ball in one hand and leave the floor, with Kareem between you and the basket—knowing, finally, that there is no hope of your making any of those zillion spots, instantaneous decisions that you must make in the air, if you are not borne aloft, buoyed up, as you leave the floor, by a serene, tenacious, gravity-defying confidence that, in just a few seconds, you are going to duck, twist, extend, and slam that sucker down!

Air Guitar

James Naismith’s Guiding Principles of Basket-Ball, 1891
(Glossed by the author)

1 There must be a ball; it should be large.
   (This in prescient expectation of Connie Hawkins and Julius
   Erving, whose hands would invent basketball as profoundly as
   Jimi Hendrix’s hands reinvented rock-and-roll.)

2 There shall be no running with the ball.
   (Thus mitigating the privileges of owning portable property.
   Extended ownership of the ball is a virtue in football. Possession
   of the ball in basketball is never ownership; it is always tempo-
   rary and contingent upon your doing something with it.)

3 No man on either team shall be restricted from getting the ball
   at any time that it is in play.
   (Thus eliminating the job specialization that exists in football,
   by whose rules only those players in “skill positions” may touch
   the ball. The rest just help. In basketball there are skills peculiar
   to each position, but everyone must run, jump, catch, shoot, pass,
   and defend.)

4 Both teams are to occupy the same area, yet there is to be
   no personal contact.
   (Thus no rigorous territoriality, nor any rewards for violently
   invading your opponents’ territory unless you score. The model
   for football is the drama of adjacent nations at war. The model
   for basketball is the polyglot choreography of urban sidewalks.)

5 The goal shall be horizontal and elevated.
   (The most Jeffersonian principle of all. Labor must be matched
   by aspiration. To score, you must work your way down court, but
   you must also elevate! Ad astra.)

Colleagues of mine will tell you that people despise critics because they fear our power. But I know better. People despise critics because people despise weakness, and criticism is the weakest thing you can do in writing. It is the written equivalent of air guitar—flurries of silent, sympathetic gestures with nothing at their heart but the memory of the music. It produces no knowledge, states no facts, and never stands alone. It neither saves the things we love (as we would wish them saved) nor ruins the things we hate. Edinburgh Review could not destroy John Keats, nor Diderot Boucher, nor Ruskin Whistler; and I like that about it. It’s a loser’s game, and everybody knows it. Even ordinary citizens, when they discover you’re a critic, respond as they would to a mortuary cosmetician—vaguely repelled by what you do yet infinitely curious as to how you came to be doing it. So, when asked, I always confess that I am an art critic today because, as a very young person, I set out to become a writer—and did so with a profoundly defective idea of what writing does and what it entails.

Specifically, I embarked upon a career in writing blithely undismayed by the fact that, as a writer, I was primarily interested in that which writing obliterates: in the living atmosphere of all that is shown, seen, touched, felt, smelled, heard, spoken, or sung. I knew this was a peculiar obsession, of course, but I thought writers were supposed to be peculiar. I thought it was just a “problem,” that it could be solved, and that, once solved, the enigmatic whoosh of ordinary experience would become my “great subject”—that I could then proceed to celebrate the ravishing complexity and sheer intellectual pleasure of simply being alive in the present moment forever after. I thought.

So I began by writing poems, quickly shifted to fiction, abandoned that for pharmacologically assisted pastiche, and abandoned that for gonzo reportage—always trying to get out of the book,
trying to get closer to the moment, and always floating farther from it, slamming myself up against the fact that writing, even the best writing, invariably suppresses and displaces the greater and more intimate part of any experience that it seeks to express. Ultimately, I would be forced to admit that all the volumes of Proust were nothing, quantitatively, compared to the twenty-minute experience of eating breakfast on a spring morning at a Denny's in Mobile—and that the more authoritatively and extensively I sought to encode such an experience, the more profoundly it was obliterated from the immediacy of memory and transported into the imaginary realm of remembrance, invested with identity, shorn of utility, and polished up as an object of delectation.

I would begin, every time, trying to approximate some fragment of that enigmatic whoosh and end up, every time, inevitably, writing an edited, imaginary version of myself. Which is simply to say that my "great subject" was not a subject for writing at all. It was a cure for writing. The quotidian experience I was seeking to evoke in writing, as it turned out, was nothing other than a solvent for the identity I was imposing upon it by writing. That gauzy filigree of decentered awareness I was seeking to know in writing was the body's last defense against such codified self-knowledge. Like sex, which marks its final intensification, and art, which supplies its visceral hard copy, that whoosh was the quintessence of everything that is not writing.

So the choice (as it presented itself to me in the intellectual jargon of the late nineteen sixties) was either to stop writing or divest my writing, somehow, of its presumed autonomy, of its implicit aspiration to timeless authority. The option of not writing never seriously presented itself. It was my living and a good kind of life. Also, by this time I understood that the burden of living as a citizen in a massive civil society included the responsibility of wrangling for one's pleasures, lest they dissolve into the smooth surface of rational administration. And writing could do that: It could wrangle, if somehow, as a writer, one could shed the ludicrous, God-like mantle of auteur while retaining one's sotto voce as a private citizen.

By this route, then, I fell upon the option of writing with as much strength as I could muster in a weak genre—a contingent discourse, if you will—by narrating my experience of objects that were likely to survive being written about, and that, by surviving, might redeem or repudiate what I had written by replenishing all those challenges to knowledge and self-knowledge that are shorn away in the historical act of composition. I would write about works of art, then, about pieces of architecture and recorded music—objects that would continue to maintain themselves in the living present subsequent to my transporting them out of it.

In this way, I might stop destroying that which I wished to celebrate and cease celebrating myself in ways I had no wish to—for even though my writing about art might momentarily intervene between some object and its beholders, the words would wash away, and the writing, if it was written successfully into its historical instant, could never actually replace the work or banish it into the realm of knowledge. If the work survived, the writing would simply bob after it, like a dinghy in the wake of a yacht. If the work sank from sight? Well, too bad. The writing could disappear after it into the bubbles.

Art criticism, then, presented itself as a compromise between my "great subject" and the impossibility of writing about it; and, even though times have changed, even though I set out to become a writer in a weak genre—a critic in an age of art—and have survived to labor as a critic in an arid age of criticism, I still believe that the primary virtue and usefulness of criticism resides precisely in its limitations, in the fact that the critic's fragile linguistic tryst with the visible object is always momentary, ephemeral, and local to its context. The experience blooms up in the valley of its saying, to borrow W. H. Auden's phrase, but it does
not survive that moment.

I see the object. I translate that seeing into vision. I encode that vision into language, and append whatever speculations and special pleadings I deem appropriate to the occasion. At this point, whatever I have written departs. It enters the historical past, perpetually absent from the present, and only represented there in type, while the visible artifact remains in the present moment—positively there, visually available for the length of its existence regardless of its antiquity, perpetually re-created by the novelty of its experiential context. As a consequence, what I write and what I have written about diverge from the moment of their confluence and never meet again.

The writing gets older with each passing moment while the artifact gets newer. There are works of art on the wall of my apartment, for instance, that I have written about in the past. They remain as fresh and devious as the first day I set eyes upon them, invariably evoking the sense memory of that first bright encounter—while the words I wrote on that occasion, informed by that brightness, have yellowed into antiquity and seem to me now as weathered and grotesque as Dorian’s portrait tucked away in the attic. Thus, in the same sense that there is only historical writing, there is no historical art beyond those imaginary works that critics describe in writing. For even though a visible artifact must necessarily predate the language that describes it, the artifact itself, as we stand before it, is always newer and more extensive than any word ever written about it—newer and more extensive, even, than the visual codes incorporated into it, because whether we like it or not, we always confront works of art as part of that selfless, otherless, unwritable instant of ordinary experience.

In the process of writing about works of art, then, we make the same sort of Draconian decisions that we do when writing about nonart experience. We write about what can be written about. We decipher that which lends itself to cipher and discard the rest as surplus. Unlike the lost surplus of nonart experience, however, the surplus we ignore in works of art survives, remains available to be invested with meaning by subsequent viewers under different circumstances. But a problem remains, which is that the aspects of visible artifacts that are most effectively translated into writing usually have little or nothing to do with the occasion for writing about them, which, in my case, invariably resides in the pleasurable, confusing, or horrific nature of the experience itself—an experience in which there is neither surplus nor cipher. “In the landscape of spring,” the koan reminds us, “the branches are neither long nor short.” They are simply present, precedent to the standards and expectations we impose upon them as we name their attributes, pronouncing them long or short, strong or weak, young or old.

In the act of writing about art, then, you press language to the point of fracture and try to do what writing cannot do: account for the experience. Otherwise, you elide the essential mystery, which is the reason for writing anything at all. The easy alternative is just to circumnavigate the occasion of seeing something—to “professionalize” art criticism into a branch of academic art history—to presume that works of art are already utterances in art-language that need only be translated into a better language to achieve perfect transparency. In this way, the practice of criticism is transformed into a kind of Protestant civil service dedicated to translating art-language into a word-language that neutralizes its power in the interest of public order. The writer’s pathological need to control and reconstitute the fluid universe of not-writing is fortuitously disguised by this stratagem—since in a truly “professional” discourse, no more intimate engagement with the “needy” object is required than that of a doctor with a patient, and no more stress need be placed upon the language than that required by the clinical assignment of names to symptoms.

Thus, the hypocrisy of the “disengaged critic” writing about art is closely analogous to that of the “disengaged psychoanalyst” writing about sex: Any acknowledgment of the ordinary pleasures
attendant upon the event itself is rigorously suppressed (as professional impropriety) and, along with it, any recognition of the multitudinous challenges to self-knowledge that are attendant upon those pleasures. Professionals will tell you in conversation (not in writing) that these subversive pleasures are simply "understood." But that just begs the question, the line between "pleasure understood" and "pleasure denied" having become increasingly fine as the therapeutic option of telling us things "for our own good" falls ever more readily to hand.

The justification for this pretense to disengagement derives from our Victorian habit of marginalizing the experience of art, of treating it as if it were somehow "special"—and, lately, as if it were somehow curable. This is a preposterous assumption to make in a culture that is irrevocably saturated with pictures and music, in which every elevator serves as a combination picture gallery and concert hall. The question of whether we can enjoy, or even decipher, the world we see without the experience of images, or the world we hear without the experience of music, seems to me pretty much a no-brainer. In fact, I cannot imagine a reason for categorizing any part of our involuntary, ordinary experience as "unaesthetic," or for imagining that this quotidian aesthetic experience occludes any "real" or "natural" relationship between ourselves and the world that surrounds us. All we do by ignoring the live effects of art is suppress the fact that these experiences, in one way or another, inform our every waking hour.

In my own case, I can still remember gazing at the lovely, lifting curve of a page upon which Oscar Wilde’s argument that “life imitates art” was inscribed and knowing that this was the first “big truth” I had come across in writing. I can remember, as well, standing on the corner of 52nd Street and Third Avenue on a spring afternoon, six feet from a large citizen gouging the pavement with a jackhammer, and thinking about the Ramones, amazed at the preconscious acuity with which I had translated the pneumatic slap of the hammer into eighth-notes and wondering what part, if any, of the pleasures and dangers of the ordinary world might rightly be considered “natural.” So it seems to me that, living as we do in the midst of so much ordered light and noise, we must unavoidably internalize certain expectations about their optimal patterning—and that these expectations must be perpetually and involuntarily satisfied, frustrated, and subtly altered every day, all day long, in the midst of things, regardless of what those patterns of light and noise might otherwise signify. Thus, in the light of what I perceive to be the almost total absence of "unaesthetic" experience in ordinary life, the necessity of art criticism addressing our ordinary experience of art, from whence these expectations flow, seems all the more urgent.

The joys and perils of our internalized formal expectations are not going to go away, no matter how we exorcise them at their source. As a consequence, to paraphrase Adam Phillips, the language of pleasure and the language of justice are inextricably intertwined. I like to think that this is what Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he reconstituted that French trinity of liberté, égalité, fraternité as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” privileging our quest for quotidian equanimity and implicitly freeing us from the bonds of tribal brotherhood so we might perform the more cosmopolitan tasks of equal citizenship. Certainly, this intertwining of pleasure and justice is what Emerson had in mind when he insisted that all constructions of public virtue must be tested on the anvil of private happiness.

In any case, the question of who decides what we can or cannot enjoy, and how we may enjoy it, joins art criticism ineluctably to the realm of politics, where the battle between our professed standards, our cultural expectations, and our ordinary private desires is fought—and must be fought because, even though there is no persuasive evidence that human character has changed in the last millennium, there is ample evidence that the way we see, and the things at which we look, have changed considerably—and that these alterations in what we see and how we look at
things have had some behavioral consequences that can only be considered redemptive. Moreover, as intriguing as it is to speculate on the intentions that have created these landscape-changing images, evidence further suggests that these changes derive less from the authority of artists and institutions than from the novel and often inappropriate uses to which existing images have been put—from new accommodations of pleasure and justice arising from the willful contingencies of perception and interpretation at work upon ordered visual information.

In “The Anxiety of Influence,” Harold Bloom argues that artistic practice changes because younger artists must willfully misinterpret the work of their masters. I would suggest that we all must do so—that we are always looking for what we want. If we find it in an image, it’s there, at least for the purposes of argument. Caravaggio was hired to celebrate and lend credibility to the problematic lives of the saints. To do this, he fell upon the novel device of portraying ordinary people, naturalistically, as characters in his imaginary narratives. The historic consequence of Caravaggio’s device, however, had nothing to do with the lives of the saints and everything to do with the way we privilege and attend to the visage of ordinary humanity. Caravaggio and his masters would have wished it otherwise, but they were outvoted. That’s that.

Police mentalities will always strive to impose correct readings, to align intentions with outcomes, and couple imaginary causes with putative effects, but we always have a choice. In a poorly regulated, cosmopolitan society like our own, the discourse surrounding cultural objects is at once freely contingent and counter-entropic. It neither hardens into dogma nor decays into chaos as it disperses. It creates new images and makes new images out of old ones, with new constituencies around them. It is a discourse of experiential consequences, not disembodied causes. Thus, the sheer magnitude of social experience and organizational energy generated in the wake of a single painting by Velázquez so far outweighs and overrides the effort and intention that went into its creation as to make nature pale and angels weep. As a critic, I generate tiny bursts of this new organizational energy in hopes of generating more. 'Tis a small thing, but mine own.