**BETWEEN ARTIST AND CURATOR:
ON THE 'LAWS OF ATTRACTION'
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EXHIBITION**

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Here there has occurred a separation and a new combination, and one then feels justified even in employing the term "elective affinities," because it really does look as if one relationship was preferred to another and chosen instead of it.

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*

Made popular by German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel of the same name, the term "elective affinities" refers to the feeling of attraction for an idea, attitude, or person that is capable of disrupting existing social conventions and institutions to obtain the object of desire. While the term, and Goethe's novel, caused a stir when it was published in the early nineteenth century, its significance as the title of Edmund de Waal's 2019 exhibition at the Frick Collection — his first solo exhibition in an American institution — may initially escape even those visitors who are already familiar with its origins. As one proceeds through the Frick in search of the nine site-specific works that make up *elective affinities: Edmund de Waal at The Frick Collection*, the use of the phrase becomes clearer. De Waal's complex affection for the Frick's permanent collection is its own form of elective affinity, with the exhibition serving as a response to and an embodiment of de Waal's relationship with the institution. In this context, the affect-driven nature of de Waal's pieces becomes significantly more important. Combined with the fluid boundary between the historical and the contemporary, the permanent and the temporary, they cast doubt on who should be considered the "true" curator of the exhibition: the Frick's curator Charlotte Vignon or de Waal himself. De Waal's exhibition challenges visitors to reconsider how they perceive "the curatorial" by demonstrating that works of art can also be inherently curatorial even before they are organized and contextualized around an idea or theme, as is often the case in exhibitions. While the artwork's placement — within the Frick as well as within vitrines — is integral to understanding and appreciating what the nine works are trying to achieve, it is the fact that de Waal created his pieces as interventions into and in conversation with the other works of art that reveals this element of the "inherently curatorial," the works inseparable from the space of the Frick, which conditioned their existence.

To answer the question of curatorial authority it is first necessary to consider the implications and significance of *elective affinities: Edmund de Waal at The Frick Collection* in the context of the Frick's exhibition history. Exhibitions are an opportunity to introduce visitors to new works and artists, particularly

in the case of retrospectives, or to provide new ways of thinking about artwork one might be more familiar with, as is often the case in exhibitions that are organized around a theme. Yet in discussions about curatorial and museum studies, the medium of the exhibition tends to be taken for granted, often “glossed over as a ‘natural’ form within the life of an institution,” argues Canadian curator and writer Bruce W. Ferguson. In other words, the exhibition is taken for granted because it is expected of an institution, acting as a way of justifying its existence to inform and entertain the visitor while also avoiding the potential dullness of predictability that comes with permanently displaying a fixed collection of works. For an institution like the Frick, at the core of which is the original collection of founder Henry Clay Frick, this risk of predictability is inflated. Thus, in the case of the Frick, the exhibition is not an expected “natural form” but rather a way of encouraging visitors to consider the permanent collection concerning other works, to consider similarities and differences across different mediums such as, painting and porcelain, or time periods.

What makes “elective affinities” in particular truly unique, and difficult to merely gloss over as yet another exhibition, is the fact that it is the first of its kind at the Frick, the first time that contemporary work by a living artist has been displayed in the institution. Charlotte Vignon, the (now former) Curator of Decorative Arts, was quick to point out that this exhibition is not an indication of a new ‘normal’ for the institution, that she is “personally ‘not interested’ in organizing another such presentation” because she is interested in de Waal rather than contemporary art more broadly. Returning to Ferguson’s discussion about the significance of exhibitions, that he described as “the speech act of an institution,” wherein an exhibition speaks *for* the institution by conveying an intention, a vision, one of the first questions that arises in relation to de Waal’s exhibition is what kind of speech “elective affinities” is. Yet Vignon’s words above quickly reveal that “elective affinities” is not a speech act that heralds a new normal for the Frick, that the institution does not overtly want contemporary art and that there is no place for work that does not engage with the permanent collection and requires being displayed separately, as something distinct and unrelated. Vignon’s words also imply there is no commitment to continue Henry Clay Frick’s legacy of collecting contemporary works and supplementing the existing historical ones, which is why de Waal’s use of vitrines is instrumental. Not only do vitrines bring bits of their surroundings into the structured space inside of themselves, thereby strengthening the relationality between de Waal’s work and the Frick’s collection, but they are also a non-intrusive and temporary “way of framing the world,” making a temporary statement that can be documented and removed without disturbing the idyllic existing order. Vitrines are therefore a speech act in and of themselves, their role similar to punctuation like a comma or a hyphen in that they add to the existing dialogue begun by the Frick from the moment of its inception, rather than like a period, which is definitive and marks an end of some sort, before moving on to the next idea.

Much has been made of the placement of de Waal’s pieces, the praising tone of the comments revealing a protectiveness and anxiety over how contemporary art should “behave” in a space similar to the Frick. The exhibition’s curation has been characterized as a modest and “very decidedly not disruptive,” seamless and lacking harshness. Ian Wardropper, the director of the Frick, called the exhibition “subtle and quiet,” while Vignon points out that “elective affinities” “will not shock [since] [i]t’s not an exhibition of contemporary art.” Of all nine works, “on an archaic torso of Apollo” is arguably the epitome of subtlety, the small gold vitrine at home in the opulent setting of the Fragonard room (Figure 1) to the point where, if a visitor were to glance through the room in a hurry, the vitrine would register as merely another decorative object amid an array of busts, sculptures, and vases. Yet placement and spatial practices in “elective affinities” are not limited only to the importance of the location of each piece, as each of the nine installations not only incorporates information from its surroundings but also channels it back outward, allowing for the kind of seamless and inconspicuous effect that has been praised by visitors and museum staff alike. De Waal’s exhibition demonstrates that the distinction made by art critic Maria Lind between a context-sensitive and a site-specific exhibition — with site-specificity placing greater emphasis on location whereas context-sensitivity requires a “sensitivity to situations and a challenge to the status quo” — does not always hold true, as the two are inseparable in “elective affinities.” Since the Frick itself is a vitrine, artists like de Waal engage not only with material objects but also with history itself, as any work that has been brought in becomes part of the politics of class and gender that continue to be contributing factors in the collection.

Figure 1.

archaic torso of Apollo installed on commode (left-hand side of image) in the Fragonard Room. 2019. The Frick Collection. Source: <https://www.maxhetzler.com/zh/exhibitions/edmund-de-waal-elective-affinities-edmund-de-waal-frick-collection-2019/zoom-i/11> (accessed April 6, 2020).

Figure 2.

Edmund de Waal. *the temptation of Christ on the mountain* (installation view, Enamels Room). 2019. Porcelain, steel, gold, alabaster, aluminum, and plexiglass. 59 x 42 x 21cm. The Frick Collection. Source: https://www.frick.org/exhibitions/de_waal/51 (accessed April 6, 2020).

Figure 3.

Edmund de Waal. *an annunciation* (installation view, Anteroom). 2019. Porcelain, steel, gold, alabaster, aluminum, and plexiglass. 44 x 58 x 22 cm. The Frick Collection. Source: https://www.frick.org/exhibitions/de_waal/38 (accessed April 6, 2020).

That de Waal chose to present his pieces in the form of vitrines is fitting, as this allows him to create his take on the “cabinet of curiosities” that runs parallel to the one created by Henry Clay Frick, the two men clearly sharing a common interest in the *mirabilia* installation format, that was “designed primarily to delight and surprise rather than to instruct.” In pieces such as the “an annunciation” (Figure 2) and “the temptation of Christ on the mountain” (Figure 3), the vitrine successfully transforms its contents into a world of the miniature; on one hand, reflects the figures depicted in the artworks above them, while on the other “detach[ing] [the visitor] from the surrounding world [...] help[ing] [...] to resist dissolution of the surrounding atmosphere.” Only one of the nine installations — the five “steel light” pieces located in the West Vestibule (Figure 4) — lacks a vitrine covering, the realization that becomes increasingly jarring considering how unlikely it is that a visitor will notice this inconsistency on their first encounter with the exhibition. However, the exception can be easily explained: since de Waal wanted the piece to capture light coming in from the nearby window and for shadows to be reflected, the glass of the vitrine would have acted as a filter for the experience, heightening this interplay between interiority and exteriority, the materiality of “steel light” and of the cabinet and two flanking paintings. By interspersing the pieces throughout the Frick, de Waal successfully achieves his goal of slowing people down without resorting to a shock or surprise factor. The vitrine functions like a pitstop, a moment of rest and contemplation that recalls the way philosopher Gaston Bachelard describes the function of corners, in which “one does not talk to oneself” and where “we remember above all [is] silence, the silence of our thoughts.” More importantly, the vitrine has a fleeting quality to it, in part due to how mobile it is, inviting us to contemplate not only what spurred de Waal to place each piece in its particular location but also whether a vitrine took up space once occupied by a different artwork, such as the vases that had to be removed in the case of “that pause of space” (Figure 5). The viewer can certainly marvel at the affect of intricacy, even coziness, created by de Waal’s vitrines, yet while one may be drawn to them initially due to a feeling of curiosity or desire — a desire for the object as well as for knowledge of the object — the form of the vitrine is not neutral nor purely rooted in questions of aesthetics and display. Instead, the vitrines are entry points, inviting visitors, to paraphrase the well-known saying, to come for the visuals and stay for the affective self-reflection, all without unloading a large amount of information about de Waal’s intentions and creation process.

De Waal’s integrated approach to placing his works means visitors who do not know where to look will miss a portion of the series, especially those as elusive and well hidden as “an alchemy” (Figure 6). At the same time, this hide-and-seek atmosphere encourages visitors to be aware of their surroundings, just as Deborah Solomon admits that she “never noticed Frick’s elephantine desk” until de Waal’s exhibition forced her too. “elective affinities” thus implements elements of the “chance encounter” that Leigh Markopoulos advocated for in her article “The Accidental Exhibition: Chance as Curatorial Critique and Opportunity” without resorting to complete randomness. Unless visitors voluntarily pick up an exhibition map and use it to guide them through the space, one’s trajectory remains up to their discretion.

This means that contrary to Markopoulos’s accusation that “the audience [...] remains[,] for the most part[,] recipient rather than co-author of the mechanisms for generating change and difference,” the visitor maintains some level of control of their experience. One is not forcefully guided by the space of the Frick collection or by any kind of glaring signage of the sort that often signals a new sub-section within an exhibition, around which visitors frequently congregate to read the text before moving on and seeing the work. The visitor can choose how to engage with the exhibition, whether they wish to trust the curatorial intentions to shape their perception of the works — that, in this case, comes from the artist, de Waal, rather than from the institution’s curator, Vignon — or if they prefer to engage with the work through a combination of guessing, creating aesthetic, value judgements, and inferencing.

Figure 4.

Edmund de Waal. *steel light I-V* (installation view, West Vestibule). 2019. Porcelain, steel, and gold. 36 x 16 x 18cm each. The Frick Collection. Source: https://www.frick.org/exhibitions/de_waal/41 (accessed April 6, 2020).

Figure 5.
Edmund de Waal. *that pause of space*
(installation view, North Hall). 2019. Porcelain,
gold, alabaster, aluminum, and plexiglass. 58
x 76 x 28cm. The Frick Collection. Source:
https://www.frick.org/exhibitions/de_waal/48
(accessed April 6, 2020).

Figure 6.
Edmund de Waal. *an alchemy* (installation view, Library). 2019. Porcelain, steel, gold, and plexiglass. 46 x 55 x 42 cm. The Frick Collection. Source: https://www.frick.org/exhibitions/de_waal/53 (accessed April 6, 2020).

“elective affinities” is therefore characterized by the effect of unexpectedness, as a first-time visitor might not know they are looking at one of de Waal’s pieces until they stumble upon it then note the stark difference in style as well as the medium between nine vitrines and the rest of the Frick’s collection. If a visitor chooses not to take a map at the entrance to the Frick but to simply proceed inside, then one might not realize the existence of de Waal’s exhibition until they, similarly, happen upon one of the vitrines, likely spurring the desire to know more about what these works are, who they are by, and, most importantly, what their “intention” is. The decision to omit didactic panels further reinforces the effect of unexpectedness, the leisurely and contemplative approach to spatial practices, all the while ensuring that the artworks are “genuinely in conversation with The Frick.”¹ Visitors interested in learning more about the inspiration behind each work, are to acquire the information by listening to the audio guide written and read by de Waal himself.² Since the audio tour is optional, the sensorial and emotional, rather than a didactic experience, becomes the default way of seeing, that Victoria Newhouse argues is what occurs in the absence of information panels.³ Hence, “elective affinities” disturbs the conventional dynamic of contemporary art exhibitions, in which the focus is equally as much on the artist as it is on the work. If one visits the Frick with the deliberate intention to see de Waal’s exhibition, whether out of fascination for his work or because one simply recognizes his name as a world-famous potter/ceramist, de Waal’s own love affair with the collection is the only one possible frame of reference for engaging with the exhibition and is not a dominating constituent. The visitor is not forced to share de Waal’s infatuation with the collection or the institution, as evident by the ease with which one can choose to disregard de Waal’s commentary about the works or the works themselves, in which case the subtlety of the vitrines acquires yet another purpose: to allow the disinterested visitor to engage with the rest of the collection without feeling as if de Waal’s temporary exhibition is being forced upon them.

This begs the question of who de Waal is attempting to engage with “elective affinities.” Although de Waal’s interventive method recalls exhibitions similarly to Fred Wilson’s installation *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society and the Contemporary Museum of Baltimore from April 2, 1992 – February 28, 1993, “elective affinities” lacks the kind of distinct goal that Wilson does in *Mining the Museum*, namely “to confront the difficulty of putting theories of diversity and historical revisionism into practice and to offer a model for change responsive to our particular community,” in the words of co-curator Lisa G. Corrin.⁴ De Waal’s endeavour is not attempting to enforce visitors to think critically about the works in the Frick’s permanent collection the way Wilson does in working with the Baltimore museums. The nearest de Waal gets to anything of that nature is to highlight how the different spaces in the institution are imbued with Henry Clay Frick’s ambitions, writing: “At the Frick, you can become, sequentially, French, then English, and then possible Dutch, before ending in a reverie of Siena in the Enamels Room.”⁵ Yet de Waal’s statement is adjacent to an observation that lacks a critical edge, a discussion of class and Western ideals, to say nothing of the numerous female portraits that Henry Clay Frick supposedly purchased because he enjoyed gazing at beautiful women.

If “elective affinities” is not an exhibition for the collection – Vignon was adamant that the Frick does not intend to begin collecting contemporary art – nor is it a critical intervention *into* the collection, the natural second explanation is that “elective affinities” is an exhibition for the audience. Considering that de Waal is perhaps better recognized for his best-selling 2010 biography, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, amongst the wider public, the fact that this information was prominently displayed in the original press release, as well as in all consecutive programming and promotional material, suggests that it is a particular kind of visitor that the Frick was hoping to engage with, all while reiterating that, just like his family biography, de Waal’s “elective affinities” lies in the realm of the personal. The sense of intimacy in the exhibition, then, potentially could be read as an attempt to draw in the public who is familiar with de Waal, accompanied by the intention of then trying to encourage visitors to be more mindful of their own experience at the Frick on the level of affect and sensorial perception. If the Frick left such a lasting impression on de Waal that spanned several decades and culminated in a kind of physical love letter to the institution, then surely the

1 The Frick Collection, “Edmund de Waal: ‘Steel Light: Materials and Memories,’” YouTube video.

2 Julia Friedman, “Edmund de Waal’s Relationship to Precious Materials at the Frick Collection,” *Hyperallergic*, August 13, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/503806/edmund-de-waals-relationship-to-precious-materials-at-the-frick-collection/>.

3 Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement*, 231.

4 Lisa G. Corrin, “*Mining the Museum*: An Installation Confronting History,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 36, no. 4 (1993): 303.

5 De Waal, “That Pause of Space,” 14.

casual visitor will also discover something similarly striking, perhaps even life-changing, during their visit. Therefore, there is no single answer to *how* the audience is supposed to engage with de Waal's works, primarily because they are not necessarily asked to do so or pressured to come to a conclusion. It is only after seeing — or not seeing — de Waal's pieces that one learns how they will engage with them, the same kind of spur-of-the-moment that de Waal experienced during his first visit to the Frick, which he explores in the exhibition, demonstrating that the unexpected is memorable.

How, then, are we to understand the function of the curatorial in “elective affinities”? How do we classify the exhibition — is it an installation or an intervention? How does the “type” of exhibition directly impact the role and function of the curator? Considering the nonintrusive nature of the exhibition, it is difficult to classify “elective affinities” as an intervention, since the term has a slightly more negative connotation than installation. However, since the conception of each piece depended on its location and, more importantly, on de Waal's *reading* of the space around it, “elective affinities” is not merely an installation of an arbitrary group of works, with barely a tether to the space that they inhabit over the duration of the exhibition. Rather, “elective affinities” has elements of both exhibition types but cannot be neatly confined to only one of these two categories. This hybridity directly impacts how we conceptualize the role of the exhibition auteur in “elective affinities.” Given the highly personal nature of the exhibition, to the point that de Waal jokingly describes it as “an autobiography (of sorts),”⁶ it would not be unwarranted to argue that he should also be considered the exhibition's curator, “the curator as creator.”⁷ Moreover, de Waal quasi-performs the role of the curator through the audio guide, that he created and narrated himself, assuming the responsibility of imparting specialized knowledge to the visitor, only this time, this knowledge is personal rather than historical. By enabling de Waal to shape visitors' experience, for those who choose to take the audio guide, the Frick validated de Waal's personal and affective relationship with the permanent collection, elevating it to the same level of importance as the specialized knowledge that is typically displayed on didactic panels or shared with visitors during tours, which is considered to be informative and therefore objective. Yet this is not to suggest that Vignon's name has only been included as a formality on paper. Rather, as a traditional curator whose job it is to “accrue specialist knowledge of particular movements, genres or periods,”⁸ Vignon is the bridge between the historical and the contemporary, the mediator between de Waal and the Frick who enriches cultural heritage. However, it is not through the acquisition of contemporary works, as Natalie Heinrich and Michael Pollak argue,⁹ but by ensuring that the existing historical information gains new meaning when it is processed through the eyes of a contemporary artist, such as de Waal, acquiring a new form.

De Waal writes: “That is what epiphanies are: moments when the place you are stays exactly the same but everything is transformed.”¹⁰ “elective affinities” functions as this sort of epiphany for visitors who are already familiar with the Frick, challenging them to perform an exercise in unmediated looking in which one focuses specifically on the objects' materiality and how it lends itself more to the creation of an atmosphere than on its historiographic context. “elective affinities” also sets a precedent for the field of curating, expanding the norm, for if we revisit the term that lends the exhibition its title, we find that the ideas of intimacy, recombination, and the shifting of affections are used to redefine the relationship between the artist, the curator, the visitors and the institution. In staging this exhibition, the Frick reaffirms the validity of an affective engagement with historical works and spaces while simultaneously dispelling the idea that “understanding” art means being able to retain intricate information about it rather than to engage with it through a sensorial, full-body experience. There is no one way to experience or “know” a work of art and de Waal's knowledge — as an artist-curator as well as a long-time enthusiast of the Frick — is only one example, as “elective affinities” facilitates and encourages numerous permutations of the person without settling on a single, definitive approach.

6 Phrase was quoted on the dustjacket of exhibition catalogue, *Elective Affinities: Edmund de Waal at The Frick Collection*.

7 Helena Reckitt, “Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 5, no. 1 (2016): 10.

8 Ibid, 9.

9 Natalie Heinrich and Michael Pollak, “From Museum Creator to Exhibition *Auteur*: Inventing a Singular Position,” trans. Robert McGee, in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), 167.

10 De Waal, “That Pause of Space,” 12.

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