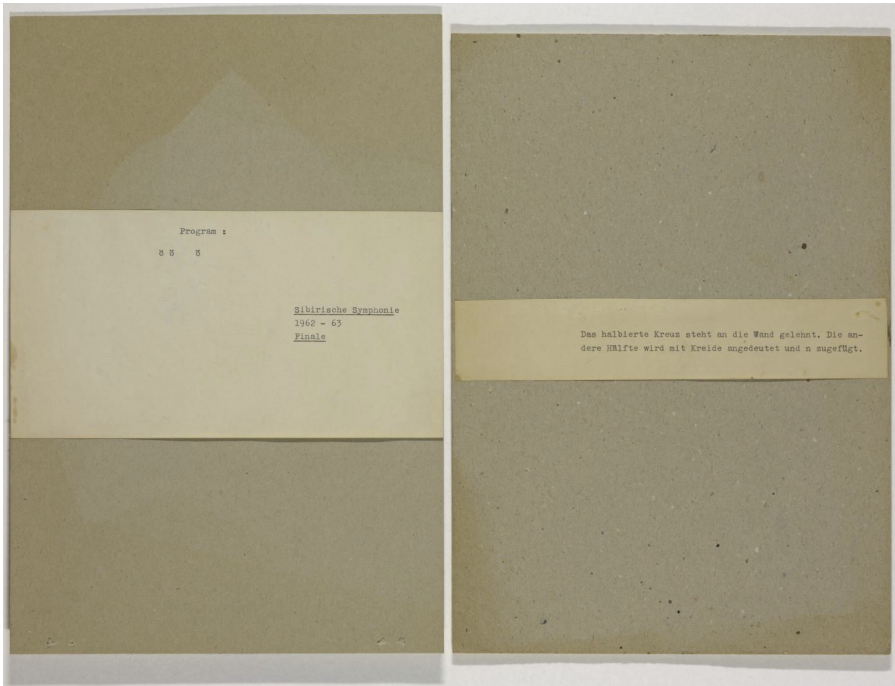
Tisdall, Beuys, 95.

100

Ibid., 95 (emphasis in the original).

101

Georges Bataille, Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr., *Georges Bataille. Vision of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Minneapolis, MN 1985, 31. Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless. A User’s Guide*, New York, NY 1997, 143–147.



[Fig. 9]  
Joseph Beuys, *Score for Siberian Symphony*, 1966, typescript on paper cardboards,  
30.9 × 20.9 + 29.7 × 21.2 cm. London, Tate Galleries, AR00674 © DACS, 2021.

and “essential impressions” of landscapes and cities.<sup>102</sup> Beuys later worked these memos into the Life Course/Work Course document, a list of life-events mixed with some art events that lacked a discursive pattern, that resisted privileging certain events over others, and that presented life-events as exhibition – the first entry of his birth – and art events as happenings in life.<sup>103</sup> The list grew during the first years of its existence, mainly with early events that apparently began to matter to Beuys in later life.

In Beuys, life-events do not *account* for the making of art, as they would in traditional forms of biography. His artworks rather retro-actively *create* life-events that complemented the lists of events he published in writing. Beuys’s preference for modes of transmission in his art production, like the cables and twigs connecting piano with blackboard and the utterance of “ö ö” in *Siberian Symphony*, produce his work as a radio operator aboard a fighter jet in the war years, an event that went unmentioned in the two lists of life-events Beuys produced. He would later explain that his decades-long use of felt was because ethnic minorities had wrapped him in felt after he had crashed in the Crimean planes with his fighter jet, a story he had fabricated out of the work he did.<sup>104</sup> Claudia Mesch pointed out that Beuys’s art practice helped him to deal with the traumatic experience of the war, a means of narrating biography that wasn’t possible in writing.<sup>105</sup> Trauma *forms* past events out of present experiences; in this form of deferred action, Beuys produced earlier life-events out of later artworks.<sup>106</sup> Rather than pitching life as the ground on which art was founded, Beuys made life emerge from art. Both *For Siberian Symphony* and *Score* show that life and work are on constant repeat, one following after the other after the other. *Score* confused the chronology between the preparatory drawing (1962), the actual performance (1963), and its preparatory score (1966). A score is what is supposed to precede the performance, allowing its endless rehearsal in the future, but Beuys made *Score* long after the moment he performed in Düsseldorf in 1963. It is a work of retro-action, just like the wires used during the performance *made* the biographical event of Beuys’s work as a radio transmitter in the war years. The confused chronology between

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Joseph Beuys, Notizzettel, in: *Josef Beuys. Zeichnungen, Aquarelle, Oelbilder, Plastische Arbeiten aus der Sammlung van der Grinten* (exh. cat. Kleve, Städtisches Museum Haus Koekkoek), Kleve 1961, unpaginated.

103

For the document, see Adriani, Konnertz, and Thomas, Beuys, 8–9.

104

For the complicated chronology of life and work evolving around the felt story, see Chris Thompson, *Felt. Fluxus, Joseph Beuys and the Dalai Lama*, Minneapolis, MN 2011.

105

Claudia Mesch, *Joseph Beuys*, London 2017, 18–21.

106

For the Freudian idea of deferred action, see Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. by David Macey, London 1989, 88: “It always takes two traumas to make a trauma.”



drawing, performance, and score, of Beuys's own making, reiterates the chronology-bending effect of Beuys's take on biography. Beuys made life and performance look like events that could be scored *afterwards*.

In 1967, the year Beuys typed *Score*, Roland Barthes published *Death of the Author*, in which an author weighed down by biography is replaced by a reader “without history, without biography, without psychology”.<sup>107</sup> Barthes essay was followed by strenuous post-structuralist and formalist efforts to discount biography as a source for understanding objects and texts. In art history the criticism of biography ran even deeper. In his monumental *Kunstliteratur* of 1924, the first systematic collection of textual sources on art, Julius von Schlosser dismissed stories about the artist's life as “naïve criticism of impressions” that falsely connected theories of creation with the artist's “inadequate life”.<sup>108</sup> The separation between art and life helped scholars of Caravaggio and Beuys do their work without having to answer difficult questions about how work and life related. Beuys had been a member of the Hitlerjugend during the war, Caravaggio had a long record of criminal offenses, he killed a man and had sex with minors. Critics who confronted Beuys's biography dismissed his art. In 2018, Beat Wyss called Beuys “der ewige Hitlerjunge” and saw Beuys's activist art as an extension of fascist thought.<sup>109</sup> Caravaggio scholars like Sybille Ebert-Schifferer and Michael Fried have either claimed that the details of Caravaggio's life do not matter because his patrons didn't care or ignore his life altogether.<sup>110</sup> When Caravaggio became a serious topic of art historical research around the middle of the twentieth century, when Beuys was just getting started as an artist and Barthes had begun to unthink authorship, Roberti Longhi and Lionello Venturi prioritized Caravaggio's position in the history of Milanese and Roman art over thinking how his artworks scored the artist's life.<sup>111</sup> Their efforts

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Roland Barthes, *Death of the Author*, in: *Aspen. The Magazine in a Box* 5+6, 1967. For the context in which Barthes's essay was published, see John Logie, 1967. *The Birth of 'The Death of the Author'*, in: *College English* 75, 2013, 493–512.

108

Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur. Ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der Neueren Kunstgeschichte*, Vienna 1924, 10. In their *Die Legende vom Künstler. Ein geschichtlicher Versuch*, Vienna 1934, Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz tried to show that stories about artists were in fact legendary tales of a highly topical nature, closer to literary fiction than offering an entry into understanding pre-modern art. For a historiographic account of Kris and Kurz, see Evonne Levy, Ernst Kris, *The Legend of the Artist* (1934), and *Mein Kampf*, in: *Oxford Art Journal* 36, 2013, 207–229. Even Margot and Rudolf Wittkower's *Born under Saturn. A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution*, London 1963, offered no model for understanding the relationship between the stories they collected and the artworks they mention.

109

Beat Wyss, *Der ewige Hitlerjunge*, in: *Monopol. Magazin für Kunst und Leben*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/der-ewige-hitlerjunge> (18.12.2020).

110

Ebert-Schifferer, Caravaggio; Fried, Moment.

111

Lionello Venturi, *Il Caravaggio*, Novara 1951; Roberto Longhi, *Il Caravaggio*, Milan 1952.



were remarkably resistant to early seventeenth-century responses that I have argued above carried the idea of Caravaggio's transitive painting.<sup>112</sup>

The model I have presented here sees the ragged lives of Beuys and Caravaggio as included in the work, which amounts to more than a material object. *Near painting* is always reaching out to beyond its material form, to an outside where the artist's life awaits, ready to be included in the work again. What attaches Caravaggio to Beuys is that both men figure painting's nearness. Caravaggio made representation refer to all that was beyond the picture's frame, placing figures near the picture's surface, cutting their bodies off by the picture's border in order to suggest their extension to life itself, and rhyming the picture's air with the air in which Caravaggio painted. Beuys's work scored real-life performances, in addition to suggesting a movement in and out of the work. Outside the work awaited lifestyle, which also counted as a factor towards a work's style. Caravaggio's studied avoidance of traditional models of style, strongly tied up with models of a controlled exercise of the imagination, made style slip into the space around the object that Caravaggio filled with his lifestyle – ragged and fragmented.

Rather than situating the power and efficacy of art in dead objects, the model of *near painting* draws attention to what the producers of images do and did beside the work, when living their lives. With life itself becoming part of the work, questions of aesthetics cede place to those of ethics. It reformulates the central questions of "What do pictures want?" or "What do artworks do?" as "Whose lives matter in art?" If recent discussions during the display of Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016) at the 2017 Whitney Biennale, the Gauguin exhibitions in Ottawa and London in 2019, and the cancelling of the Philip Guston exhibition in Washington and London this year are any indication of what matters in art today, then the life *near painting* is again at its center.

Joost Keizer (joost.keizer@rug.nl) is Associate Professor and Director of Curatorial Studies at the University of Groningen. His work focuses on the ethical questions raised in and by pre-modern European art, with an emphasis on ecology, the conceptual overlap between art and nature, inclusion and exclusion, and current curatorial practice. He is Guest Curator for the exhibition *Artemisia. Woman and Power* at the Rijksmuseum Twenthe. His publications

<sup>112</sup>

The reliability of Caravaggio's early critics is a point of contention among Caravaggio scholars. They point out how much early authors depend on established literary formats, art theory, and personal biases; many of these critics were writing long after Caravaggio's death in 1610. However, some accounts are backed up by archival documentation, workshop practice, or can be traced back to reliable sources of information. The comments on Caravaggio's workshop practice appear in sources that were written independently of one another (Mancini and von Sandrart) and are backed up by the workshop practices of Caravaggio's earliest followers, like Ribera. For Caravaggio's early biographers and their truth-claims, see Sophie Coëtoux, *Effets d'affects. Le Caravage dans les textes du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in: *Histoire de l'art* 35/36, 1996, 39–46; Ebert-Schiffereer, *Caravaggio*, 15–27.

include *Leonardo's Paradox: Word and Image in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (Reaktion and University of Chicago Press 2019) and *The Realism of Piero della Francesca* (Routledge 2017). He is currently at work on a book-length study entitled *Ground Level: Seventeenth-Century Ecologies and the End of Art*, which argues that seventeenth-century Dutch artists recalibrated art as nature in order to found a new kind of ecological image.