

TWELVE THESES ON ATTENTION

*At other times when I hear the wind blow
I feel just hearing the wind blow makes it worth being born.
I don't know what others will think when they read this;
But I think it must be good because I think it without effort...*

- I. The astonishing reality of things and persons — this is the object of pure attention.
- II. True attention does the work of *bringing forth*. It is the aperture through which the latency of things and persons becomes present. “Mere” attention, ordinary attentiveness, is *useful*, standing in relation to the world like the opening, closing, entering, and exiting of the sensible doors in a well-maintained house. But unmixed attention — pure attention to what cannot be used, to what no one already wants, to what promises no knowledge or gain— does not require doors, because it *walks through walls*.
- III. This true attention, given to objects, unerringly reveals the *presence of others*.
- IV. True attention allows potentialities latent in human relations and encounters — often immediately stifled by the weight of the everyday and by the hegemony of what is agreed to exist and to require attention — to flower and to flourish. It nourishes the implicit forms of being together that are emergent within human interaction and which are constantly interrupted.
- V. An attentional path is the trace left by a free mind. To *submit* to the attentional path of another, to retrace it, is a form of attention. Retracing the attentional path of a free mind is one of the keenest pleasures we can take in each other and in the world.
- VI. In this sense we must recognize a dialectic of attentional freedom: true attention consists in the ability to submit one’s attention to the attentional path traced by another. The absence of freedom of attention may thus feel like freedom (endless solicitation). Freedom of attention may feel like unfreedom (deliberate submission).

VII. This dialectic has been deliberately manipulated by market structures and technologies to the point that we are *increasingly incapable of true attention*. Our attention has never been more free, or more continuously entrapped. Our attentional environments are thus *catastrophic*. True attention is fundamentally *endangered*.

VIII. Escape from our attentional nightmare will not unfold in a singular event. The exercise of a truer attention requires the carving out of spaces in the world where it can survive and thrive — new environments. This might manifest literally through the creation of spaces that facilitate new ways of gathering, but it also requires that we strengthen the relationship between our inner lives and our outer lives. Sharing our individual sensory experiences with others is a means of reconciling a world that is otherwise broken. A world, that is, in which our ability to think for ourselves and to desire on our own terms is consistently threatened.

IX. “Sanctuaries” of this sort for true attention *already exist*. They are among us now. But they are endangered, and thus many are in hiding, operating in self-sustaining, inclusive, generous, and fugitive forms. These sanctuaries can be found, but it takes an effort of attention to find them, and this seeking is also attention’s effort to heal itself. This *attention-which-seeks* often takes the form of an intense and near-devotional expectation and anticipation that refuses to know what it expects and anticipates.

X. What is needed is an *ethics of attention*. This is akin to a practical mysticism. Practical mysticism is not impractical. It is no more and no less than the effort to draw closer to the astonishing reality of things, through those forms of pure attention that are unmixed with evaluations of utility and judgment, and free from the deforming grasp of a seizing hand (or eye or mind).

XI. True attention takes the unlivable and makes it livable. It is a lung that replenishes the air it breathes. If suddenly you feel that you can live and breathe in the place where you are, you or someone around you has committed, enacted, or bestowed attention. This is our work.

XII. This work is the work of freedom and understanding. It is a work, through attention, of world-building. This work is fundamentally political.

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