I am looking for a field that will frame the formative experiences I’ve invoked—gazing at an Édouard Manet painting, watching the sunset from the slope of an extinct volcano, wandering through a Cor-Ten spiral on a midwestern evening. To qualify as a category, slow art requires shape and coherence—but not too much of either, as that could blunt the particularities that make such encounters noteworthy in the first place. Further, slow art has no “essence”; rather, it names social, time-bound experiences. Slow art is plural. It can be demanding or easy to access, avant-garde or homespun populist, refined or vulgar, chaste or salacious, as cool as Thomas Struth’s video portraits or as kitsch as a waxwork Sleeping Beauty with a beating heart. Again, what counts as slow for you might not for me.

Notice that not all art registers as either fast or slow. In many cases, if not most, tempo and duration hardly solicit our attention. The test of a good Hollywood “entertainment,” for instance, is not checking your watch. To fit our category, then, experiences must be coded as culturally slow, must make us say to ourselves, “Oh, this feels drawn out”—even at the risk of boring us. Herein lies the deeper divide: on one hand aesthetic forms in which time is neutral or invisible; on the other those in which tempo, whether fast or slow, makes itself integral to the work. In 1993 the Scottish filmmaker Douglas Gordon stretched Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho to twenty-four hours of running time. In 2002 the Los Angeles filmmaker Daniel Martinico replied with 24-Second Psycho, which compressed Gus Van Sant’s shot-for-shot remake of Hitchcock’s thriller to twenty-four seconds. Same coin, two sides.
Morton Feldman’s glacially slow compositions offer musical corollaries to slow visual arts. Feldman’s are more pertinent because of their painterly inspiration—like Rothko Chapel (1971) or For Philip Guston (1984). Think of them as musical tableaux vivants, performing paintings. Literary analogues include experimental writing like Gertrude Stein’s repetitious and minimally varying compositions. Rather than narratives advancing, repetition suspends progress to focus on specific moments. Or take Alain Robbe-Grillet’s novels, in which voluminous and nearly identical passages of pure description suspend the plot indefinitely and reduce the story to a string of verbal still lifes.

Three false starts: initially I conceived of slow art solely in terms of objects. I collected works of visual art that compel rapt attention, or at least cultivate patience, works that lead us to look scrupulously, even indulgently, or works like Ad Reinhardt’s “black” paintings, that only reveal themselves over time. “Slow art” would curate such objects under a collective name. But how could we agree on which works secure our engagement?

Besides the object, I wondered about the artist who designs works to hold our gaze, like Robert Irwin (born 1928). In the 1960s he made a series of paintings that prompted one critic to remark, “What Irwin manifestly wishes to do is to slow the viewer down, to prepare him, in effect, for an encounter. A certain measurable duration of time is necessary before one can even see what there is to be seen, so that the viewer will either see it the way Irwin wants him to see it or he will—quite literally—not see the painting at all.” However, intention—what the artist “wants”—never guarantees results; those must be proven on the pulse. Besides which, slowness may work more effectively as a by-product than as an explicit aim. Works designed to detain us risk seeming didactic.

Third, I considered the viewer’s perspective. Is slow art a way to regard any kind of work, independent of its specific features? Would any object suffice if one focused on it long enough, even if that object was made with no aesthetic intent? Gustave Flaubert and Buck Mulligan would have thought so. But if anything becomes interesting when I look at it long enough, then slow art will be whatever I choose, or manage, to experience as such. Flaubert’s prolonged gaze would produce a brief book. In sum, none of these three perspectives—the object’s, the artist’s, or the viewer’s—can ground a definition, even though they will all figure in our coming to terms. I needed to begin again.

Rather than locate slow art either in beholder or beheld I return to my definition: a dynamic relationship that transpires between objects and observers. Slow art enacts tacit contracts between works that may have designs on us and beholders who may invest in them. As in physics, changing the way we look changes the things we look at. The division of labor is flexible: some works seduce us, others require our active pursuit. The sequence can shift as well. Flaubert’s observer initiates the slow-art experience, but for many museum-goers Claude Monet’s paintings of Rouen Cathedral trigger slow art. To be sure, their enormous popularity results from the richness of Monet’s colors and his bold brushstrokes, but also from the paintings’ markedly temporal character. By chronicling the appearance of a Gothic facade over the course of a day—temporalizing stone, Monet invites us to compare a morning scene with an evening one. He activates our
sense of duration. Twice over, in fact, for when we approach the canvas the image decomposes into tiny blots of contrasting colors; when we back away, the facade recomposes.

Thomas Struth’s photograph *Kunsthistorisches Museum III, Vienna 1989* (1989, plate 2) reads as an emblem of slow art because it depicts what transpires between viewer and image. **Medium matters:** because photos don’t change, the man will never cease gazing at the Rembrandt. Notice that he stares not at the larger painting whose elaborate gilt frame is visible at the left edge, but at the quieter, more modest work. As if revisiting an old friend, he leans forward to get a better look. It also matters that his face is hidden from us; we only see an old man gazing, mirror-like, on another old man. But Struth’s picture makes a double mirror because the image itself already stages our relationship to the image: we engage the photograph as the man engages the Rembrandt. More powerfully, perhaps, because we don’t need to be old, male, or Dutch to replicate this scene. Simply by looking we repeat his gaze.

Several artists whom we will study make this subject-object relationship primary. Robert Irwin: “The art is what has happened to the viewer.” Richard Serra: “The person who is navigating the space, his or her experience becomes the content. So, the whole subject-object relationship is reversed.” James Turrell: “The experienced is the ‘thing,’ the experiencing is the ‘object.’” Theoretical underpinning for these remarks comes from Nicholas Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics,” as exhibited in the influential exhibition *theany space whatever* (2008) at the Guggenheim Museum, New York. For Bourriaud the meaning of art is lodged in the social interactions between beholders and works: Does the work allow me to engage with it? Behind his continental speculations lies John Dewey’s homegrown idea of “art as experience.” As the philosopher Alva Noé explains, “The artwork is not the object . . . ; the artwork is the experience the object affords. Crucially, Dewey rejects the idea that experiences are interior, private, sensation-like occurrences. . . . [Rather,] . . . experiences are made; they are transactions with the world around us.”

Because “works” of slow art are incomplete absent the beholder, slow art is radically empirical. We engage the aesthetic object in its material presence—color, scale, texture, heft. We experience it bodily, and in time: to spend a night at Turrell’s Roden Crater, or to contemplate Jeff Wall’s human-scale photographic lightboxes, rather than to see them reproduced in books. (The exception may be videos. But even with digitally produced images, scale, support, and setting—all of which can only be experienced directly—are integral to the experience.) Antidotes to our computer-screen worlds, these encounters anchor us in the here and now, in addition to laying down memories.

This sounds naive, I realize, as if one could ever be fully present with an artwork. Nobody is better at pointing out the mediated nature of looking than Marcel Proust (1871–1922). In his novel *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–27), artworks tend to mediate experience, as when a character is first attracted to his mistress because she resembles a figure in a Sandro Botticelli painting. But slow art lets us imagine, for a spell, that we could taste pure presence. In fact, one way to gauge slow art is its power to persuade us momentarily that our experience is all-consuming. Presence is shaded, however, because
we also ask whether the work beckons us back after we leave it. As Serra observed, “The
question is not how much time you spend actually looking at the work, but how much it
occupies your thought. A limited viewing can lead to a long life span. Indeed, one reason
we go back to the work is that it’s not commensurate with what we recalled. We can even
be mocked by it. If it’s good, it keeps on.” Proust attests to the power of such memories.
His fictional novelist Bergotte is stirred from his deathbed by a desire to see Johannes
Vermeer’s View of Delft (1660) one last time. Because slow art is experiential, this book
is fated to be a Platonic shadow of the material it treats.

Three overlapping contexts will situate slow art: logical, historical, and psychological.

LOGICAL

Slowness and speed are not independent but governed by their relation, as I’ve noted.
We can have no meaningful experience of slowness, cannot grasp it, without a sense of
how fast feels. Each being what the other is not, they cradle one another. Further, slow-
ness emerges against the backdrop either of stasis or of some relatively faster motion.
But if we experience slowness only through difference, then difference must also operate
within any particular experience of slowness. And keep operating. Once a slow tempo is
established, it risks becoming the norm, and therefore is no longer perceived as slow. So
its tempo must vary, even if changes are hardly noticeable. The same holds for speed.

Actually, “stillness” is a misnomer. Physicists tell us, “Nothing that’s localized is still.
The more I know where something is, the less still it becomes.” Genuine immobility
exists only as a theoretical limit case, a hypothetical environment of absolute zero, so cold
that even atoms freeze. The philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) argued that matter
itself is energy, always in motion. The shapes of familiar objects are really “snapshots
taken by the mind of the continuity of becoming.” From distant galaxies to molecules
in the lead of my pencil, everything moves, even if such changes fall outside the range of
human perception. Between the galaxy and the atom occur countless alterations over
time, like the growth of plants or shifts in seasons. Ordinarily, these movements are
obscured by the tempos of everyday life. Slow art tests the limits of our attentiveness. It
takes a James Turrell (born 1943) or a Charles Ray (born 1953) to help us register the
subtle movements of a planet light years away or a cylinder rotating almost undetectably
on a table, as in a particular installation by the latter, to which I’ll return.

If we can’t experience “slow” without “fast,” then slow art requires a working defini-
tion of fast art. Let us say that fast art likewise transpires between beholder and beheld,
and that fast art exceeds our habitual experience of time’s passing. If slow art falls below
that threshold, fast art rises above it—a growing plant versus a car chase. We apprehend
fast art viscerally and immediately. It’s the difference between the one-liner and the dou-
ble take. Who looks twice at Marcel Duchamp’s mustached Mona Lisa, L.H.O.O.Q.
WHAT IS SLOW ART?

(1919)? Rather than perceiving ourselves perceiving, as with a Turrell or an Irwin, our attention pivots outward. Examples of fast art: art made by sets of instructions—like releasing a liter of nitrogen into the air—or simply the instructions. My students add billboard advertisements, the website Stumbleupon.com, or speed painter Dan Dunn’s Paintjams (begun in 2008). Tricky things happen, as when speed seems to flip over into stillness: light traveling to us from the Milky Way appears stationary. Crossing a continent or an ocean in a jetliner, we feel motionless. This sensation also occurs on the ground. The video artist Gary Hill told me about a memorable trip to the Grand Canyon: “There were long stretches of road and I was doing 90 mph and it felt like 30 mph. The landscape was so vast and wide it slowwwwwed me down and yet no ‘moving parts’ were slowed down. What is it to think fast or slow?” A racecar driver thrown thirty feet into the air following a crash recalled, “It seemed like the whole thing took forever . . . like I was a player on a stage and could see myself tumbling over and over.” Speed up enough and you reach “escape” velocity. People on LSD may “trip” so fast that things seem to halt. Whirling dervishes discover contemplative stillness at the center of their dance. Even etymology confirms that we can experience fast as slow, for “fast” once meant “fixed,” as in our expression “to hold fast.”

HISTORICAL

The prevailing tempos of everyday life form the baseline or backdrop to experiencing art in time, from narratives sung by Homeric bards that stretched over many nights to movies on cell phones, which hold viewers’ interest for about three minutes. Each age has its characteristic rhythms, impacted by all manner of developments—technological, economic, social, political—and varying with place, class, and so on. The invention of clocks in thirteenth-century Europe produced objective and uniform time, but that is different from lived experience, what the sociologist Erwin Straus called “sociocultural time.” If we ignore it, he warned, time “loses its reality, and we find ourselves in an exceedingly difficult position in our efforts to orient ourselves in the time process, to find out ‘where we are’ and where are the other social phenomena on ‘the bridge of time’.” Today’s American museum-goers who dwell with a painting for more than ten seconds exceed the norm, while in the Middle Ages contemplating icons was a lengthy affair but would not have seemed abnormal. History in some measure shapes psychology. A daring hypothesis comes from Jonathan Crary, a scholar of visual culture. He proposed that in the early nineteenth century the very model of vision underwent a radical shift. Until that time the eye was conceived of as a kind of camera obscura, so that seeing was thought to be objective and reliable. But over the 1820s and 1830s, the understanding of both the observer and the act of seeing changed. Seeing became “increasingly tied to the body,” Crary says, and that challenged the idea of objective seeing because the body has an “innate capacity to misperceive.” Henceforth “the act of seeing” was tied to “one’s own subjectivity experienced in time.”
Psychological time likewise varies, as the neurologist Oliver Sacks illustrates:

I would often see my patient Miron V. sitting in the hallway outside my office. He would appear motionless, with his right arm often lifted, sometimes an inch or two above his knee, sometimes near his face. When I questioned him about these frozen poses, he asked indignantly, “What do you mean, ‘frozen poses’? I was just wiping my nose.” I wondered if he was putting me on. One morning, over a period of hours, I took a series of twenty or so photos and stapled them together to make a flick-book. . . . With this, I could see that Miron actually was wiping his nose but was doing so a thousand times more slowly than normal.22

Miron suffers from bradykinesia, a neurological disorder associated with Parkinson’s disease. The same behavior that fascinates Sacks turns into art in the hands of video makers such as Douglas Gordon, Bill Viola, Tacita Dean, and Fiona Tan. Their work places us in Sacks’s shoes, as we likewise observe movement dialed down to stillness. But from Miron’s perspective, presumably, we would find nothing peculiar about a performance that dilated an hour-long preparation for a date to three days.23 Recreational drugs can also distort time. The psychologist William James (1842–1910) was so curious about their effects that he experimented with nitrous oxide, peyote, and hashish. With the latter “we utter a sentence, and ere the end is reached the beginning seems already to date from indefinitely long ago. We enter a short street, and it is as if we should never get to the end of it.”24 James mainlined slowness.

. . . . . .

Work so that I could neither arrest my eyes nor tear them away from your canvas.

DENIS DIDEROT ADVISING AN ARTIST, NOTES ON PAINTING25

We now turn to the heart of the matter, that sustained call and response between object and observer. First we’ll examine the artwork’s contribution, then the beholder’s, and finally investigate the nuances of that relationship’s character.

THE OBJECT’S SHARE

Objects can spark slow looking in multiple ways. The trigger could be personal—say that blue paintings sing to me. Or perceptual—the time it takes to decode a Reinhardt canvas, or for a Turrell installation to come into focus. Alternatively, the cause could be behavioral—the object requires time to negotiate, like wandering through a Serra Torqued Spiral. “Joe cannot be grasped as Gestalt or image,” the artist remarked. “The sculpture is understood behaviorally as a function of time.”26 Massive as Serra’s Torques are, slow-art sculp-
ture expands to become Land art, like Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977), that grid of steel rods in rural New Mexico, or Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), which snakes fifteen hundred feet into Utah's Great Salt Lake. Further, *empathy* can induce slow looking. “What painstaking work!” we feel on seeing Vija Celmins's meticulous drawings of water’s surface or Eva Hesse's complicated rope sculptures. Or again, the cause could be *cognitive*—a dense or ambiguous picture that requires decoding, like Bronzino's mysterious allegory *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* (ca. 1545), or Manet's *Young Lady in 1866* (1866), for that matter. Personal, behavioral, empathic, cognitive—I need not specify exactly how or in what combination works engage beholders. It’s enough to establish that certain objects captivate, intrigue, move, or arrest us.

But again, do such works share common features? To address the question I’ll divide the field of slow art between moving and still works. To think in these terms is appropriate—indeed, necessary—since our experience varies with the temporal characteristics of aesthetic forms. Medium is never neutral.

The eighteenth-century German aestheteician Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) was among the first moderns to write about experiencing art in time. In an influential treatise called *Laocoon, or the Limits of Poetry and Painting* (1766) he elaborated an opposition between the “arts of time” and the “arts of space”: “Succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter.”27 Painting is atemporal, he maintained, because we can grasp it in an instant: “The beauty of an object arises from the harmonious effect of its various parts, which the eye is able to take in at one glance.”28 Lessing’s schema has not weathered well, however, as later writers have demonstrated the difficulties of separating space from time in specific works—never mind Albert Einstein. As the painter Paul Klee (1879–1940) remarked, “Space too is a temporal concept.”29 I will replace Lessing’s time-space division with my mobile-stationary one. His arts of space, I’ll propose, are themselves already time based; in fact, I’ll argue that *all visual art is time based*, although duration varies with the genre and content. In other words, looking at a painting is rather like listening to music—both “compositions” take time to absorb.

Let’s begin with the moving arts, which are temporal by definition. As Aristotle explained in the *Physics*, “There is no time without movement or change, and it is in perceiving movement that we perceive time.”30 Arts of motion take two forms, depending on whether the work appears to be slowing down or speeding up. First, *slowing down*: In *La tache aveugle* (1978–90) James Coleman (born 1941) projected frames from James Whale's 1933 film *The Invisible Man* over a four-hour period. Then he repeated the projection in reverse, altering the degree of luminosity.31 Each frame takes about twenty minutes to fade away, which extends the cycle to several hours. What at first looks to be unimpeachably motionless actually waxes and wanes. Variations in which little transpires over time include Andy Warhol’s multi-hour movie of a sleeping man *Sleep* (1963), or “structural” films such as Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967) or Chantal Akerman’s *D’est* (1993). While none of these examples actually comes to rest, their sluggish pace implies that they must at some point expire. They seem to ache for stillness.
Second, taking on motion: stationary works foil instantaneous viewing by insinuating movement, as the Belgian sculptor Pol Bury (1922–2005) demonstrated. He used hidden electric motors to power large rotating balls, columns, or tilting planes. They move slowly enough to rest on the threshold of perception; it takes a double take, or a triple, to confirm that something has actually changed. Charles Ray’s 1989 sculpture *Tabletop* reflects Bury’s influence (fig. 4). Ray placed five ordinary objects (ceramic plate, metal canister, plastic bowl, terra-cotta pot, houseplant) on a wooden table. Concealed underneath, tiny motors rotate the objects so slowly that their motion almost escapes notice.

If moving artworks automatically generate time, how can stationary works induce duration? It must be that absent time’s passing, they would feel incomplete. The beholder must perform duration as a necessary and defining feature, rather than as one possible mode of reception. An obvious example is freestanding sculpture; we circle Michelangelo’s *David* (1501–4). Even when we remain still, statues may appear to enter the temporal flow. In a 1798 essay Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) proposes that we view...
the Hellenistic sculptural grouping *Laocoon* (ca. 40 BCE) by torchlight: “If one were to stand in front of the *Laocoon*, close one’s eyes, then reopen them, it would seem as if the figures had actually moved.”

Paintings can signify or engender duration in different ways. First by *content*, as when a medieval predella depicts several stages in a saint’s life. The same figure might appear three times on a winding road—young at the top, old at the bottom, middle-aged in between. Modernist iterations include Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending the Staircase, no. 2* (1912) and Gerhard Richter’s remix of Duchamp, *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)* (1966). History painting represents scenes from unfolding actions chosen to suggest both antecedents and consequences. Because painting “can use but a single moment,” Lessing famously advised, the artist “must . . . choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow.” Second, a painting can express duration through its *making*: Jackson Pollock’s dripping, looping lines and layering are radical versions of canvases that reveal “the work of the brush in ‘real time.’”

Finally, *viewing* can demand duration; witness Robert Irwin’s 1960s dot paintings. From a distance, a canvas looks solid white. Approach and the middle starts to appear a bit fogged over. Closer still, you begin to discern a cluster of red and green benday dots. When eyeballed, the dots resemble the weave of the canvas, as they dance in vertical and horizontal file. Irwin offers a striking example of how a painting “wants to be viewed,” and how manner and matter together can determine the slow art experience. The distinguished art historian Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001) would argue that our experience of Irwin applies generally: “Visual perception itself is a process in time, and not a very fast process at that. . . . The reading of a picture . . . needs a very long time.”

Gombrich explicitly dissolves Lessing’s opposition between painting and music: “When we look at a picture . . . we build it up in time and hold the bits and pieces we scan in readiness till they fall into place as an imaginable object or event. . . . Both in hearing a melody and in seeing a representation . . . the ‘effort after meaning’ leads to a scanning backward and forward in time and in space . . . which alone give coherence to the image.”

Work creates its time, its own time
“gives” content to its time, not “expresses” time.

*AD REINHARDT*

From these twin arts of motion—speeding up or slowing down—two consequences follow. *Either the image stretches into an event (1), or the event coalesces in an image (2).*

1. We experience the still image or object as an event or a performance, because the stationary acquires motion—whether actual or psychological—and opens itself to us over
time. Eve Sussman’s video 89 Seconds at the Alcázar (2004) transforms Diego Velázquez’s (1599–1660) painting Las Meninas (1656) into a ten-minute narrative of how the painting might have come to be. The charm of her video consists in making us studio insiders as we witness the artist fabricating his iconic image. *Painting*, recall, is both a noun and a verb.

Even monochromatic canvases, which we might suppose would reveal themselves in an instant, can only be understood gradually. Barbara Rose, the genre’s great expositor, underscores “the issue of time, not only how long it takes to visualize the monochrome [i.e., to take it in], but our sense of the overlays of painting and glazing that enrich the final surface, trapping light in their layers and emitting a compelling radiance that takes time to experience.” Darkness likewise reveals itself slowly, as Reinhardt demonstrates.

2. Hiroshi Sugimoto’s (born 1948) photographic series *Theaters* (begun in 1975) illustrates the converse, an event collapsing into an image. Sugimoto produces his *Theaters* by positioning an immobile camera at the back of a theater, focused on the screen. He opens the lens to expose an eight-by-ten-inch negative for the duration of a feature-length
FIGURE 6
movie. There results a luminous white rectangle that fills the screen where the movie was projected, framed by the darkened theater (fig. 5). That solid records every still in the film, one laid down over another. In other words, Sugimoto’s photographs conceal stills through the act of recording them. Stasis issues from compacting motion, blankness from multiplying images.

By separating still and moving artworks, my analysis has suggested that they divide their aesthetic universe. But reflection reveals that both mobile and stationary works undergo a drift, so that each turns at odds with itself. Precisely what qualifies both mobile and stationary objects as “slow” is that each aims to appropriate the place and character of the other. Each flirts with its opposite. Begin where you will, with either the still or the moving—slow art gravitates toward their meeting place. This convergence may occur in a gray zone populated with hybrid forms that seem simultaneously to animate and petrify, making it hard to determine whether a work proceeds from motion to stillness or the reverse. We will return to Joseph Marioni’s (born 1943) monochrome paintings in chapter 7. For now I call attention to the bottom edge of his canvases, where a slow flow of paint ends in drips (fig. 6, plate 9). Are these drips about to drop to the floor, or are they coagulating? Or the veils of color: Do we imagine them suspended or slowly descending?

Imagine a graph with two asymptotes, where the horizontal axis represents stasis and the vertical axis represents motion: the curve of “stationary” art lifts off the horizontal until it meets the curve of “mobile” art descending from the vertical (fig. 7). Their intersection marks the ideal locus of slow art, and actual practice approximates it—which is what differentiates slow works. Like Marioni’s drips, we will discover how tableaux vivants approach the intersection from either direction. Or imagine that the still and the moving nearly close a circle at the point where stationary arts acquire movement and moving arts grow still. Slow art is slippery—perpetually in transit, if at a snail’s pace; slow is never still. Stationary and moving “cleave,” in the verb’s intransitive sense, “to adhere firmly and closely.”

30 - DRAWING OUT SLOW ART
THE OBSERVER’S SHARE

The eye altering, alters all.

WILLIAM BLAKE, “THE MENTAL TRAVELER”

It might seem that our obligation is simply to look long and hard. I know of no better model than Robert Irwin, whose biographer describes how the artist would sit—literally sit—for weeks on end, concentrating on his line paintings. I asked Irwin: “How did you manage that?” “I was disciplined,” he replied. “I’d look for a while, and nap. After a while that ceased to be an issue. I could look at [the line paintings] for huge amounts of time. It was practice. You change the role of how the observer engages. And realize that painting is a learned logic. . . . At some point interesting things happen. You come up with something you couldn’t have imagined.” Or maybe Irwin is not such a good model. For most of us, trying to concentrate on a painting without interruption is a surefire prescription for mental wandering—rather like repeating a word until its sense drains away. Ironically, such sustained looking may lead to distraction rather than engagement, or produce another of modernity’s great hallmarks, boredom. Hardly a way to satisfy the needs of beholders.

The following chapters offer multiple models of spectatorship; for now some general observations can suffice. Take my relationship with Manet’s Young Lady in 1866: rather than a marriage it was an affair, a long flirtation. (Flirting itself is deeply visual in character.) I needed to come and go. In fact, paying attention is itself riven or double-edged; it means focusing on part of the visual field at the expense of the rest. Attention is thus defined in part by what it leaves out, by what we fail to notice. Furthermore, distraction and boredom aren’t automatically detrimental. In creating his line paintings, Irwin recalled, “one of the tools I used was boredom. Boredom is a very good tool.” And “distraction” has a double sense: it means a failure to concentrate, but also the pleasure of playing hooky, both a removal from the present moment and a savoring of that moment. In fact, you can’t untangle attention from distraction, or engagement from boredom. They are at once opposed and inseparable—like slowness and speed. Slow art, we will see, flirts with boredom, oscillates between engaging viewers and alienating them—for in slow aesthetic practices nothing much happens. Witness John Cage’s centuries-long composition for organ, ASAP (As Slow as Possible) (1987). Robert Wilson’s theater piece the CIVIL warS, first performed in 1984, featured a twenty-foot-tall Abraham Lincoln on stilts who took an hour to cross the stage. In The Body Artist (2001), Don DeLillo creates a fictional performance artist who intends for “her audience to feel time go by viscerally even painfully.” Like slow art, boredom is a thoroughly temporal experience; to be bored means to be conscious of nothing but time’s passing. Which suggests a further step. If attention sustained too long empties into boredom or distraction, perhaps boredom or distraction might awaken attention. Irwin is right; boredom can be useful.
David Foster Wallace's posthumous novel *The Pale King* (2011) also connects boredom with attentiveness. In this fictional world of tedium and routine, everybody seeks distraction from the “deeper type of pain that is always there.” They can’t bear the thought that “we are tiny and at the mercy of large forces and that time is always passing and that every day we’ve lost one more day that will never come back.” They need consolation—something like Peter Sellars’s “new possibilities of awareness and love.” To address our current condition, Wallace prescribes precisely the modus operandi of slow art: paying attention. Such a mindset, he says, enables us to find “second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive.” Second by second, a temporal affair.

Downtime in slow art works differently from deferral in a mystery novel or a horror film, where delay builds suspense and generates a more intense resolution. Slow art stretches time out for its own sake, so that we experience its passing “viscerally.” But if artists simply deploy boredom to gain “authenticity”—to prevent work from being recuperated into some economy of consumption, for instance—then the payoff will likely prove meager. Slow Art will introduce work that challenges us the way DeLillo’s body artist does. It’s for you to determine whether and under what circumstances boredom repays your investment.

Finally, observer and object perform their roles in some physical environment. This setting, as I’ve remarked, can promote or hinder slow art. That it requires time and effort—a pilgrimage, really—to reach the Japanese island of Naoshima or De Maria’s *The Lightning Field* enhances the power of these experiences. On a smaller scale, T.J. Clark observed how changing illumination inside a Getty Museum gallery altered his encounter with Nicolas Poussin’s paintings, not to mention their hanging in a room of their own. Further, the psychological space of slow art differs from ordinary physical space. It’s the space we inhabit, or create, when we bring ourselves before a work and hold ourselves open to it. This space is subtle; it unfolds the more we...
present ourselves to a work whose contours we slowly learn to navigate—a process without closure.

One last fork in the road. My study is neither neutral nor objective. Its job is to describe the field of slow art, but beyond that to advocate for its practice. Schematically, then, Slow Art looks like the illustration in figure 8.
Searching for an image that would embody or enact slow art I hit upon suspension, because suspension hangs between the poles of observer and object. There is more. Objects of slow art are themselves hinged between stillness and motion, partake of both, and pivot toward freezing or flowing. Subjects of slow art hover between engagement and distraction. Suspension likewise applies spatially, oscillating between flatness and depth. The word harbors an etymological paradox: from the Latin suspendere, from sub, “up from under,” and pendere, “cause to hang, weigh.” Suspension results from that double and opposing pull between up and down—like Marioni’s drips and veils. While suspension offers the freedom to linger (contrast interruption, which prompts the gestalt, the drive to complete what has been halted), it also carries a punitive or disciplinary sense. As early as 1300, “to suspend” meant “to bar or exclude temporarily from some function or privilege.” Not to mention the word’s association with medieval techniques of hanging. As a verb, suspend is both transitive and intransitive: transitively, “to keep fixed . . . (as in

FIGURE 10
wonder or contemplation); intransitively, to cease operation temporarily, to defer. Suspension encompasses motion and stasis—thereby enlivening our experience. Slow art may move at snail's pace but it's never static.

Visual suspense takes both representational and abstract forms. In The Game of Knucklebones (ca. 1734, fig. 9) the French painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779) captures a moment in which a girl contemplates a small object she has tossed in the air as it reaches its apogee. This hanging instant fixes her attention, for in order to catch the object she will need to trace its descending arc. We in turn become absorbed in her state of mind, and copy her drawn-out instant of awareness—endlessly drawn out because painted. Suspension likewise animates Alexander Calder (1898–1976) mobiles attached to the ceiling, drawn down by gravity, their elements rotating in the moving air. It's hard to imagine a more exact performance of suspension than Bill Viola's early video He Weeps for You (1976). The work projects the viewer's body onto a droplet of water forming at the end of a pipe, then projects the resulting image onto a screen, where it appears upside-down and elongating. Over time the drop grows heavier until it falls onto the skin of a drum with a microphone underneath. After which the process repeats and repeats.

In 1967 and 1968, Richard Serra compiled a list of verbs that would uncannily map his future career, including “to suspend.” Suspension anticipates his enormous sculptural installation Delineator (1974–75, fig. 10), made of two metal plates, each ten by twenty-six feet. One plate rests on the floor; you can walk on it the way you walk on certain Carl Andre installations. Its twin is attached to the ceiling, hung at right angles to the lower one; it’s “held up”—raised spatially and arrested temporally—to create a force field of suspense, figuratively and literally. Delineator lures us into a charged space even as it rouses anxiety, for looking up to see a replica of the floor beneath you provokes vertigo. Literal suspension generates narrative suspense: How long before the upper plate submits to gravity and flattens me? Even the air’s specific gravity, squeezed between the plates, seems to have thickened.

A problem remains. Could there be a bad version of slow art? Indeed; let us call it “long art.” Such work fails to earn its slowness, fails to justify its duration. These are cases where risks produce no commensurate rewards. We experience such work as merely tedious. Long art might also take the form of nostalgia, a reaction-formation to life's harried pace that offers only the promise of return to some imaginary tranquil place beyond return. There's no need to propose examples, because your “slow” may be my “long”; what counts is having the category to deploy. Plus, the slow-long distinction is not adamant. Education might turn long art into slow art, or at least invite us to wager that, with time, deferred pleasures might follow.

Adding this category of long art implies that slow art, by contrast, is synonymous with what (at any given moment) we regard as great art. Or at least this addition suggests circularity. Is art great because we want to dwell with it, or does it arrest us because it's
great? Either way, let’s agree that slowness cannot be the gatekeeper for every authentic aesthetic experience. We must reserve a place for great fast art—even if we can’t define it precisely. Maybe a work compels us instantly, before which we need not linger. Does Jeff Koons produce convincing one-liner art? That said, I imagine that most art we regard as great will secure our attention, independent of content, and get us feeling and thinking about a range of different things, beg us to revisit and re-experience again and again. No fast pass will exhaust its potential. Maybe the difference between great and slow artworks is that the former do not self-consciously attempt to prolong our engagement. Greatness simply has that effect. Slow artworks, by contrast, prolong engagement by design, building into their structures a temporal unfolding, as I’ve argued—witness Reinhardt, Serra, Turrell. But again, intention alone guarantees nothing. Finally, slowness in itself and divorced from context, slowness tout court, is inherently no more meaningful than is speed.

To make slow art a workable idea, I’ve proposed a definition and a structure: slow art is not a thing but an experience, an ongoing conversation between artwork and spectator. Slow art is at odds with itself, playing stillness against motion, drawing images into events and thickening events into images. Our structure must be flexible and welcome a variety of encounters. At the same time, the structure must prove firm enough to exclude other experiences. All without requiring individuals to agree. My next step will be to supply this form with content, to identify concrete instances that test the structure’s durability. In tableaux vivants I discovered the material embodiment I sought. While tableaux vivants hardly exhaust the field of slow art, the following chapter shows how accurately they occupy the intersection of motion and stillness; how they engage distracted spectators; and how they lend themselves to popular, underground, or avant-garde performances. We will contest the marginalizing of tableaux vivants, offer them legitimacy, and account for their lively presence in contemporary art.

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*