

FRYE /
Art Museum



**THE THIRD, MEANING
ESTAR(SER) Installs the
Frye Collection**

October 15, 2022–October 15, 2023

What are museums for? What are we supposed to do with the works we find in them? Our current exhibition, *THE THIRD, MEANING*, invites visitors to ask these questions and to experiment with answers. Part of an ongoing series of thematic presentations of the Frye Art Museum's collection, *THE THIRD, MEANING* is an artist-curated installation featuring an eclectic range of works: some much-beloved paintings from the Founding Collection, some rarely seen pieces brought up from long spells in storage, and some peculiar objects that may or may not be what they seem. Who assembled all of this? And why?

This exhibition is the work of ESTAR(SER), a collective that has a long-standing interest in the problem of attention. How and when we pay attention, to what, and to what ends—these questions motivate every ESTAR(SER) project. At the deepest level, *THE THIRD, MEANING* is an exhibition about attention. It is moreover, like every exhibition, a presentation that *wants* your attention.

So do many other things! Indeed, attention has become a singular problem in the past decades. People have always felt busy, and they have presumably always experienced the pull of various distractions when attempting to focus their minds and senses on this or that. But in recent years, the rise of a powerful new “attention economy” has placed human attention under dramatic, unprecedented pressure. Because so much of life now flows through networked screens, and because those screens are powered largely by financialized consumer data, each one of us is the target of a continuous stream of subtle and often invisible solicitation. Never before have such powerful technologies (and such enormous resources) worked so hard to grab our eyes—and sell them to the highest bidder.

This industrial-scale fracking of human attention touches every aspect of life: individual, social, political, aesthetic. Many argue that our ability to “pay attention”—to one another, to ourselves, to books and paintings and other things that were not made to compete in the new marketplace of hyper-competitive attention-seeking—is being irreversibly transformed.

In the face of these large social, technological, and even cognitive developments, museums face special challenges and possess, perhaps, special resources. After all, whatever else museums have been across history, they have long functioned as secular temples for the practice of special kinds of attention: for the care and preservation of works, for the staging of occasions for the attentive use of the senses, for the gathering up of experiences of looking, thinking, and feeling with artworks in the company of other people.

Members of the ESTAR(SER) collective use various forms of storytelling, dreams, games, and conjurations to “draw attention to attention.” Their animating idea of a passionate community of “radical attentionauts” (the so-called Order of the Third Bird) becomes a playful way of continuously reimagining our attentional lives. In the process, we are invited not only to rethink how we attend but also to consider the ways that attention has changed across history. In the museum, there are people and there are works. But there is a third thing: attention. And it is this ethereal, essential, mysterious, and powerful third thing with which *THE THIRD, MEANING* is centrally concerned.

THINKING IN THREES Paying Attention to Attention at the Frye

By D. Graham Burnett and Joanna Fiduccia

ESTAR(SER), or The Esthetical Society for Transcendental and Applied Realization (now incorporating the Society of Esthetic Realizers), concerns itself with the history of attention in general and, more narrowly, with formal practices of attention wherever they may be found. At the center of our studies is the *Avis Tertia*, or “Order of the Third Bird,” a remarkable cohort of “radical attentiononauts” who gather at appointed times and places to pursue rituals of *extreme attention* during which they engage in collective, contemplative séances of attending.

We do not know exactly why they do this. Indeed, there remains a good deal of confusion (and even active misinformation) about the “Birds,” as they are often called. They prefer to operate at the margins and to refrain from speaking about their peaceable activities. Consequently, it is perennially difficult to say when and where Birdishness may be in play. Among us, whenever small groups of persons appear to be paying close attention in silence to artworks, it may well be that we are witnessing some subtle doings of this gentle community.

Although writing the history of such a delicate and fugitive activity obviously presents considerable challenges, ESTAR(SER) is fortunate to have inherited a unique archive of documents and artifacts, known as the W-Cache, that appear to have been amassed by someone who hoped to write the definitive account of the Order of the Third Bird. The task proved impossible for a single hand, but over the years collaborating ESTAR(SER) researchers have diligently mined the W-Cache to bring to light chapters in the history of the Birds.¹

It is, for instance, from a document in the W-Cache that we came to understand how the Birds got their name. In the work of the Latin poet Pliny, there appears a familiar story about the making of art: the painter Zeuxis is said to have painted an image of a boy carrying grapes that was so realistic that birds pecked at its illusory fruit. Yet Zeuxis was disappointed by this result, reasoning that, had his rendering of the boy been more lifelike, the birds would have been too afraid to approach. The researchers of ESTAR(SER) surfaced a curious variation on this well-known tale, a bit of Plinian “fan fiction” that continues the story. In this supplemental lore, Zeuxis went back to work on the painting. When he placed the improved version outside, *three birds* approached: the first spotted the boy and flew off with a squawk; the second did as before, pecking at the painted grapes. But the THIRD BIRD simply landed quietly in front of the painting, and remained there, *looking*.

The devotees of “Birdish” attention take this Third Bird to be their avatar or guiding spirit. It was neither indifferent nor deceived, neither confusedly frightened nor confusedly hungry. It seems to have understood something about what a work of art could be. This was the Bird of *attention*.

It is this Bird of attention, this *Third Bird*, that hovers over our labors.

The researchers of ESTAR(SER) are not, of course, actual associates of the Order. Indeed, it is said that anyone who claims to “be” a Bird is, by definition, no true Bird—since those most inward with the practices of the Order never chirp to that effect. But we ESTAR(SER) scholars are very much *students* of Birdish matters—and the W-Cache is our school. Admittedly, it is a messy school, and there are many questions about the ultimate reliability of the sources we find there. We have been surprised on many occasions to learn that a W-Cache source, believed authentic, is in fact a forgery or decoy, a spurious plant meant to throw us off the trail. The Birds, after all, do not wish to have their stories told. It is as if they know that true attention must always slip sideways and avoid capture (in this, it might be said that they model a style of underground resistance to the massive industry of corporate attention-capture).

When we received the present commission from the Frye Art Museum, we turned to the W-Cache in hopes of finding something in the archive that might shed light on the history of sustained attention in the Pacific Northwest. No sooner had we begun our search than we fell upon a veritable *Pandora’s box* of attentional mysteries.

Quite literally. For it turned out that a young research fellow from ESTAR(SER), working with us on a summer internship, had just been approached by a somewhat mysterious collector who claimed to have access to a most improbable discovery: a large trunk of unusual manufacture that contained a baffling array of documents, toys, viewing devices, and sundry miscellaneous tidbits. Many of these objects were obviously “Birdish”; some clearly hailed from Seattle and its environs. A preliminary inventory of this peculiar stash even *suggested ties to the Frye itself*. Evidently, we had stumbled upon a treasure trove: an opportunity to reconstruct—or at least to reimagine—a colorful history of radical attention in and around Seattle across the decades that span the birth and growth of the museum. Dubbed “The Frye Trunk,” this labyrinthine box of tricks and promises has become a centrifugal prompt for our exhibition.

Nevertheless, we must caution viewers that certain troubling questions remain. For instance, we have noted a clown-car-like abundance of objects in the trunk that, once catalogued, appear to be *more numerous than can physically fit back into the trunk*—a fact that has raised concerns about the coherence and historicity of the collection. It must also be said that the dealer who brokered our acquisition of the trunk has subsequently tried to sell ESTAR(SER) several other artifacts that we now know to be forgeries. Have we been duped? Our confidence in the historical veracity of the Frye Trunk has waxed and waned, but our fascination with its attentional “kit” has never flagged.

We thus think of *THE THIRD, MEANING* as, in a sense, an *unpacking* of the Frye Trunk. We present some of that work—namely, sifting through the trunk’s contents and wrestling with their stories—as research-in-progress in a small catalogue accompanying the exhibition. But the core of our investigation takes the form of the exhibition itself, in which works from the Frye’s collection have been hung on the walls in an unusual triadic pattern, a configuration inspired by a document found inside the trunk itself.

That document—an anonymous manuscript titled “Three, Three, Three”—is something like a manifesto of love. This exuberant text, discussed in further detail in the catalogue, focuses on the role of attention in the mediation of body, mind, and spirit, drawing on a medley of Renaissance Neoplatonism, “New Thought” self-help, and homespun American eccentricities. Appended to this manuscript is a hymn composed by one Chlotarius around 1921, whose opening lines—“Attend, O mind, to Triplicity, and frame thy vision ALWAYS IN THREES!”—celebrate a special kind of hyper-attention in a distinctly triadic idiom.

This last phrase “always in threes!” appears to have been the motto of attention practitioners working in Seattle in the early-to-mid twentieth century who parlayed the hymn’s refrain into a novel practice of looking at three artworks at a time. This exhibition, where the viewer will encounter threefold gatherings, is an attempt to understand precisely how that practice functions. It is an extension of our ongoing research in which you, the viewer, are invited to participate.

We have been struck by the great economy of the manifesto’s triadic principle for generating the ecstatic attentive experiences prized by the Birds. A simple proposition began to emerge as we considered this refrain: while it is relatively straightforward to think in terms of pairs, it is unexpectedly complex to wrap one’s mind around a trio. Pairs can be complements or kin, lovers or opponents, mirror likenesses or perfect inversions—all of which are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. But a trio may imply evolution, series, cycles, chaperones, dialectics, the stable rule, or the dramatic pretext. Adding a third element to any pair multiplies the possibilities for meaning. For this reason, the dynamic “triad” (as an alternative to the stable dyad) and the supplemental “third” (as a complication in the efficiencies of binary thought) have long been invoked to discuss the status of artworks, as well as the peculiar sort of relations we establish with them. Is an artwork essentially a *third type of thing*? Perhaps it is neither a proper subject nor an ordinary object but rather something similar to what the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott called a “transitional object.” Or perhaps artworks are to be understood to offer a “third kind of knowledge,” one that is immediate and intuitive, along the lines theorized by Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century—or a third sort of significance, like Roland Barthes’s “third meaning,” which defies reduction to symbol or information.

These three-thinkers each wrestled with the dialectic and its limits. Barthes’s “third meaning” is a potency we discover in cultural artifacts that is distinct, in his view, from both their first-order signification (their “plain sense”) and their second-order games of symbolic expression. This third meaning, he writes, is “evident, erratic, and persistent”; it is “a signifier without a signified,” meaning that it defuses our conventional ways of getting at the sense of something, soliciting us to come at significance more obliquely and less willfully.² In Barthes’s “third meaning” there is an irreducible *openness*.

Theories of a third sort of knowing, like Barthes’s or Spinoza’s, stand in tense relation to an older intellectual appetite for dividing the world into threes. From Friedrich Schiller’s “three impulses” to Giambattista Vico’s “three ages of history,” to countless other spiritual and political groupings (from the Trinity to Abbé Sieyès to Marx), the list of triadic structures is long. As forms of classification in which every thing appears to have its slot, rigid threefold taxonomies may paradoxically work to exclude exactly such “third meanings” or “third knowings” that forever destabilize such efficient categorizations.

Our wager, however, is that any concrete experience of a triad is as much a bringing-together as a parsing-apart. And when a triad is *gathering* rather than *sorting*, it becomes the natural wellspring of a host of third meanings and third senses—of *thirdishness* in general.

We might think of this thirdishness in the terms offered by the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, who defines the “position of ‘the Third’” as a way of relating to another person as both *like us* and *another mind*.³ In this position, we suspend our sense of sameness and difference, of what is shared and at the same time unequal. We relax our insistence on seeing the world as one of subjects and objects or, as Benjamin puts it, “doers and done to.” The Third breaks up the locked and linear relation of complementarity—not by the intrusion of some other element, but through a mode of being together that lies within the relationship itself.

If our most intimate relationships provide opportunities for us to cultivate this mode, our interactions with artworks insist upon it, too. Who can say, after all, who is doer and who is done-to when we look at art? Our attention, in the end, vibrates in a space between.

We have organized the works in this exhibition in this spirit, moved by the promise and puzzle of the Third. Our triads are not rebuses; there is no riddle to solve, no particular analysis to be teased out by the clever viewer. Rather, we sense in each of them the possibility of conversation across geographical regions, mediums, and eras. Attention, we hope, will set these little three-sailed pinwheels turning.

Take one of the first triads in the exhibition, which places Gabriel von Max’s *Seifenblasen* (Soap Bubbles), 1881, alongside David McGranaghan’s *Self-Portrait*, 1984, and Duane Linklater’s *Trap*, 2016. Nearly 140 years separate these works, although all three are, quite evidently, reflections on reflection. Max’s *Seifenblasen* depicts a woman peering into a hand mirror, her gaze passing through a small bubble that hovers like a gleaming and insubstantial eye. In McGranaghan’s *Self-Portrait*, this orb becomes the shape of the painting itself, in which we see the scene of self-portraiture both *as* and *as if in* a convex mirror. Linklater’s *Trap* takes this suggestion of work-as-mirror even further: a bear trap set on top of a mirror that has been mounted to a fragment of dismantled gallery wall, it brings together the pleasure and threat of narcissistic gazing. Faced with this triad, we might ask: Is reflection a form of self-regard, ultimately as fragile and illusory as a soap bubble, or is it a means of bending the world around our vision or capturing us unawares? In reflecting, do we find ourselves enthralled, englobed, or entrapped? And where do we stand, in “reflecting on reflecting,” when we consider these artworks—in the place of the moralizing judge, the sovereign artist, or the foolish prey?

Considering these questions, we thought to place beside this triad one of the strange objects from the vertiginous excess of the Frye Trunk: a piece of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century laboratory equipment known as a “Manometric Flame Analyzer.” A tool for visualizing sound, this spinning mirror permitted viewers in a darkened room to watch a flickering gas flame as it danced to the subtle breath of speech or song in the air. Here it is still. What secret conversation among these three works would it show us if it could spin again?

Throughout this exhibition, a third thing is always speaking. And always silent, too. We invite you to move through these rooms to see what attention can do.



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ESTAR(SER): The Esthetical Society for Transcendental and Applied Realization (now incorporating the Society of Esthetic Realizers) is an established body of private, independent scholars and amateurs who work collectively to recover, scrutinize, and (where relevant) draw attention to the historicity of the so-called Avis Tertia, or “Order of the Third Bird.” www.estarser.net



Essay Endnotes

1. Many of these contributions to the history of the Order have been published, and a portion appear in the volume *In Search of the Third Bird: Exemplary Essays from the Proceedings of ESTAR(SER), 2001–2021* (London: Strange Attractor, 2021).
2. Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 53, 61.
3. Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 23–24.

Cover: Carol Mothner. *The Wait*, 1998. Egg tempera on panel. 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Frye Art Museum, Museum Purchase, 1999.005. Photo: Jueqian Fang; **Back cover:** Children viewing portrait of Charles Frye by Henry Raschen, 1950s; **Poster:** A collage image of the Frye Trunk, from the collections of ESTAR(SER), courtesy of the Milcom Memorial Reading Room and Attention Library, Mana Contemporary (Jersey City). Photos courtesy of John Berens; studio courtesy of the Monira Foundation. Special thanks to Leah Beeferman on design.

THE THIRD, MEANING: ESTAR(SER) Installs the Frye Collection is guest curated by the research-based artist collective ESTAR(SER), with D. Graham Burnett, Professor of History and History of Science at Princeton University, and Joanna Fiduccia, Assistant Professor of the History of Art at Yale University, as project leads.

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