

An Extract from The Pig that wants to be Eaten

by Julian Baggini pge 34-36 A Plume Book 2006

12. Picasso on the beach

Roy looked down from the cliffs at the man drawing in the sand. The picture that started to emerge startled him. It was an extraordinary face, not realistically rendered, but seemingly viewed from many angles at once. In fact, it looked much like a Picasso.

As soon as the thought entered his mind, his heart stopped. He lifted his binoculars to his eyes, which he then felt compelled to rub. The man on the beach was Picasso.

Roy's pulse raced. He walked this route every day, and he knew that very soon the tide would sweep in and wash away a genuine Picasso original. Somehow, he had to try and save it. But how?

Trying to hold back the sea was futile. Nor was there any way to take a cast of the sand, even if he had had the time he was actually so short of. Perhaps he could run back home for his camera. But that would at best preserve a record of the work, not the picture itself. And if he did try this, by the time he got back, the image would probably have been erased by the ocean. Perhaps then he should simply enjoy this private view as long as it lasted. As he stood watching, he didn't know whether to smile or cry.

Source: 'In a Season of Calm Weather' by Ray Bradbury, reprinted in *A Medicine for Melancholy* (Avon Books, 1981)



Picasso on the beach

There is no general principle which states that there is something tragic about a work of art which doesn't persist over time. It depends entirely on what form the art takes. It is just absurd to think that a performance should have a permanent existence in the same way that a sculpture does. Of course, we can film a performance, or preserve its script. But neither of these methods freezes the work itself in time, as anyone who has seen a memorable play or concert and then watched it on film knows.

When it comes to sculpture and painting, preservation is seen as the ideal. But how sharp is the distinction between the performance and plastic arts? Picasso's imaginary sand sketch certainly blurs the boundaries. The unusual choice of medium means that that which usually endures is transformed into a fleeting performance.

Recognising that there is no sharp dividing line between the performative and the plastic may prompt us to reconsider our attitudes towards preservation and restoration. In general, we assume that it is desirable to keep, or restore, pictures so that they are as similar to how they were when they were new. But perhaps we should see the slow deterioration of artworks as an essential part of their performative dimension.

It is certainly the case that many artists take into account how their works will age when they create them. Frank Gehry, for example, knew how exposure to the elements would affect the titanium exterior of his architectural masterpiece, the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao. Similarly, the old masters were not ignorant about how their pigments would age.

Perhaps we could go further and say that our desire to preserve is a form of denial about our own mortality. The fact

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that art can endure longer than people has led some to seek a form of proxy immortality through it. (Although Woody Allen famously claimed he did not want immortality through art, but through not dying.) If we accept that art is mortal too, and that nothing is truly permanent, maybe we can see more clearly where the value of art and life is to be found: in experiencing them.