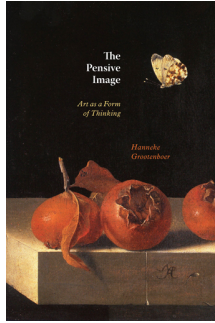


HANNEKE GROOTENBOER,
THE PENSIVE IMAGE.
ART AS A FORM OF THINKING

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Reviewed by
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A fellow art historian has recently revealed on social media that one of the questions she finds herself most frequently asking in response to her students' projects is simply: "Why should we care?" Indeed, I believe that one of the main shortcomings of our discipline is the plethora of studies that reveal new information, nuanced dates, attributions or iconographical programs, but that fail to explain what is the value and the broader meaning of the facts and ideas thus communicated. Before one even begins to analyze Hanneke Grootenboer's work, and perhaps argue with this or that point of detail or interpretation, the starting point should be unequivocal praise for precisely that fundamental, immense virtue: again and again, the Dutch art historian raises questions that really matter and discusses issues that are absolutely crucial for art history and for the study of human culture more generally.

The Pensive Image asks a deceptively simple question: what is the relation between artworks, more specifically paintings, and the process of thinking? What, in the context of the thoughtful mind, can (painted) pictures do better, or differently, than other objects and cultural practices? The answers to these questions constitute a plea in favor of the art of painting, and an articulate response to the skeptic's mockery, "painting, what is it good for?" If art is at its best when it creates a space for thought, or (more on that ambiguity later) when

it is itself doing the thinking, not only is this artform justified; art history gains a new legitimacy as well, being the discourse that reveals the hidden depths of seemingly inconsequential rectangles with pigments on them. The result is a thought-provoking book about an art which is itself, as Grootenboer argues convincingly, a marvelous provocation for thinking.

The Pensive Image, as the French would have it, *a les défauts de ses qualités*. It is a book about space created for the mind to roam in freely, a study of open-ended processes and dynamic interactions; almost necessarily, it ends up being itself a thought experiment with some blurry contours and tantalizing ambiguities. In a similar way, the exceedingly rich array of theoretical references, spanning two millennia and many cultures and languages, is sometimes reviewed somewhat hastily, in particular in the introduction, presenting many brilliant ideas from different periods that could have been engaged with more thoroughly. But then again, this is also a virtue: Grootenboer opens up innumerable possible directions in which the reader's mind could fruitfully err, juxtaposing different viewpoints and insights whose encounters incessantly ignite exciting intellectual sparks.

One of the conundrums left (I suspect intentionally) hovering over the whole book concerns the agency of the thinking process described. It sometimes seems that the images are actually thinking ("art is a form of thinking", p. 8; painting starts "'thinking' for itself", p. 9; "[...] understanding that pensiveness is a quality of the image rather than of the human mind", p. 30); in other cases, they just create a space for us to think in, or trigger the spectator's mental process ("Such thought-images contribute to thinking, or rather, they form an encounter that makes us think", p. 5; in one model the image "does not itself think but lets itself be filled with thought", p. 71). Are the two dynamics the same (one metaphorically described, the other more literal)? I'm not so sure. Many other pairs of concepts are similarly opposed but perhaps not adequately explained: thinking vs. interpretation, for example, or thinking and contemplation (even meditation), sometimes used as quasi-synonyms. Among these binaries, a particularly complex one is the dichotomy between thought and knowledge, to which Grootenboer returns many times, but which is nonetheless left somewhat unclear: is thinking the process leading up to knowledge? Is it an epistemic process of an exceptionally elusive kind? In some chapters, it seems that thinking is understood as a process singularly devoid of specific content, where "conclusions" are not expected, but in other cases, thought is described in more concrete, explicit terms: it is not just "thinking about" something but more committedly "thinking that ...", followed by a well-developed argument.

As is always the case with transhistorical studies structured around a theoretical theme, the choice of artistic case studies is interesting to think about; it is necessarily somewhat arbitrary, but indicative of nuances in the argument itself. Inevitably, the reader has ideas of her own and regrets some omissions: I, for

instance, vainly looked for Pierre Bonnard (mentioned only once in a different context) when reading the fascinating discussion, in Chapter 3, on interiority, habitation spaces, and the dialectics of in- and outside; for me, the French Post-impressionist is the artist most brilliantly figuring these issues in paint. Henri Matisse similarly comes to mind in this context. For the narrative trope of the viewer entering into the space of a picture and wandering around (presumably, and famously, Denis Diderot's invention), it would have been interesting to go further back in time and question the role of Renaissance perspective in creating such habitable, or explorable, illusionist three-dimensional spaces. The art of memory, as studied by Frances Yates and Mary Carruthers, is another corpus absolutely fundamental for this constellation of imaginative thought, and although it is mentioned in the book (p. 89), it should perhaps have had a more prominent place.

Some of the images Grootenboer does delve into, on the other hand, are wonderfully original choices; the eighteenth century Dutch dollhouse, in particular, is a refreshing example of what art historians could achieve with material culture objects not usually recognized as artworks without limiting the discussion to concrete, circumstantial questions. Indeed, Grootenboer carefully looks at that magical, all-too-often ignored object from the Rijksmuseum, showing the same level of respect and painstaking scrutiny with which one routinely honors a Rembrandt; not only is the distinction between "high" and "low" culture thus blurred (Grootenboer would not, of course, be the first scholar to do that in recent times), but more importantly, the whole intellectual and critical apparatus developed to talk about "Art" is here made to apply to a traditionally marginalized object, and the result of that process fully justifies such broadening of our horizons.

The Pensive Image, then, offers us a limited group of examples to ponder, and one could argue for hours about the pertinence of this and that choice. But of course, the number of painters and paintings the author could have hypothetically chosen is practically infinite, and the alert reader may, after reading this book, "implement" its fertile ideas to think through her own favorite paintings. Grootenboer's choice of images (just mentioned or usefully illustrated) also raises another thorny question for which the author's answer is, once again, not absolutely clear: are all images potentially pensive? Probably not: in an event celebrating the book's publication, the author seemed to indicate that for her pensive images constitute a specific *category* of artworks, whereas other pictures do not have that virtue, and perhaps even, by being too ostentatious or "noisy", impede any serious attempt at thinking. However, one is tempted to play the devil's advocate and to claim that any image could be someone's trigger and space for thought, if only, sometimes, in a negative way – an issue that brings us back to the very definition of "thinking" this book says much about but sometimes also elegantly dodges.

Whatever the images chosen by the author for analysis are, she dedicates to each one of them a wonderful, enlightening and

patient examination, a model of “slow looking”, which, though not an explicit theme in the book, is clearly one of the requisites of the thought process Grootenboer calls for. Moreover, time and stillness are important topics of the first chapter, presenting a rich panorama of ideas on movement and stasis, stills and moving images, precipitated and suspended temporalities. For Grootenboer, if some images are particularly pensive, it is because they arrest the flow of time, the frantic mind and the hectic life we all wade through, and give room for what had previously been “unthought”. Around these issues, the author weaves a broader reflection about some of the most crucial nodal points of modern aesthetics. The second chapter has a more limited scope: it discusses the concept of *Denkbild*, theorized by German-language thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Walter Benjamin, but originating, as the author’s own linguistic culture allows her to demonstrate in detail, in the Dutch *Denkbeeld*.

While the first part of the book, comprising these two chapters, elaborates on the (necessarily shaky) conceptual foundations of Grootenboer’s proposal and strives as much as possible, as its title declares, to *define* the Pensive Image, the second part is where the book really takes off. It is not exactly the conventional structure of theory, then visual analyses based on it, that is applied here: both parts are in fact a mix of abstract notions and concrete, artistic examples. What makes the second part different and more poignant is the focus, in each of its three chapters, on a narrower cluster of questions, genres, and modalities of thinking. The third chapter is the one mentioned above where, with the help of René Descartes and Martin Heidegger, but not less importantly with artists such as Emmanuel de Witte, Vilhelm Hammershøi, and Petronella Oortman (the creator of the Amsterdam dollhouse), thinking about the space of thinking is seriously, and beautifully, engaged with. It is precisely the conviction that thinking through images can be as profound as thinking through verbal concepts that is made evident here, ultimately and paradoxically (but this is an eternal, constitutive paradox of art history as such) expressed, by Grootenboer herself, in words.

Grootenboer is an art historian, but she surely hopes (and one hopes with her!) that her book would be read both by her direct colleagues and by scholars of other fields, particularly philosophy. Interdisciplinarity is always a challenge, and *The Pensive Image* generally succeeds in making itself accessible to a broad spectrum of interested readers, but sometimes some more background could be supplied. In the context of Heideggerian philosophy, for example, the difference between the ontic and the ontological might not be obvious for non-philosophers, even if Grootenboer (too generously perhaps) presumes we all know, and remember, such distinctions.

The fourth chapter returns to a familiar territory for the author: seventeenth-century Dutch still life, which she masterfully discussed in her first book, *The Rhetoric of Perspective* (2005). Once again, she rejects the iconographical approach, constantly search-

ing for symbols and allegories to decode in this fascinating corpus of paintings, and proposes instead readings attuned to phenomenological aspects and to subtle visual details. The chapter recruits Paul Klee in yet another transhistorical *tour de force* that densifies the interpretation of the early modern Dutch paintings, going far beyond their traditional consideration as decorative ensembles, ostentation of material wealth, or pious *vanitas* images.

Despite the excellence of its content, reading the fourth chapter is a somewhat irritating experience, because it fell victim to an increasingly common phenomenon in our times of financially struggling publishing industry: sloppy editing. Mysteriously, more than the other chapters this one is full of typos, ungrammatical sentences, unclear references, and the like. Perhaps this is a pedantic perspective, because one can still easily understand the author's arguments, but such an abundance of small irritations distracts the reader and somehow affects the trust she has in the text; one serious round of proof-reading by a professional – which, I believe, used to be a routine stage of the publishing process of scholarly books – could have easily and rapidly solved almost all of these issues.

Thankfully, the fifth and last chapter is not only by and large spared this kind of problem, but it also brings to a climax Grootenboer's sensitive and inspired close readings. Moreover, it offers, as a bonus, an alternative take on the historiography of late-twentieth-century art, through a rehabilitation of sorts of photorealist painting. The spectacular works of Richard Estes, in particular, are the object of a remarkably competent analytical reading, playing on the multiple meanings and associations of the concepts of *reflection* and *Schein* and on the astute intermedial character of these paintings-disguised-as-photographs. By showing how "pensive images are capable of 'thinking through' opposites" (p. 169), Grootenboer here goes beyond the sometimes vague musings of the book's first part to offer a "stronger" thinking (my counter-allusion here is to Gianni Vattimo's *Pensiero debole*, which is not to say that "weak" thinking cannot be a salutary alternative to excessive positivism), whose content is more well-defined and "meaty" (to continue the metaphor, praising "meatiness" does not mean that vegetarianism is not, in many other cases, a laudable practice).

Finally, the conclusion, often a weak link in scholarly studies (and here, read "weak" in the purely negative sense), is here ingenious and pertinent, showing through a counter-example – a 1739 painting-cum-clockwork inspiring amazement but not of the thought-provoking kind – what pensive images are, or more precisely what they *do*: how they inspire a sense of wonder at the most ordinary elements in life, an amazement that is known since ancient Greece to be the starting point of philosophy itself. In numerous moments during the reading of *The Pensive Image*, and despite some localized flaws (but which audacious intellectual enterprise has no flaws?), exactly such a feeling of wonder occurs: one is then mesmerized by the exquisite profundity of some paintings, by the beauty of thinking crystallized into images and then "melting"

once again into a stream of contemplation, and by the lofty level of thinking attained through the collaboration, over centuries and continents, between a few brilliant artists and an attentive, insightful viewer who chose to work as an art historian, transforming visual thought into fine discursive language.