

GERTRUDE STEIN IN SPACE + TIME // PORTRAITS WRITING EX

One of Stein's clearest writing procedures comes out of her talk on her portraits: looking and talking at the same time. By hitching these two things to the same moment, she hopes to bypass "remembering," which is her name for all the customary and time-honored accumulations of understanding that pertain to a person or an object.

For this exercise, try playing with this simultaneity, by writing your looking without using remembering. What Stein found, after long practice, is a sense that words suggested themselves to her. Instead of attending to what she saw with the arsenal of names and descriptive, explanatory language, she somehow experienced looking in a way that was unmediated by foreknowledge.

Admittedly, this does seem like an impossible thing to bypass, so perhaps part of the route into this kind of looking is about looking differently so that different nouns are perceived. For example, my dog is next to me on the couch as I write this, and though I could look at him and say "Woody" or "large black dog," I also notice that my immediate impression of him has to do with a shine that is breathing or a shine that is sleeping. I'm not exactly capable of escaping nouns altogether — "a shine" is a noun — but I'm experiencing his presence outside the large, conventional category of "dog."

- Set yourself a simple parameter: a paragraph, a page, ten lines, etc.
- Set yourself in front of something you can experience as being present to you.
- Write your looking.
- The loop of attention is to return to the experience of being present to this scene, this being. It is a kind of seeing lodged in the feeling of being there. Can you feel your looking? And write it at the same time?

You could also translate this to another medium, singing your looking, drawing your looking, or perhaps transpose looking to another sensory form of attention, writing your listening, and so on.