**Experimenting In The Galleries**

**With Vernon Lee**

**Version 3**

**By Nicola Baldwin**

**Based upon the writing of:**

**Vernon Lee**

**Clementina Anstruther-Thomson**

**Carolyn Burdett**

**November 2nd 2018**

**Characters**

**Vernon Lee (Violet Paget)** (1856-1935)

**Kit (Clementina) Anstruther-Thomson** (1857-1921)

**The Lecturer** (present day)

**The Scene**

**A salon hung with paintings**

*THE LECTURE begins*

LECTURER Vernon Lee’s was a key voice in the debate about the relationship between psychology and aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth century, rewriting aestheticism’s most famous tag: ‘art, not for art’s sake, but art for the sake of life’. As we will see, empathy is the term through which she sought to rescue art from the trivialization and moral vacuity she feared characterized aestheticism. Empathy, now widely accepted as central to our contemporary emotional and moral lexicon, was a means of restoring a modern, scientifically validated moral role for art which had nothing to do with Victorian puritanism. In doing so, Lee helped configure for the twentieth century the way in which we ask questions about the relationship between our minds, our bodies, and the world.

*Door opens and VERNON LEE strides in, notebook in hand.*

*She walks purposefully towards a large paining and studies it myopically as the Lecture continues.*

(LECTURER) Lee initially believed that the way bodies react when we contemplate form was the key to understanding why we find some things beautiful and others ugly.

*(Vernon writes in her notebook)*

Her theory was intended to counter what she thought misleading about contemporary ‘physiological aesthetics’ associated with evolutionary psychology and Darwinian sexual selection.

It was also, as we shall see, intimately connected to a relationship…

*KIT ANSTRUTHER-THOMSON enters, walks to the centre of the room and stares at the painting.*

*Vernon’s attention swivels from the painting, to Kit.*

VERNON Clementina -

KIT No one calls me Clementina.

VERNON No one calls me Violet Paget. (*holds out hand*) Vernon Lee

KIT Kit - (*holds out hand)*

VERNON Kit. (*shaking hands warmly*)

KIT (*shaking*) Vernon

VERNON We exchanged calls. She was living in Queen’s Gate with an invisible –

KIT Deceased, Vernon. Grandmother was dead.

VERNON Her father Colonel “Jack ” Anstruther-Thomson, had been a famous Master of the Hounds. Her family interests were entirely equestrian.

KIT In actual fact, I'd been learning painting professionally since 1884, first at South Kensington, then at Slade

VERNON Art to Kit meant modern painting. And what she might learn in Paris. She intended to master all she could of oils (probably to paint horses)

KIT I was intending to make it my business to show art to the East End people in London.

*(they are amused by each other)*

VERNON Kit came to stay with us in Florence. The recollection, as vivid as their colours, of putting scarlet and purple anemones in her room. Our first walk, I see in my mind as clearly as I see now; the hundred yards of old road to Fiesole, between steep olive yards and big black cypresses against the blue. And bells ringing

KIT Bells are always ringing, wherever we two meet.

VERNON Kit took the measure of my depression and restlessness, and understood that I needed someone to pull me through.

KIT The pulling through, given unfavourable circumstances and previous neglect, occupied quite a couple of years.

VERNON When the last red of sunset shone like enmeshed threads, and dusk rose from the half-reaped cornfields into the green sky, she would point with her chin, and say in a hushed voice

KIT Now we have become mere intruders. Now it is They who are in possession

VERNON (*echoing*) They who are in possession. Speaking of the landscape; its lines, planes, colours. So the only personality in the matter was her own, projected into the sights and sounds of nature and of art, only to receive them back, as one receives one’s voice and words back from an echoing hill.

*(beat)*

Florence seemed the best place to pursue the studies we had in common, and she liked the idea of spending half the year with me.

KIT I gave up painting, to look at paintings

VERNON Our work began.

*The Women turn to face the wall on which images of art may be projected.*

*They move along the ‘display’ in poses of attention and interest.*

LECTURER It might have seemed to many a whimsical or downright peculiar idea. But Lee was taking a cue from recent influential psycho-physiological theories of emotion. In particular, the ‘James-Lange hypothesis’. William James and Carl Lange sought to overturn the common sequence in which bodily changes associated with emotional states (hair rising on the back of the neck, limbs trembling, heart racing) are seen as reactions to those states (fear, for instance). On the contrary, James insisted, the sequence works the other way: the body responds to environmental stimuli and the feeling which results is a consequence of such changes, not their cause (we fear because we tremble, not tremble because we fear).

*(we see Kit reacting. Lee takes out her notebook and makes notes)*

The ‘subjective inside us can turn into the objective outside’; or as Lee would call it, ‘empathy’.

VERNON from subject to subject; picture to picture, statue to statue, church to church. On and on, to and fro, always comparing what she is seeing with what she has seen. And then, one fine day… how the various works of art *make her feel*. Which master, which school arose from the other, how to distinguish them; what reactions do all or any call forth?

KIT What is a work of art ?

VERNON What does a work of art do?

KIT With us. What is happening when we look?

VERNON Motion as form; form as motion.... Kit?

*Kit moves away, thoughtfully*

VERNON In April, 1894, we went to Rome

KIT I made experiments upon sculpture . . . noticing I saw statues much better during the noise a stonemason made on the floor, filing a marble slab.

*(Vernon knocks metal on stone with a ringing, rhythmic sound)*

Short, rapid strokes of the file affect my breathing; as a result the statue looks animated. Following this, I made experiments all the time in Rome.

VERNON Rome that spring of 1894, the following months in Florence

KIT London

VERNON Paris —

KIT Secretly “sampling” statues and pictures with

KIT & VERNON Our tunes!

*Vernon hums robustly*

KIT Humming In The Galleries

*Sequence of them humming, artworks hummed*

*They perform this ritual in utter seriousness, louder and more determined*

*Then*

*They smirk, or snort, collapse into laughter*

KIT What lunatics we seem to other visitors! Do they guess what we are doing?

VERNON Will they join us?

*We all hum.*

VERNON (*quietly, over humming)* Our tunes resonate in the silence of that most secret place; individual consciousness.

*(She hums, Kit speaks over)*

KIT For a decade we ‘experimented’ in galleries, studies, churches

VERNON Many mocked us, as they laughed at Darwin.

KIT Charles Darwin?

VERNON Is our work stranger than experiments by physiologists, psychologists in France, in Germany? What difference between Anstruther-Thomson. Lee, and these men?

*The Lecturer coughs pointedly.*

LECTURER Lee’s theories, seemingly fixated on Anstruther-Thomson’s performing body, were also in detailed dialogue and dispute with a newly influential ‘physiological aesthetics’ which aggressively claimed to ground aesthetic pleasure in blunt evolutionary facts of natural and sexual selection.

Lee was reading widely. She copiously annotated Grant Allen; publically registered her distance from Ruskin’s depiction of the moral ends of art. But her conclusion that ‘art is happiness’ was not a comfortable end-point for her thinking. Dissatisfied with aestheticism, but critical of existing ‘scientific’ accounts, Lee was suspicious of both aesthetic sympathy, and the normative implications of sexual selection.

VERNON We will present facts and theories which allow us to discard doubtful assumptions concerning the play instinct, utility, sexual selection, and aesthetic preference as a ‘survival’ of ‘primeval’ activity

KIT Ours will be a completely original, but scientifically valid, account of aesthetic experience -

KIT & VERNON ‘Beauty And Ugliness’!

LECTURER After almost a decade of collaboration their long essay ‘Beauty and Ugliness’ was published in Contemporary Review in 1897. Its findings were largely ignored.

Except by art historian Bernard Berensen, who accused the women of plagiarising his ideas

KIT It’s not true, it’s not true

VERNON Of course its not true

KIT How can I plagiarise my own feelings, my reactions, my breath?

VERNON If only more people will contribute their opinions to debate our proposals, his claims will be shown up for what they are: nonsense.

KIT He claims that when I visited his house for us to demonstrate my responses to his collection, I was secretly reading and stealing from his notes-

VERNON /It’s ridiculous /

KIT / - to give to you!

VERNON Utter nonsense. I don’t need his notes.

KIT It’s bad enough to be accused of plagiarising my own emotions, but the idea that I am simply a spy, or instrument, for you -

VERNON They don’t understand your gift.

KIT It’s not a gift, its work. While you scratch away with your pen turning other people’s ideas into your own, Violet.

*Vernon bristles at the name.*

VERNON In that case, Clementina, we must redouble our efforts.

KIT The work goes on

*They shake hands, but the handshake this time is more perfunctory.*

*They move apart*

LECTURER After the publication of ‘Beauty and Ugliness’, Lee began extensive correspondence with philosophers and psychologists on the continent. She met and befriended leading figures, writing for journals with which they were associated. The French psychologist, Théodule Ribot; Munich-based psychologist, Theodor Lipps; psychologist Karl Groos; philosopher and psychologist Max Dessoir; and psychologist Oswald Külpe.

The German review of ‘Beauty & Ugliness’ by Theodor Lipps in particular picked apart the essay and Lee began rethinking her theory in terms of Einfuhlung, or empathy. A term Lipps derived from dream interpretation

KIT Who is to say, who has looked and felt, that I am wrong?

VERNON The more and more minute self-observation, which had become Kit’s work, and in which she had been employed for years, would have been a frightful strain even on a person expressly trained as an experimental subject in a latter-day psychological laboratory.

Whereas Kit Anstruther-Thomson was at once experimenter and experimental subject.

And this was done by a person who had never studied anything seriously except drawing.

I ought to say, that, until she handed me her notes, I did not guess at the intensity of the mental efforts my friend was making, nor even the precise nature of the experimentation which she never carried on except when by herself.

LECTURERBy the turn of the century, Lee had become dissatisfied with her original account and began to characterize aesthetic feeling as primarily mental

KIT (*reads)* Questionnaire for delegates to the Fourth Congress of International Psychology, Paris 1900. By ‘Paget’… *(glances at Vernon)* Question 1: Aside from your actual, literal movements, could you give an account of what we are to understand by the expressions: motor states, personal sensations of tension and pressure, sensations of raising and lowering; also movement in a lateral, diagonal direction, up and down, right to left?

VERNON April 17, Terme Museum. I am beginning to suspect we should give but little importance to the miming of the gesture of a statue. I mean of its human, actual gesture as distinguished from the movement of lines.

KIT Question 3: Do you have a highly developed visual memory? Can you recreate within you the phenomenon of complementary colours? Do pictures exist in your memory precisely, in their totality, without appearing as a succession or alternation of fragments?

VERNON The Ariadne, with all her pretentious modelling and drapery, seems to me one of the worst statues in existence: a woman arrested in the act of falling off a sofa on which she is lying in a hideously uncomfortable position….

KIT Question 4: When you remember a landscape, do you see it as separate pictures, each with a fixed point of view? And when remembering a friend, do you see her in a distinct pose, clearly defined?

VERNON December 6. Why I don t like Lorenzo Monaco (Madonna and Saints).

(1) The idiotic glowering which makes me feel queer.

(2) The vague, delusive, changing relations of body and head in space, like masks and bats, waving, but waving at wrong discordant intervals

(3) The limpness of arms and hands, contrasted with truculent pose of head and glance.

(4) The total scatteredness, idiocy, fussiness.

On the whole one of the ugliest pictures I know.

KIT Question 6: Can you give an account of what we are to understand by organic wellbeing,sometimes found in the cardiac or respiratory region, and also in the head (but not in the muscles of the eye), when you are in front of paintings of real landscapes that please you? Is it your understanding that one can take expressions such as “lines which shoot away,” “roof which drops down”, etc. quite literally? And in the case of more complex emotional states, do you attach a literal meaning to: ”an arch that crushes the soul”, or “ gothic arches that give flight to the imagination”, “a painted or carved landscape that makes the heart flutter, that frees us from the burden of worry, and which accelerates or makes regular the rhythm of life”?

VERNON I simply can’t and won’t look at the Virtues of Pollaiuolo.

I am tired, can’t go on, am bored with the pictures. ... In looking out of the window there is the relief of not focusing. How out of time to the buildings, to nature, the people are.

KIT Question 9. Does the arrangement of the drawing of the lines in a painting give you a feeling of relief? Or, a vague sense of malaise, oppression and disgust, sadness?

VERNO The Venetian Room. I am tired, bored, disinclined to look at anything. The utter irrelevance of these wall-fulls. I go to the window; the pillar, pots, tree outside.

Of course in a gallery, pictures are simply butchered by reckless hanging above and below eye-level. The Madonna del Cardellino is hung as I shouldn’t dare hang a sketch by an amateur. How utterly have we separated art from living life!

KIT Question 10. In a famous building in the Gothic style, do you feel your body making light balancing movements, as if to participate more effectively in the existence of the building?

VERNON We often find in some very fine work of art a resemblance to some beloved one - but it is a state of our feeling. I am too cold, shivery, and must leave this room.

KIT Question 12 -

VERNON March 27. Florence. Near my home, there is a stain of sulphate of copper under the espaliered vine. I have rarely remarked it of late without a thought, a distinct vision, of Tintoret’s Bacchus and Ariadne, the peculiar blue of the stain being connected with the sea and sky in that picture, while the vine suggests Bacchus’ garland on his head and round his loins.

KIT Question 14. Could you store up the image of something beautiful which you were not able to fully appreciate at a certain time?

VERNON Easter Sunday, 1904. This morning at the Mass of the monks. (I have been recently worried and somewhat unwell.) One of the ways of coming in contact with art is, evidently, to bring one’s troubles, doubts, one’s fluctuating sea or ruffled puddle of distress.

My Gallery Diaries, continued since the above entries, have covered a greater number of problems, a new crop of hypotheses, have become fuller and fuller, but also proportionately more difficult to deal with; I have therefore decided not to include any of them.

KIT Question 16. Could you suggest a new questionnaire, or corrections to this one?

VERNON CONCLUSION. But for my collaborator’s experiments, I personally should have had to wait for Lipps’ Empathy and Groos’s Inner Mimicry before getting any inkling of such satisfaction.

But these movements actually took place, or were felt as taking place, in the person of my fellow-worker. The application of the plural pronoun to experiments which only one of two collaborators had attempted answered to my conviction that what was true of my collaborator must hold good of every other human. The plural pronoun employed by me in Beauty and Ugliness meant not we two collaborators, but all mankind….

KIT Question? How many delegates completed that questionnaire of yours?

VERNON I didn’t know then how a questionnaire should be done.

KIT Not one.

*Kit waits a moment for a reply, then walks away.*

VERNON Looking back at those months of writing together.. my professional habits of rendering our new-fangled notions less startling by an array of already accepted psychological theories may have been at the expense of my collaborator’s strained nerves.

Looking back at that winter nearly thirty years ago, I fear that in some massive and scarcely conscious manner. Kit felt her very personal and living impressions being deadened under what perhaps struck her as philosophical padding. Be this as it may, when the proofs came the ensuing summer of 1897, she was far too ill to so much as glance at them.

Hence she must have felt dreadfully let down when, after we had together written out, printed and published our discoveries, sent copies to distinguished psychologists of all countries, nothing came of it. Aware of the sceptical amusement in certain artistic friends, to whom any talk of art having whys and wherefores seemed the sacrilegious chatter of a lunatic.

All of this would have been got over. But our joint publication was instantly followed by one of those little incidents by no means infrequent among intellectual workers, namely, a charge of plagiarism; whether or not seriously intended, coming in the middle of my friend’s very grave illness, it took the dimensions and colour of tragedy.

To her rather military notions of honour, plagiarism was akin to cheating at cards. You could not let such an accusation drop. Chapter and verse must be demanded; allegations refuted by endless quotations, references to diaries, elaborate legal disproof over which my poor ill friend, pored for weeks, disproving accusations which melted into nothingness.

Such, was the only notice taken of our essay, in which we had believed as one of the keys to the Universe. Then, in the course of a year, it became apparent that Beauty and Ugliness had not been overlooked. It received high praise from French psychologist M. Ribot, who henceforth opened his review to whatever I wrote. It began to be quoted and acrimoniously refuted. As far as myself was concerned, all this was extraordinarily encouraging: Kit and I had been neither cranks nor amateurs, moreover, part of a mutually, perhaps unconsciously, collaborating band of enquirers.

*(looks towards Kit)*

In collecting her papers for publication after the death of my friend, I came across a loose sheet of pencil-writing gone over in ink…a few words doubtful, or illegible. A fragment

KIT who will give us back the Spring?

LECTURERThe possibility that science might eventually discover corporeal proof of how beauty affects us was something Lee could never quite relinquish. Phenomenology, Freudian psychoanalysis, Modernism. The aesthetic connotations of empathy faded…

*Vernon Lee is standing at the painting with her notebook.*

*Kit Anstruther-Thomson takes up a position in the centre of the room.*

(LECTURER) *Now* our understanding of ‘empathy’ is no longer about the relation between self and object, but about the relationship of self to human

(*Vernon and Kit turn to look at each other)*

Even though empathy today carries different meanings we still can learn from Vernon Lee’s lingering hope that ‘future neurologists’ might discover the organic secrets of the brain, and indisputable certainty about what we feel and why we feel it.

(*Vernon and Kit reach out towards one another*)

As ‘future neurologists’ present their functional MRI scans as evidence we are hardwired for empathy, we might feel hopeful about the proofs they offer.

(*they hold hands*)

But like Lee we should, in the end, know that it is really more complicated than that.

(*The Lecturer exits)*

VERNON As clearly as I see now; the hundred yards of old road to Fiesole, between steep olive yards and big black cypresses against the blue. And bells ringing!

KIT Bells are always ringing, wherever we two meet!

*Joyfully, they hum together. EXIT.*

**The end**