YOU COULD BEGIN ANY DISCUSSION about what art is by talking about what art has to do to keep its audience. Here is a simple list:

**Displacement.** Art has to transport its audience to another place in space and time. This is, typically, the “setting” and “scene” kind of thing, the classic “once upon a time” ploy. But, examined in detail, this is an amazing feat. An audience sitting in a dark auditorium can “exist” in the 16th century without thinking about it. A museum visitor in front of a painting is “in” Provence, France, while literally taking up space in front of a Van Gogh. Transport happens frequently, easily, all the time. We are so willing, as an audience, to go that we will respond to the slightest suggestion. Movement can be virtual, simply to enter into the imaginative world, or actual themes of motion, such as travel, exile, quest, can be included.

**Surplus.** Art must produce something to which we are, to some extent at least, indifferent. You can’t care about something or someone and, at the same time, enjoy watching it get in trouble or even destroyed. It’s OK for art to “hook” us to get our attention by seeming to present a matter of great concern, but the real art part of art is most often based in things for which we care not and know not — the symmetry of a story, the machinations of fate, the rhythm of events. These are “surplus” to the basic hook.

**Collation.** Having produced something extra, that extra has to have some structure. Although it is initially unrelated to the main parts, it must reveal an entirely new order. In this way, layers of meaning develop. In the beginning, the “hook” or obvious meaning dominates. In the middle, there is an ambiguous balance between this meaning and alternatives. Towards the end, the “impossible” solution — a combination of what looked to be opposites — comes forth. Surprise!

**Levels.** The extra parts, with only a little bit of structure, produce multiple levels, each of which is a possible end or conclusion. The difference between levels and simple alternatives is that the levels constitute whole “world-views” that can be identified, usually, with specific characters. The audience identifies with one world-view or another, but is aware of the problem that this perspective may need to shift.

**Puzzle.** The first four steps could easily be enough, but all the better, from the audience’s point of view, if these multiple layers of meaning constitute a trial or puzzle. A trial or puzzle is an external form of an internal conflict of meaning. It invites audience-participation. It can do this as a lower-grade form of popular art, such as the detective novel or soap opera, but the puzzle is also a mainstay of high art, which is simply more clever at concealing its intentions.

**Closure.** The puzzle must come to a real conclusion. That is, its “solution” must have been within reach of the audience members who paid attention, but not so easy that they could see it coming from a long way off.

**Openness.** The many layers of meaning created within the work should give the audience a lot of new hooks to which they may attach personal, idiosyncratic significance. They can remake the work as their own, even if in the process they “misread” it.

This list is art’s basic contract with its audience. Notice that it does not promise specific meanings, but “meaningfulness.” It does this by expanding the literal into other possibilities. In the process, it becomes less and less specific about what it really wants to mean. It invites the audience in to attach some meanings of its own (unpredictable from audience to audience). In this way, the audience appropriates the work of art in the reception of it. It makes it their own, sometimes by moving things around, suppressing some elements, misreading others. There is no one single interpretation, in this view. But, there is something like a single formula out of which develops a harmonic relationship among possible meanings. If the formula is simple enough, the internal structure will be sturdy and reliable. We might put it this way: the stupider the structure, the smarter the (multiple) meanings (and their interrelations).
the contest between zeuxis and parrhasios

What would these “stupid structures” be like, then? An ancient anecdote has the secret. There were two famous painters in ancient Greece, Zeuxis and Parrhasios. Each was at the pinnacle of his abilities, no one knew how to choose between them. They, however, decided to resolve the issue for once and for all, with a “painting duel” held under strictly controlled conditions. They assigned themselves two areas of a wall, each invisible from the other so that they might work in private. Each artist was to paint a mural, a fresco of pigment in wet plaster. A carefully assembled audience-jury was to view both paintings and award one the prize, ending forever the tedious and insoluble rivalry.

Zeuxis was actually thought to have the edge in this contest. While his paintings were not ultimately judged better than Parrhasios’s, they always had a strong initial effect. They could “knock your eyes out,” as they say, by using the tricks of trompe-l’œil, or super-realism. Parrhasius knew the same tricks but was more subtle. You got to like his paintings because of their time-release effects, which sometimes made them less likable in the beginning. Parrhasios, subtler and probably more talented because his works took time and endured, was ironically less likely to win out over Zeuxis, who was a master of initial surprise. The contest was really about Parrhasios’s ability to think his way through this dilemma.

When it came time to judge the freshly completed paintings, the audience of select critics assembled, and, behind them, a large crowd of onlookers. Zeuxis was outwardly calm and confident. He had produced, he seemed to think, his best work for this crucial occasion. Behind the curtain (it was important to reveal the work all at once) was his life’s masterpiece.

The spokesman for the jury asked Zeuxis to draw the curtain. When he did, the crowd and jury gasped to see a bowl of fruit, plaintive and simple. How could a great painter be content, in a situation such as this, to paint a bowl of fruit? It was admittedly a finely painted still-life. The glint of light off the pale green surface of the pears made them seem moist and firm. You could practically taste the pomegranates.

After a long period of silence, a bird flew down from its vantage point on the top of the wall, straight into the painted bowl of fruit, from which it had hoped to steal a grape. Hitting the wall with a smack, the bird fell to the ground, a victim of illusion.

Without a doubt, this proved what the jury and audience could scarcely conclude: that the realism of the painting had made it escape its limits, as artificial; the real judge had been the bird, whom no one could accuse of favoritism. When the gasps of the crowd died away, Zeuxis was sure he had won, no matter what Parrhasios’s entry. For what better demonstration could he have hoped?

Zeuxis’s confidence now caused him to straighten up, breathe deeply, and radiate a newfound humanity, which he turned on to Parrhasius who was standing at the edge of the open circle of onlookers. “Now, let’s take a look at the undoubtedly excellent work of my esteemed colleague” he suggested, with a tone that suggested he would be magnanimous in his victory, always sending a bit of work Parrhasios’s way if his own studio got too busy.

Parrhasius feigned or honestly exhibited (one could not say which) a meek but genial tone. Slightly bowed, he did not speak but turned slightly towards the area where his mural was to be revealed. The crowd shuffled and murmured. Zeuxis by now had become their leader.

Now standing around Parrhasios’s wall, the crowd grew impatient. Even the curtain began to look a bit dowdy. Zeuxis, not wishing to over-embarrass his rival, came forward after a longish interval and directly addressed the painter. “I think,” he said, “it is time to see what you may have done. Would you honor us by drawing the curtain?”

“Can’t be done,” Parrhasius replied. The jury, audience, and Zeuxis thought that Parrhasius was at the breaking point, that he was emotionally crushed by the nearness of defeat. “Surely,” Zeuxis put in, trying to soften the blow of the inevitable, “we would be very happy to see your work, but we’re getting a bit impatient standing in the hot sun. Just show us the painting.”

After a pause, Parrhasius replied, “You’re looking at it.” The onlookers focused more carefully on the wall, realizing at last that they were looking at a painting of a curtain.

You don’t have to be Greek to conclude that the prize went to Parrhasios, or that the reason was that, while Zeuxis had tricked a bird, Parrhasius had not only managed to trick human beings, but his fellow-professional at that.

A subtler truth within the story is about human perception versus animal perception. The bird went for the food, and was dependent upon the appearance of the grape which it would, in some eternal moment in bird-heaven, be able to eat: a sort of behavioristic “operant conditioning” situation where stimulus and

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the art 3 idea
reward follow each other in close succession. The human situation is different, in the evidence of this anecdote. The humans saw not a grape-like thing, but the cover of that which they wanted to see. They were tricked because they were expecting a *concealment* of what they wanted. They automatically valued only what was invisible, inaccessible. Used to concealments, they did not inspect the painting of the curtain closely. They were tricked by their own expectations, even if the curtain had been painted poorly.

The first moral of the story might be called the audience’s take-home truth. Good artists can fool our natural selves, great artists fool our cultural — our real — selves. The deeper moral is for artists and student-critics of the arts. This has to do with a rule to follow. When it comes to tricking humans, you can rely on them to help you with their own expectations. And, humans expect tricks! — In this case, a simple curtain. The good artist therefore gives a good trick: a painted grape that fools our natural selves. The great artist gives a great trick: a trick, as it were. The great artist anticipates our predilection for trick tricks, and tricks the trick, making a trap for humans.

**artifact “contaminates” representation**

If you really grasp the full significance of this point, you might stop here and do the rest of the book. There really isn’t much more in the way of revelation to offer. But, once you get the main idea, there’s a certain amount of filling-in to do. You would want to cover the psychological aspect, as in “what makes humans vulnerable to artifact contamination,” as well as a historical account of trick variations down through the ages. Also, it might be useful to go back to the recipe for the glue that binds artists to their audiences, and see just how these two kinds of tricks make for a stronger bond.

If you want to do it yourself, please proceed. There’s a certain amount of self-teaching required anyway. If you do just “read on,” remember that what follows is an approximation, and that the real truth is the *intersection* of a knower with the known. Just like the anecdote of the two painters, truth never forces you to get the point, and sometimes it’s very finicky about giving itself away. Most of all remember: the half-life of missing the point is forever.

Although art3 has its rough parts, think of the first two ways of knowing about art. If you were an artist, you would have to train for years. You would compete with talent-loaded ambitious backbiters who would step over your dead body with pleasure to get to the top. You would be utterly dependent on your muse-given abilities which might, without warning, vanish at any moment.

Or, consider the second way of knowing art. You are an art historian. This presumes that you come from a family that is willing to support you in this notoriously low-paid profession. In the early stages, you are shown stacks of paintings and buildings on slides. The caption material is mumbled by a professor who has not given anyone an ‘A’ in the past fifteen years. You finally are able to call yourself an art historian only at the doctoral level and you discover that three of the five members of your examination committee consider you to be the anti-Christ. You could quit and become an antiques dealer or a high-school teacher, two other professions known for their genteel poverty.

There is, however, a third way to study art. “Formula Three” as it were. It does not compare itself as superior to the two forms above mentioned, but it does point out that, unless you are willing to put up with the hardships, the apparent superior authenticity of the traditional forms one and two may not be worth it. Artists, after all, do not really have to “know” art. That is, their knowledge is a “knowledge by acquaintance.” You “know” how to ride a bike, but you don’t really need to be able to write down the principles of gravity, inertia, vectors of force generated by spinning objects, or the principles of welding. You just ride. And, when you fall off, you don’t whine about vectors, or welding, or the like. Knowledge by acquaintance enables you to do something without being able to articulate the principles of that ability. Actually, this is a good knowledge-form for artists, who have to make things for a living. Can you imagine how oppressively boring it would be to be lectured after every performance, or to have a painter standing by his/her canvas with handouts? Be thankful that most artists let their works speak for them.

In contrast to the artist’s knowledge by acquaintance, it often seems as if art historians have knowledge without being acquainted. That is, they are immensely familiar with the products of art but you sometimes get the feeling that they don’t go to parties where artists hang out. The art object can be photographed and categorized, the artistic process cannot. But, there are many times when this knowledge of the second kind comes in handy. The poet Robert Graves once said this about scholars. It applies, in equal or greater measure, to art historians, who have always been scholars in the best sense. They will dig and dig and dig, said Graves. It is their studied neutrality towards art, rather than their sensitivity, that keeps them going. They do an
enormous amount of work, far more than most poets, artists, or critics would be willing to do. They place masterpieces alongside mediocrities — this is an act of sheer genius! — erasing any real prejudice. From the Graves’ point of view, art historians don’t completely know what they’ve got, and this allows poets of every stripe to find what they need: a real symbiotic relationship. So, don’t go around carping about art historians. And, of course, you can’t say anything mean about artists. You might be tempted to say “the dumber the better,” except many of them are extremely smart. It is just that the smart part and the art part are two different parts.

This is where the real fun of art through the third formula comes in. Given that artists are extremely productive but can’t or shouldn’t say much about how they did it, and given that art historians are object-fetishists with the “what,” “when,” and “where” questions answered but not much of the “how” or “why,” studying art in the third manner would be a piece of cake, territorially speaking. If it were not for the lack of terms, and the general unfamiliarity of looking not so much at the painting or the caption but, as it were, the “glue” that holds everything together, art3 would be no work and all play.

Let’s go back to the Zeuxis-Parrhasius thing. Zeuxis is a case of art awareness type one. He knows how to produce an illusion, how to hold an audience. Art historians in the Second School of Thought love Zeuxis’s work, because it is exquisite and there’s probably a lot of it to compare and caption. “This bowl of fruit suggests an Ionic influence in its use of a broad palette and modeled surface; it represents a marked departure from his normal stylizations in imitation of the Egyptians, and probably reflects the contemporary influence of the popular interest in natural science.”

It was, however, Parrhasius who won. He was not the first artist who benefited from art3, but his application of it was a classic. He won because he attended to the nature of the audience as well as the nature of nature. That is, he had to be able to paint a curtain with exactitude in order to pull off the stunt. But, given that he knew human nature was more apt to expect a curtain than a bowl of fruit, he really didn’t have to do that good a job. His trick was part art, part psychology, part philosophy. He knew that tricky stuff is cleverer than trick1. Let’s look closer.

**using vectors to figure it out**

There are two aspects of the Zeuxis-Parrhasius contest. They are judged on the basis of the represent-
of meaning independent from the meaning of the representations. This trick is both about the fictional world created by the work of art, and about our access as an audience to that world. Because it is generated by our own human nature and perception (and psychology, and history, and culture, etc.), this vector of the artifact is capable of making lots of connections within a very small frame of representation.

It is time to look in some detail at these two vectors, their relationship, and their respective methods. The painters’ duel gives us a good anecdotal starting point. The paintings were flat, but we “saw” a third dimension in them. The bird, in fact, was fooled to such a great extent, that he used up his vector of the artifact, spending it foolishly on representation that turned into a fatal encounter. The chief teller of this story, Pliny the Elder, was not the last to seize upon this situation. Vladimir Nabokov, the Russian-American novelist of the mid-twentieth century, wrote a mock poem in his novel *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) that begins with a provocative image of the “mind” of art. And, he uses the same bird trick that we encountered with Zeuxis and Parrhasius (“what goes around comes around”):

\[
\text{I was the smudge of ashen fluff — and I} \\
\text{Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.} \\
\text{And from the inside, too, I’d duplicate} \\
\text{Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:} \\
\text{Uncurtaining the night, I’d let dark glass} \\
\text{Hang all the furniture above the grass,} \\
\text{And how delightful when a fall of snow} \\
\text{Covered my glimpse of lawn and reached up so} \\
\text{As to make chair and bed exactly stand} \\
\text{Upon that snow, out in that crystal land!}
\]

The wall and painting lie within the dimension of the artifact and “project” an imagined reality, a “space of representation,” along a VECTOR of representation. The artifact is “supposed” to be independent (“orthogonal”) to the dimension of representation. But, as we can see in the Zeuxis-Parrhasius anecdote, the artifact (the curtain) can be brought back in to contaminate the audience’s idea of what is being represented. The audience expects to see a curtain (an artifact) and doesn’t expect the curtain to be the intended representation.

The co-presence of art, illusion, and death and the existence of life in art, in the “dead” world beyond life, the crystal land, has been in artists’ minds for a long, long time. Important that we should know, in a third way, what it means.

The waxwing’s flight “is” the poem, in the most universal sense. As usual, the artifact affects the body: the representation is “what we might think,” the “what’s it about” aspect of art.

Back to vectors. As the bird demonstrates, we are “killed” by the dimension of the artifact. Not literally, of course, just commanded to play dead. We must be silent witnesses in the theater of art, and should one of the corpses start talking or coughing noisily, the usher will be down in a flash. We live in the space created by the artifact that allows us to live and be dead at the same time. This is, looking on the bright side, a bit like being an angel. Specifically, it is like those paintings that show angels arranged in social order (cherubim, seraphim, etc.) on seats that look, in fact, like an auditorium, fit into a hole in the sky (crystal, no doubt) that is spectatoring on some holy personage’s trial or ascent. In our case-study of vectors, it is art that ascends into heaven, our heaven, and we are the angelic witnesses. Doesn’t sound like most audiences, I know, but it’s just a metaphor.

Consider this hole in the sky. Relative to the illusion-world of art, we the audience are angels — beings that exist in a separate dimension. In geometric terms, this is why the vectors of the representation and artifact are placed initially at right angles (angels?) to each other. This is the “orthogonal” relationship, where on a graph the ‘x’ variable can change without affecting the ‘y’ variable, and visa versa. This angular relationship symbolizes the independence of the two worlds, the audience’s “real” world and the illusory world of the work of art. This is a preface. What happens is that we get pulled into the work, just like the bird. We live in two places at once, hence our “angelic” status or, if we take things literally, our death, by bonking into art’s physical wall.

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the window pane;
There is a funny episode in Miguel Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. The knight is spending the night at an inn where, by fortunate accident, a famous puppeteer is performing the drama based on the well known tale of a Lord Gaiferos, who frees his wife, the beautiful Melisendra, from the Moors. As the play gets under way, Quixote coaches the puppeteer as a fellow-artist, pointing out the crucial parts of the story and aspects of interpretation. But, Quixote becomes so involved with the story that he turns from critic to consumer, puppeteer to puppet. He draws his sword to slay the heathen puppets, and wrecks the miniature theater in the process. He stepped out of artifact into representation, as it were.

Dimensionally speaking, we are as close as we will ever get to describing a geometry that personifies the para-site situation of poetry. There are, according to our vectors, two sites: a site of representation and a site that supports the artifact. Could we use the theater as a model? The play goes on in front of the audience. Characters enter and exit through the wings. Like the frame of a painting, the proscenium acts like an arbitrary limit. It gives us a privileged view, but the life of the play “goes on” beyond the wings, to the left and right of (and presumably beyond) the stage. We sit before the action in a “frontal” relationship. We give up our power of movement and perception in order to see the play through the playwright’s eyes. Our hands are the artist’s hands, our feet the artist’s feet, our ears the artist’s ears. One for one, we exchange our normal senses for poetic ones, a kind of body swap.

We hardly think of this as happening in space, but if we do, it is undeniably a weird space. The dimension between us and the work of art is “not supposed to exist” in the world of the art object. When actors, as they occasionally will, turn and address the audience directly, this speech is outside the norm of the play. The other characters don’t hear it. It is the equivalent of the storyteller’s helping phrases, “he said,” “she said.” Stuff goes on in this dimension, but it is a dimension for us angels, who see what’s happening a little in advance of the characters before us.

A little summarizing: Parrhasius beats Zeuxis — why? Because he knows how to displace the audience, manage the surplus values (“what is this curtain, anyway?”), and collate the results to create levels (one of which conceals his trick). — Because, too, he knows how to mediate the dimension of the artifact as well as the dimensions of representation. The wall illustrates the geometry of the situation. The artifact is at a “right angle” — which creates a right, or true “angel” — or, perpendicular to (hence independent from) the representation. This angle/angel is something like a rule. If we violate it, we bonk our heads literally, like the bird in the Greek story or Nabokov’s poem. We, like Don Quixote, run into the artifact with swords drawn. We become victims of the illusion of representation.

The point is, we don’t have to obey rules all the time, and in art if we do, we’re looked on with great suspicion. The situation suggested by head-bonking and puppet-chopping is actually pretty interesting. We see that contamination turns the tables. Consider a fairly commonplace experience. We have a dream, say, of meeting someone with red hair. The next day, we actually run into someone with red hair, and the dream comes to mind. Usually it stops there. But, in fairly vivid occurrences of the phenomenon of *déjà vu*, it can get scary. The extended version of this is a favorite ploy of novelists. Some characters in a novel go see a play or movie, or read a book. The characters in the play, movie, or book, do something that becomes significant because it “accidentally” resembles a situation already happening with our novel’s characters. The characters share this secret, and are hardly willing to admit it to themselves; but their lives seem to be driven by some story that existed before them. I could give you some examples, but the list would be very long. The films *Dead of Night* and *Black Orpheus* are good starters. This technique is known as the “story within the story” and “contamination of life by the dream or story.”

What happens, in short, is that the right-angled relationship between representation and artifact, simple enough, is actually a set up for a short-circuit to occur, a contamination, a creation of multiple lev-
els. — Because at any point in a work of art we can travel “forward” into the illusion of representation or suddenly turn into the head-bonking direction of the artifact, the work of art retains the capacity not just to trick us but to trick us, to reveal not only an illusory world but a real Us hidden within that world.

**summary**

The point of this chapter is not to cover all cases and examples of the representation/artifact distinction, but to “get a feel for it,” so that we can recognize it anywhere, in the great number of guises in which it appears. For simplicity’s sake, think of situations where the conditions of representation have dominated. In Zeuxis’s case, in the puppeteer’s case, it was obviously the illusion that mattered, and interruptions of that illusion were catastrophic, re: Nabokov’s wax wing. What stays on the wall, or within the proscenium arch, is not to be violated. The world of the representation seems to spread beyond our privileged opening on to it, beyond the frame.

Now think of some cases where this spreading actually takes place, causing many “frames” to be constructed. In Medieval painting, where representation played an important role in communicating the stories of the Bible to mostly illiterate folk, church walls were used to construct narratives. This is a perfect example of the artifact’s strategy of migrating beyond a simple fixed scene. In the process of connecting story to story, the artist has to sacrifice the kind of realistic spatiality that would stick each scene in first gear. It could be argued that poor Mr. Artist didn’t know about perspective, and this may be true, but the flattening of space that came with the funny angles made by buildings and roofs, the stylization of the landscape, and the use of the flat, gentle colors of pigmented plaster had a positive effect in enhancing the narrative flow.

The surface of the wall became the “artifact,” the physical place for the illusion of representation. The story stretched out over the ceiling and all wall surfaces. It was a kind of architectural comic-book, although with deepest religious content.

We can learn one lesson right now without going further. It was the flatness of the wall that made it such a good medium for representation, and the representation was a good representation because it responded to this flatness not as a limitation but as a resource. The images were good in that they flattened themselves out to enhance their narrative quality. They moved better across the surface and through the imagination because they limited their depiction of depth and concentrated on motion. Of course, they could have stopped to make each scene an exquisite trompe-l’oeil, just as Zeuxis had done, but this would have slowed the action.

Let’s go further, because the good stuff is at the end. Say you’re Giotto, in the Arena Chapel in Padova, before starting work. You look at the ceiling, the simple wall surfaces of the rectangular chapel and apse, thinking where to put what. Then it occurs to you. The natural order of the story also has to do with the use of the chapel as a place of ritual. The most sacred and remote spot, the ceiling, is the perfect place for the most sacred and historically remote moment, creation. The upper parts of the wall are good for the Old Testament, the lower bits for the New. The painter’s delight was, of course, not this drudge stuff, Mary doing this, St. Paul doing that, but the Day of Judgement, the Apocalypse, where you could paint devils doing anything they liked, flayed bodies, high-reaching flames, imaginary beings — anything, in fact, that you, the painter, desired. That was easy to place: the west wall, since the west end was called the “Jerusalem porch” and was a kind of boundary associated with the death of the secular and rebirth of the sacred. You put the baptismal font there because, like the Jordan, you had to cross over to enter the heaven of the inner church.

Well, given the sacred stuff going on from the ceiling to the walls up front, the painter’s delight in having the west wall to himself was doubled by the thought that it was this wall the priest had to face when addressing the congregation. Was there ever a painter who got along with priests? Well, some. Maybe two. Artists and priests come from two different schools of thought. One carouses privately, the other in public. But, the clergy has always had the upper hand, except in the matter of the Apocalypse, the painter’s revenge.

The point is that the wall starts out by being a simple and supportive artifact upon which a representation is “hung.” Then, because the wall itself has some story qualities built into it, a certain coordination takes place. Then, the artifact, the wall, becomes the “joint” where the angles of representation and artifact come together in a more complex and potentially humorous (if you go along with priest-mockery) situation. We learned about the flattening process inherent in representation, following representation’s desire to “get on with it.” We learned that artifacts are supposed to be quiet and lie there. “Be a good little auditorium and don’t get in the way of the play.” But,
with Giotto’s “auditorium,” getting in the way was a means of perfecting and extending the structure of the Biblical narrative into a universal story with local codicils about priests and painters. So, lesson learned for the day, borrowing from Giotto’s terminology, when artifact contaminates representation, “all hell breaks loose” (literally).

We come away from the situation with a useful diagram in our pocket, if that’s where you carry your diagrams. It is an arrow moving horizontally (doesn’t really matter) with another arrow bombing down on the middle of it from above. You could just as easily use the “Jaws” arrangement where representation is a boat or swimmer and artifact is a shark. This is what Michel Serres described as the classic “parasitic relationship” in his book, appropriately named The Parasite. The parasite interrupts an ongoing process, just like the parasite-poets of ancient Greece crashed parties in order to filch the buffet table. Lucky for Serres that parasite also means “noise” in French, for this extends the meaning considerably. “Stop making noise” is what you say to the noisy member of the audience when you’re trying to take in a movie at $8.50 a ticket. Parasites, second-rate characters, must eat in silence.

But, ahah! Look what’s happened. We used the parasite relationship to describe art’s relation to life. Now we’re using it to describe our own relationship as an audience to artistic representations! What’s going on? Have we discovered an artistic principle, or what? Don’t get excited.

Think about it. Art to life was put in terms of what we now call artifact to representation. Art was “artifact,” life was “representation.” Art had to insert itself silently, to maintain its secondary status as a parasite, a para-site, a “liminal space” beside the “serious space” of the ordinary. But, now, just as life went on beyond the boundaries of art — outside the theater, as it were — we see that art’s representations can seem to go on beyond the boundaries set up to view them; and that these boundaries have a definite effect on the way in which our imagination intersects the work of art. Then, we found out that artifact and representation, far from being the independent forces pictured as a right angle, defined a place and manner of contamination. So, this is love?

I want to take this idea of contamination to its conclusion, so to speak. I want to see whether or not it constitutes a “kernel” of the artistic.

Here’s a joke. It comes from an amateur magician and president of a great university in the eastern U. S. A group of computer scientists meets up with a group of professors at the train station. Both groups are on their way to professional conferences. The computer scientists notice that the professors don’t have their tickets yet. One professor goes to the ticket window and purchases a single ticket, but the others stay put. The computer scientists asks the professors how they will manage with just one ticket, and the professors say, “Just wait.” Both groups get on the train, and just before the conductor starts to come around, all three professors pile into the lavatory. The conductor knocks on the door and a hand sticks out with a ticket, which the conductor punches. The computer scientists are very impressed.

The computer scientists decide to benefit from this learning experience and, on the return trip, they purchase only one ticket between them. Wink wink, nudge nudge. Again, they meet up with the professors, and they notice that the professors this time have purchased no ticket. “How are you going to manage with no ticket?” ask the computer scientists. The professors say, “Just wait.”

Once the train starts off, the computer scientists pile into the lavatory, repeating what they had learned from the professors. Once they are all inside, one of the professors gets up and walks over to the door. He knocks on it, and says, “Conductor!”

The point of this illustration is that, in terms of the vectors of representation and artifact, this is a masterpiece of simplicity. The representation is what the naive computer scientists grasp, without an appreciation of how artifact works. They don’t realize that the professors were setting them up (the “artifact” of the trick was going to move into the representation category). Their willing consumption of the representation provided the raw material for the professors’ free ride. They used Parrhasios’s trick. The “curtain” in this case was trick.

The artifact is always the event we didn’t see coming. With good jokes, the artifact hits the representation with a bang. Sometimes it hits in waves or stages, as in the two parts of the train joke. The first part, the ticket trick, is funny, but the part where the computer scientists try to get in on the trick is funnier. Now, you see, contamination is really the element of surprise. Without it, where would art be? At the job of representing someone else’s parade, no doubt. But,
artists are too independent to be given over to such drudgery. They seek the rewards of impishness, and get them. “So, it’s representation you want, hah, hah” (with a secret smirk). “It’s representation you’ll get!” Meanwhile the large semi containing an industrial-sized artifact is pulling around back.

Artifact contamination is a way of an artist getting back at a literal-minded patron, but it is also, as we see in cases where novels and plays contain stories about contamination of the characters’ “reality” by stories or dreams, a useful theme. Like the joke about the professors and computer scientists, we get a response simply by intersecting two (usually incompatible) levels of reality. The more impossible it seems that they might join, or the more invisible the one is from the other, the greater the effect. Within a blink, we have to be able to see just how they meet. But, before that moment, we are supposed to have no idea how this could happen. The polarity between these two opposite conditions creates an elastic “pop,” a real visceral effect, that makes a joke funny or an adventure adventurous. In Greek tragedy, it was called the anagnorisis — the moment Oedipus finds out that he killed his father and wed his mother. It has to happen quickly, so the audience must be prepped way in advance so that they can process it, when it comes, in nano-seconds. The fore-part of the play could be regarded as nothing more than preparation for this moment, a kind of slow winding of a rubber-band propeller of a toy airplane. The more you wind, the wilder the flight.

The relationship of artifact and representation doesn’t really depend on which is which. It is a mobile relationship. It defines the relationship of art to ordinary life, the structure of various déjà-vu devices used in plots, and the machinery behind surprise endings for works of all kinds. We will even see cases where it structures visual art and music. The point is not to sell this as a pocket-fishing tool or Swiss Army knife, but to understand just why it works and what its workings imply.

Here’s a short list based on art3 ideas to come.

**Idea One: Rules of Form Are Spatial, Logical, and Temporal.** Artifact and representation each generate their own rules of form. The rules are not so important in themselves but in how they are different from each other. They are like soap molecules that allow grease and water to mix: “catalysts,” in the popular sense of the term. These rules of form are spatial, logical, and temporal. That means that space is structured by one or the other or both, that time is one or the other or both, that logic is . . . etc.

**Idea Two: The Angle’s Got All the Angles.** The artifact-representation angle is the basis of the development of different levels within the work of art. Art is fundamentally about levels, for in order to enter into the illusion of representation, we have to leave life proper in exchange for the life of the work of art. We move, and the artifact gets us to move in just such-and-such a way. This level shift can see its own mirror image in the movement of characters and objects within the work of art, and the levels can curve in on each other in topological feeding frenzies. We are reminded of the motion of fate that animates the primal Empedoclean elements and humors; this motion is about the soul, the body, time, nature, and fate — in other words, “us.”

**Idea Three: Levels Have Their Own Internal Order.** If the representation-artifact “thing” creates levels, then these levels must have some internal order of their own. This is a main point of the art3 idea: that levels are not simply multiplications of possible meanings but an orderly plan for a final possible maximum optimum great wonderful super maxi-size all-day-sucker-type contamination. Something like that. Why would we keep art around if it didn’t produce the kind of gala in which everything comes together, which doesn’t require us to be rocket scientists to experience it, and which lets us participate within the universal “body” of art? Art must do this, or it wouldn’t be worth much. Given that it does do it, how does it do it? Levels, layers, stuff like that.

**Idea Four: The Cultural Angle = An Angular Culture.** If the artifact-representation vector thing helps us understand art better, it is because it enables
us to see art in its cultural context. Actually, this is an understatement. The vectors of artifact-representation help us understand what culture is in the first place, and by the time we do that, we see just how much culture is art, or art in various guises. Art involves “displacement” — the movement of the audience’s imagination to other places and times — but culture involves displacement, too: the invention and transformation of institutions and customs. Learn about art, and you learn about lots of other things at the same time.

Idea Five: Vectors Create Systems of Differences. Artifacts and vectors are not opposites so much as they are a system of distinction that works internally in perception and experience. We can distinguish the representation if we isolate it from artifact, spatially and temporally. In terms of modern hip French philosophy, the vectors are a system of difference. Without difference, there would be no place to hide meanings, no way of creating suspense or bringing about surprise. Try telling a joke without these ingredients.

Another thing about a “vector-based” view of art is that whole technologies and periods of history can be associated with various views of or interests in these vectors as such. The artifact of looking, the frame, has been the center of cultural attention since the Enlightenment. The invisibility of the viewer and the isolation of the viewer from the viewed was translated by Cartesian logic into a philosophical program for the perfection of knowledge. Along with this program came inventions that idealized the “line of sight” with telescopes, microscopes, theodolites, and gun-sights. Painting started to look less like a comic-book and more like a camera-shot. Ironically, this trend is called “representationalism,” although it is chiefly an instrumentalization of vision as artifact (getting rid of the “art” in artifact, so to speak).

We can look at literature and see how artifact and representation intersect to create plots and stories within stories. Fictional time and space are used to manage the levels of meaning that result. These techniques can also be found in music and painting. The list goes on. Our experience with the poem, “Annabel Lee,” demonstrated how much the poet depends on the reverberation effects to be had by opposing artifact and representation. This “angle” is truly “angelic.”