

5

**Beyond
Face or Vase**

*I can paint you the skin of Venus with mud,
Provided you let me surround it, as I will.*
—Eugene Delacroix⁵⁵

Head first

In 2003, the Neuberger Museum of Art held a *Biennial Exhibition of Public Art* on the campus of Purchase College, State University of New York. It was a juried exhibition featuring fifteen site-specific projects presented in a suburban public space. One of the installations was *Head First* by The Art Guys (Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing).

The installation comprised nine life-sized fiberglass mannequins dressed in men's business attire—suits, shirts, ties, and wingtip shoes. The artists buried the mannequins' heads below the surface of the ground (Figure 5.1). Each of the figures is holding a position as if poised in some exercise, a handstand, or a somersault. The contrast between what appears to be a thoughtful, deliberate action, and the hidden physiognomy creates mystery, irony, and humor.

One visitor to the exhibition assumed that The Art Guys' figures represented dead victims of the 9/11 World Trade Center attack, two years earlier. The viewer



Figure 5.1: The Art Guys (Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing), *Head First* (detail), 2003. Fiberglass installation of several life-sized figures. Dimensions vary. Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, Purchase, NY. Courtesy of Jack Massing.

became quite irate about *Head First*. Her reaction was strong and visceral, fueled by her own vivid memories of the traumatic experience. To her, the work was offensive and insensitive—a blatant, graphic affront to everything decent and humane. She was so upset that she demanded that the Neuberger Museum remove all nine figures.

The Art Guys did not intend to relate *Head First* to the 9/11 tragedies. When they toured the campus to select their site, they “commented repeatedly on the pristine facades and hidden faces, the absence of human presence.”⁵⁶ In their catalog essay, the artists did not cite a conceptual framework or source of inspiration but stated, “We hesitate doing work that can be easily interpreted. *Head First* is about issues of sex and death. And that’s the truth. Is it not?”⁵⁷

The viewer’s outrage indicated how little artistic intention has to do with what people see in works of art, and how much viewers’ interpretations depend on their own past experience and the work’s context. In a sense, past experience and context are the ground. In this case, it influenced the viewer’s interpretation of the figures.

Within *Head First* (Figure 5.1), several other interesting figure-ground relationships conflate. The isolated mannequins, heads buried ostrich-like in the earth, are figures literally in and on the ground. The pastoral site—grass, trees, adjacent road—provides the ground for the figures, much as people ordinarily perceive human figures in an environment.

The larger cultural and social context provides another kind of figure-ground. This meaning is associational and can be quite intense and persuasive. Manicured business and industrial parks, corporate headquarters, and golf courses in affluent Westchester County, NY, surround the campus site. This context gives another layer of meaning to the oddly oriented, head-buried mannequins of businessmen. This socio-cultural “ground” makes the figures ironic and psychologically dark. No doubt the post-9/11 psychic environment also influenced some viewers’ associations. They may have interpreted *Head First* to be exposing the absurdity of the powerful elite, men in suits making decisions with their heads buried in the ground. Yet the artists and the work itself overtly stated none of this. Throughout the exhibition, *Head First* attracted notoriety and attention, largely because of the ground that informed the figures.

In addition to discussing figure-ground in drawing and painting, this chapter considers other examples of this phenomenon in which human society and evolving history and culture influence the ways people see art, sometimes in ways the artists never originally intended. These stories stimulate yet another level of thinking about figure-ground as a core organizing concept for experiencing life and art.

Figure-ground

In each experience of seeing, that which is primary is “figure” and that which is secondary is “ground.” The viewer usually sees the figure in front; the ground appears behind. In some configurations, figure-ground relationships are ambiguous and seem to “flip.” When this happens, the ground takes on a figurative role, and the figure appears as ground.

An elementary illustration of the figure-ground flip phenomenon is the psychologist’s diagram known as the “Face-vase.” Does one see two faces or a vase? It depends. The vase appears as a figure when the viewer perceives the black area as ground; the faces appear as figures when the viewer sees the white area as ground (Figure 5.2). The two configurations (face and vase) share a common border. When the brain encounters that ambiguity, it shapes one image into figure and the other into ground. Depending on where viewers direct their attention, the image flips. It seems impossible to hold both images in one’s view and mind at the same time.⁵⁸

In the three-dimensional (3D) world, figure-ground is also dynamic and constantly changing. For example, writing on my computer, I can see the computer on my desk as a figure against the ground of the wall around it. Each time I change my attention from the screen to the keyboard, to the notes on my desk, I experience a new figure-ground relationship. If I focus on editing a single word,

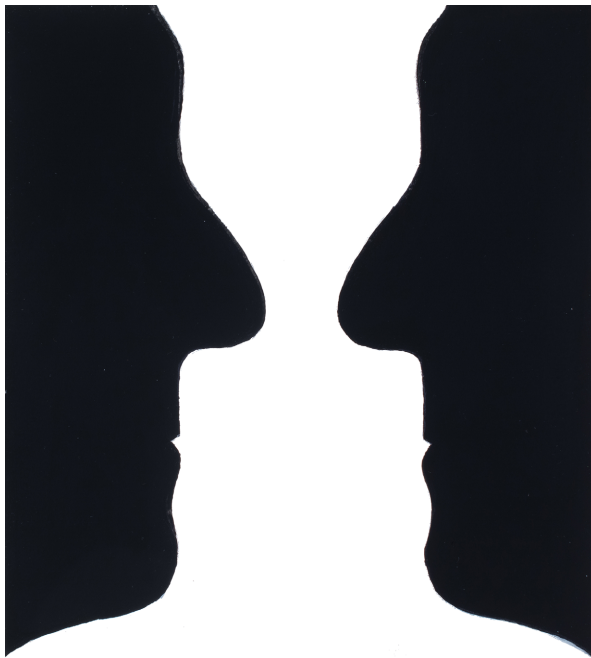


Figure 5.2: Figure-ground face-vase by the author, 2022. Flashe paint. 12 × 12 inches. Collection the author. Photo credit: Jay York.

I have a new figure. The chapter is ground. When I shift my attention back to the digital document, it becomes the figure within the ground of the computer.

If a phone call interrupts me, the call becomes figure and my writing shifts to ground. If I am listening to music, a song may trigger a reverie, which then becomes figure. Then, a sound from my clock may remind me that I have an appointment. As my attention shifts, the figure-ground relationships constantly shift (and I may get very little writing done). When I finally return to focusing intently on the writing at hand, my perspective has shifted, and I may see the last passage I wrote differently.

Figure-ground relationships in the 3D “real world” always manifest in an infinite variety of stable and unstable relationships. As discussed, what people see is constantly shifting with head, eye, and body movements, as they perceive objects in relation to the surrounding 3D context.

But in paintings and drawings, the figure-ground cues happen on the flat picture plane. If the artist is working from observation, they respond to the 3D cues by making two-dimensional (2D) marks on the flat picture plane, organizing them into patterns and configurations in the context of the whole. The viewer then decodes the 2D cues on the flat picture plane.

In the western artistic tradition, especially from the early Renaissance on, artists focused figure-ground on making convincing representations of the world by rationalizing pictorial space, creating perspective systems, and shape-size cues that paralleled discoveries in the scientific revolution. Prior to the Renaissance, the tradition of medieval icons used figure-ground to imply meanings. Central positioning, symmetry, and size differences communicated a hierarchy of content. Artisans positioned the size and location of figures according to their relative importance in the religious hierarchy. For example, artisans positioned Mary in the center and larger than the saints, because she was more important.

With abstract art, artists have focused on constructing a field for viewers to look at, rather than a record of what the artist saw, or a hierarchy of meaning and symbols. Abstract art also foregrounds the 2D cues and the figure-ground phenomenon.

Whatever style or media artists choose, controlling the relationship of figure to ground within the picture plane is a challenge. Artists must contemplate and control a complex interrelation of part(s) to whole. The ground is always a significant partner in the interaction, contributing both form and meaning. Whether making abstract shapes, apparent solids and voids, or objects and backgrounds, artists shape what viewers see via the figure-ground phenomenon. To do this effectively, the artist develops and continually practices suppressing object-directed seeing in favor of ground-directed seeing, because the ground is always shifting while the work is “in process.” And everything is happening all at once on the flat picture plane.

Not negative and positive

The figure-ground phenomenon, at the core of drawing/painting practice, is visually preferential. A line drawn on the picture plane describes both the figure and the ground simultaneously, but the eye and brain tend to see and shape the figure and not notice the ground. A line placed on the surface also displaces other lines and shapes on the surface. Any mark, shape, smudge, or smear within this context functions as a figure-ground event. No matter how insignificant it may seem, it changes the whole.

Artists' marks create and reveal meaning as they accrue on the picture plane. As discussed, position is the most important relationship, relative to the whole configuration. For the artist, this is the key to understanding, maneuvering, and adjusting figure-ground relationships within an emerging configuration to achieve an artistic purpose.

A new mark modifies other marks. Therefore, every mark the artist makes has an ambiguous character, in terms of figure-ground and content. Marks are never absolute, finished, complete, signifiers, or symbols, until the artist decides to stop. A new mark changes the interrelationships of all the marks, often inverting or subverting the prior patterns and the artist's intentions.

Humans' visual preference for figure rather than ground may occur because people's bodies exist in a world of foreground, middle ground, and background. The horizon is a constantly changing, but ever-present, infinite ground. In the human experience, the figure always emerges from the amorphous, vague, ambiguous, continuous ground.⁵⁹ As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired so long as we can see far enough."⁶⁰

Jan C. Bouman, the author of a 1968 book, *The Figure-Ground Phenomenon in Experimental and Phenomenological Psychology*, wrote, "Our perception is always rooted in the existential ground of the contact of the body-subject with the world." Bouman continued, "Perception, then, does not *create* meaning, but *finds* it in the world and elaborates upon it."⁶¹ As Picasso said, "I do not seek. I find."⁶²

When artists steadfastly pay attention to the ground, the largest enclosing shape, they are organizing the pictorial space. What the viewer finds is not always something that the artist intended. An artist may make a mark in the lower left corner to effect a change in the upper right corner, for example, or change the tonality of a surround to change how an object-shape appears. Removing something from one area is a tool to change the appearance of another area.

Artists continuously adjust their spatial configurations, until the artist is satisfied with the whole. A figurative element may become ground when the artist introduces new shapes and relationships. By paying attention to the whole of

figure-ground relationships emerging in the visual field, and acting accordingly, the artist enjoys far greater command of the work and its impact.

Stepping back from their work, when they look at the whole painting or drawing, artists may delight to see new, emerging relationships after each mark or set of marks. It is satisfying to sense the work move toward unity, integration, and organization.

Edge-condition

The edges of adjacent painting/drawing shapes are important cues for creating pictorial space (figure-ground). When a painted mark overlaps an adjacent shape, it appears to push it back into the ground, and vice versa. In this way, the boundary can define the figure-ground relationship at the edges of shapes and brushstrokes. This important juncture is the edge-condition.

Figure-ground edge-condition is an essential tool for creating space, tension, ambiguity, clarity, mystery, or uncertainty in a painting or drawing. The artist has an array of choices for defining edges and how shapes meet. Defined, sharp edges appear closer than blurred, soft edges. Crisp, clean edges tend to flatten pictorial space. A smooth edge contrasted with a rough edge creates a spatial illusion. Edge-condition is a qualitative, emotional cue as well as a technical one.

Thomas Eakins' life-sized portrait of his brother-in-law, Louis N. Kenton, titled *The Thinker* (Figure 5.3), reveals how the artist shaped the work and directed the viewer's eye with clear and ambiguous edge-conditions. Eakins sharply focused and clearly defined the face, while he blurred and softened the edges of the man's hair "behind" his ear and on top of the head. The edges of the jacket and pants are soft, and transitional, appearing to include both the color of the pants and the surrounding ground color, like brackish water.

The brushstrokes indicate how Eakins painted the edges of the pants and jacket. He pushed the surrounding ground color into the edges of the pants and jacket, leaving a mixed gray soft edge. The sharp and soft edges throughout the painting form figure-ground, enhance verisimilitude, and direct one's eyes. As viewers examine the contemplative emotion of the realistic face, framed by the sharp white collar, they sense the more mysterious interplay of the nearly abstract, dark shapes of the clothing against the ground.

Figure-ground edge-condition is also multidimensional in van Gogh's *Oleanders* (Figure 5.4). In this vibrant exploration of complementary color contrast, the artist's edge-conditions realized his image. The surface is a complex interplay of shapes, marks, and brushstrokes, with impasto colors exhibiting a variety of edge-conditions. In some places the paint representing the flowers



Figure 5.3: Thomas Eakins, *The Thinker*, 1900. Oil on canvas. 81 × 43 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1917. Fair use under public domain CC0.



Figure 5.4: Vincent van Gogh, *Oleanders*, 1888. Oil on canvas. 23 3/4 × 29 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, Gift of Mr and Mrs John L. Loeb, 1962. Fair use under public domain CC0.

seems to be in front of the green ground; in other places it flips. The green ground shapes the flowers, leaves, and the pot, while simultaneously the forms appear to shape the green ground.

van Gogh's vigorous pink, white, and dark green brushstrokes meet the outer edges of the green ground. His application of the green ground shapes the subject. The interlocking of the pointed leaves with the green field around them is as significant and as visible to the viewer as the organic "figures" they define. Red lines define many of the flower and leaf shapes as well as the edges of the table. In other places, the artist painted over the outlines so that the green paint meets and defines the flowers. Viewers can feel van Gogh's mark-making energy as he painted the surround, the flowers, the pot, and the leaves, the table, and the books almost simultaneously, treating figure and ground as equally important, in a dynamic relationship.

van Gogh did not paint the *Oleanders* first and then fill in the background. The existential evidence for the artist's equal engagement with figure and ground is right there on the canvas (and even more evident in viewing the painting, rather than a photo of it), in the impasto paint strokes, their visible edges, and the layering of paint applications.

Yes and no

Unfortunately, most conventional art instruction is fuzzy-minded about figure-ground. Instructors discuss figure-ground as positive and negative space. Confusing the distinction between object-directed and ground-directed perception, both student and instructor may interpret the model posing against a background as the figure-ground phenomenon, defining it as an object/background or positive/negative space relationship. But this manner of seeing remains directed toward the objects.

When focusing solely on the “negative” space (rather than the dynamic whole of figure-ground relationships), the student replaces one object-directed attention with another. Shifting perceptual attention to ground-directed seeing while responding fully to the figure-ground relationships on the picture plane is difficult. Part of the difficulty is “constancy anxiety.” It feels wrong and uncomfortable at first to let go of one’s customary experience of constancy and customary object-directed seeing in the real world.

Figure 5.5 is an example of a student’s figure-ground exercise done on white paper with dark charcoal material. This same exercise appears at the end of this chapter. It is a good approach to learning to see and handle figure-ground by focusing on the shifting figure-ground role of the black and the white, inclusive of the objects and the surround. The artist described the objects and the surround with both black and white by using “only” black chalk. The drawing displays white shapes and white lines on black grounds, and black shapes and black lines on white grounds.

While this exercise does not address the full complexity of the figure-ground phenomenon, it does shift the student’s attention from the object (figure) to include both the figure and the surround (ground). When adopting this approach, figure and ground are in dynamic, evolving relationships within the entire picture plane.

Figure-ground is a conjunction. As viewers, people are hard-wired to perceive the figure and overlook the ground. Picking up a smart phone from a counter puts one’s attention on the smart phone. The counter becomes secondary. But artists must give the “surround” equal weight and attention as they construct the whole painting or drawing. Moreover, the artist needs to be watchful of the ever-changing emerging figure-ground relationships on the whole picture plane because they are always in flux.

Lois Dodd’s painting, *Iris + Tree* (Figure 5.6) is an excellent example of the multiplicity of figure-ground relationships. Her painting makes her process explicit. Dodd shaped the paint to form the dark shadow of the tree



Figure 5.5: Student, *Still Life*, n.d. Compressed charcoal on newsprint. 24 × 18 inches. Collection of the author. Photo credit: Jay York.

(at the bottom right) so that it also creates the bright green stem of the iris bud. The flower stem is the figure, yet she formed it by shaping the ground. Throughout her painting process, the artist formed figure-ground reversals. In some places, the brushstrokes shape figures; in others they form the ground. This mesmerizing reciprocity is possible because of the artist's ground-directed attention. She paid attention to the whole of the painting, shaping a flower and a tree not as two single objects, but rather as a dynamic visual interplay of figure-ground.



Figure 5.6: Lois Dodd, *Iris + Tree*, 2011. Oil on Masonite panel. 20 × 12 inches. © Lois Dodd. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery, New York, NY.

Intentions, meanings, and context

Figure-ground relationships are fundamental to human experience and are present in all worlds of discourse. James Elkins suggests that figure and ground are the basis for meaning itself. He writes,

Without contrast, between one thing and another, I cannot know anything: Whether it is the distinction between a printed letter and a blank page; or the difference between the person I love and every other person. Contrast creates meaning, and the most rudimentary way to speak about contrast is by speaking of figure and ground.⁶³

In his books, *The Object Stares Back* and *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*, Elkins provides useful interdisciplinary accounts of vision.⁶⁴

Figure-ground relationships are fundamental to all the arts, not just painting and drawing. One can understand contrasts between configuration and context, or melody and harmony, or actor and chorus, for example, as figure-ground. In Greek tragedy, the chorus establishes a ground or context for the protagonist's action. The choices, consequences, and conclusions of the narrative are an example of the relationship between the figure and ground. Fiction writers, the entertainment industry, films, fashion, and the media use figure and ground. In a film, for example, one may think of the ground as the setting, action, plot, lighting, soundtrack, and timeline. All interact to shape the characters and the "story line." The ebb and flow of figure-ground, the framing long-shot, then the close-up, then the surge of the music, and then the dialogue create a dynamic ground from which the drama emerges.

In psychology, personality development provides another figure-ground example. Many psychological theories—those of Freud, Erikson, Winnicott, Lacan, and Maslow, among others—attempt to account for this complex development. The "figure" is one's sense of autonomy as separate from the environment. This environmental "ground" engendering a sense of self includes natural factors (e.g., the biological clock of fertility, the stages of aging) and cultural factors (economic, social, and political conditions). All these factors form the ground that defines one's individuality. Whether through nature or nurture, the ground does form the figure.

The figure-ground dynamic also operates in the discourse about history, politics, and ideology. In the postmodern period, with its shifting perspectives, thinkers tend to question the concept of absolute, objective truth. Rather, they believe that context (ground) shapes one's understanding of relative truth (religious

fundamentalists excepted). A shift in the ground, a change of viewpoint, creates a new context and new meanings.

In his book *Art and Discontent*, Thomas McEvelley discusses the psychologist D. W. Winnicott's work in relation to painting. He quotes Winnicott as saying:

Work that emphasizes the ground, or an ambiguous condition in which the figure is almost completely merged into ground, expresses the ego's desire to dissolve itself into a more generalized type of being, on the remembered model of the infant's sleep on its mother's breast. Work that emphasizes figure, or a clear separation of figure and ground, expresses a sense of ego-clarity, and a fear of ego-loss or of the loss of the clear boundaries between ego and the world.

McEvelley continues, "All artworks, I think (perhaps all human actions of any type), express an attitude on this question, no matter what else they express."⁶⁵

Consider how this figure-ground dynamic applies specifically to abstraction. Viewers bring their past experiences and cultural context as their personal "ground" for seeing artwork. Their interpretations of imagery—realistic or abstract—vary accordingly. The artist's intention also reflects their personal ground. They may bring philosophic views or stylistic orientations to their creations, ranging from the eccentric and existential to the minimal and geometric. Always, the meanings loaded and found in visual art reflect the "ground" of their cultural moment.

In John Torreano's painting *DMs & Hot Stars* (Figure 5.7), the artist compounds the 2D figure-ground illusions and unites them with actual 3D areas. He makes his paintings on plywood panels, routers out shallow relief forms into the plywood surface, and adheres faceted stones to the surface, creating a complex, dazzling figure-ground experience. His hide-and-seek world created by ambient light reflecting and refracting off the stones enhances the value and color experience for the viewer, while the excavated shapes mirror the painted shapes on the picture plane. Torreano's selection of photographic references made from telescopic examinations of the universe and beyond inform his configurations. His large-scale paintings evoke the subject.

In contrast to the ambiguous figure-ground configurations of Torreano's abstract work, Frida Kahlo's self-portraits express ego clarity and separation. Kahlo paints herself within a particular pictorial ground, by turns wearing a white wedding dress surrounded by a group of monkeys (as in Figure 5.8) or accompanied by her husband, Diego Rivera. Each painting is unique in content and meaning. She conditions her own image with the pictorial ground that surrounds

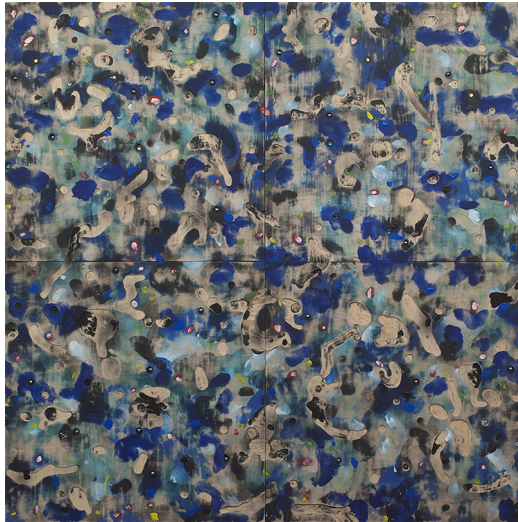


Figure 5.7: John Torreano, *DMs & Hot Stars*, 2015. Mixed media. 96 × 96 inches. © John Torreano. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.8: Frida Kahlo, *Autorretrato con monos* (*Self Portrait with Monkeys*), 1943. Oil on canvas. 32 1/4 × 24 3/4 inches. Collection of Jacques and Natasha Gelman, Mexico City, Mexico. © 2022, Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, Mexico, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, NY. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

her. Moreover, the larger cultural ground, as for example, the traditional Mexican wedding dress, adds another layer of meaning to Kahlo's paintings.

Works representing an object–environment relationship, or abstract works presenting a field of contrasts as ends, rather than as means, are equally bound by figure-ground. This is true regardless of whether these works appear to dissolve the self into the world, or if they construct the self through cultural critique.

In contemporary performance and installation art, figure-ground provides the viewer with a context in which to view the work. Exhibition and installation spaces provide defining grounds. A wall, a room, and a mark on the floor may define it. Without such a demarcation of ground, it is impossible to distinguish the “art” from everything else (in which case, that statement may be part of the intention of the artist).

Fred Wilson, a MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant” recipient, and one of the first students to graduate from the School of Art+Design at Purchase College, State University of New York, has used the figure-ground principle for his installations. Wilson is keenly aware of how bias and prejudice influence what people call “art” and how they value it. For his projects, he often selects museum objects on display and in storage. He shifts their meaning by changing the ground (Figure 5.9).



Figure 5.9: *Metalwork, 1793–1880*, from the exhibition *Mining the Museum: An Installation* by Fred Wilson, The Contemporary and Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, April 4, 1992–February 28, 1993. © Fred Wilson. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

Notably, Wilson does not change the objects. Instead, he uses the tools of museum installations—labeling, lighting, positioning, sound, and architecture—to change the content (as perceived by the viewer) of the selected works. By changing the ground, Wilson’s installations question beliefs about what art is, how viewers see it, and who decides what is truthful, good, and beautiful.

In Wilson’s 1992 exhibition *Mining the Museum*, at The Contemporary in Baltimore, his pieces included *Metalwork*. The meaning in the work derives from contrasts, formed by Wilson’s unexpected combination of objects. *Metalwork* placed a set of metal slave shackles in a traditional display-case setting, surrounded by elegant, ornate, silver serving pieces (Figure 5.10). The shackles are the “figure” which a viewer sees and considers, positioned against the “ground” of the luxurious silverware created for the privileged class (e.g., slave owners). The “ground” for this work is also the multilayered biases of cultural institutions, and the viewer’s own prejudices, perceptions, and presumptions, particularly about race.



Figure 5.10: *Metalwork* (detail), 1793–1880, from the exhibition *Mining the Museum: An Installation* by Fred Wilson, The Contemporary and Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, April 4, 1992–February 28, 1993. © Fred Wilson. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

Like Fred Wilson, other artists currently exploring art as social practice are also figure-ground shapeshifters, who explore how art can challenge aesthetic, cultural, political, and social norms, by changing the ground.

In Sanford Biggers's interdisciplinary work, the artist combines classical African art with classical western art in inventive, contemporary sculptures. He also introduces visual patterns derived from Gee's Bend quilt imagery; and he employs sandpainting artists to create abstract paintings on the floor. He is interested in cross-cultural work in a variety of materials, processes, and technologies. His art accrues new meanings due to the sources and the grounds they reference.⁶⁶

J. R. is another artist who uses technology—cameras, smart phones, computer editing, and large-scale digital printing along with glue and paper—to challenge social and cultural norms and expectations. He installs his interdisciplinary projects in community settings and changes the figures (in this case the people in the community) as well as the viewer's relationship to the community. His subjects are prison settings, border walls, abandoned buildings, and ghettos. Working with members of the community, he glues enormous, close-up photographic images on various surfaces, which foreground the disenfranchised and thereby change the ground. He documents the projects before the glued paper pieces dissolve. His critical social practice, outside the gallery and museum settings, demonstrates the principle that ground-forms-figure in art and life.⁶⁷

Figure-ground also provides a framing for how audiences think of any artist's or artwork's place in art history, and its value in the art world. An artist's resume, dates, reviews, and presence (or absence) in exhibitions or museum collections form the context (ground) within which viewers see and value any one work (figure). The figure-ground relationship is always present in conversations about the meaning of works of art. Additionally, the understanding of this relationship rewards the study of art history.

When Dorothy and her dog Toto finally reach the Emerald City and see the Wizard of Oz, they at first encounter a gigantic, frightening image of the powerful wizard's head. Toto runs off and pulls a curtain aside. This reveals an ordinary man speaking into a microphone. The enormous image of the Wizard commands, "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!" This, of course, is impossible for Dorothy and the film's viewers alike.

The world of Oz is like the world of art. Viewers bring their knowledge and experience. They can never know or see a work of art without contextualizing it. The innocent eye is a contradiction in terms. The viewer gets what they get, not necessarily what the artist intended.

Human beings are hard-wired for language and figure-ground. They are predisposed to seek connection and completion, compelled to figure things out. Conspiracy theory thrives on this characteristic of the human mind, as does the love of solving a mystery, or deciphering a code. Puzzling over art and the dialectic of figure-ground is meaningful, energizing, and often fraught with controversy.

In 2019, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City reopened after a major renovation. In the re-installed spaces, MOMA took a new approach to how it exhibits its collection. A new global-centric context has replaced the Eurocentric context that dominated the exhibitions for five decades.⁶⁸ MOMA spaces now show more diverse art by women and people of color and combine works from disparate periods and cultures. The museum now displays works in video, sound, installation, and photography alongside paintings and sculpture. For visitors to the museum, whether online or in person, the museum's global re-contextualizing of their collection (changing the ground) will alter the meanings viewers find and (re)discover in the art. To keep the conversation fresh and evolving, MOMA will rotate and re-install the collection more often than in the past.

A finished work of art is physically fixed, but people's perceptions of it live on and evolve, as the cultural ground continuously shifts beneath them. As I write this, "Black Lives Matter" has become a new cultural, artistic, and political ground. In September 2022, a ceremony in the White House unveiled former President Barack Obama's official portrait painted by Robert McCurdy.⁶⁹ The painting will hang in the White House alongside all the other portraits of past presidents, all of them White men. President Obama's portrait will appear in sharp contrast to the others.

The artist, McCurdy, positioned President Obama in a stark white ground, just as he has done in his other portrait paintings. President Obama's painting is consistent within the context of the artist's style. However, in the context (ground) of the other White House portraits of former presidents, viewers may see McCurdy's painting of President Obama's as a metaphor for the first person of color elected president of the United States of America—a man of color in the context of all White past presidents. A picture, sculpture, or an installation may be worth a thousand words, but those words will be different for different audiences. Ground-forms-figure.

Recap

Figure-ground is a fundamental organizing principle of the picture plane, in every mark made, in every action taken. It is also an organizing principle of

configuration, meanings, and interpretations. Changes in the ground have a more significant impact on the figure than vice versa.

Ground-forming-figure is a principle that one cannot overstate. It is the essence of painting and drawing on all levels, from the artist's first actions to the viewer's latest interpretations. It is a meta principle that also sheds light, metaphorically, on how viewers interpret artworks within a cultural context. Viewers see and interpret works of art—within the ground of their own life and times—in ways the artist may never have foreseen.

Exercises—F/G

In this exercise, you will work with figure-ground relationships. You will need black chalk (or drawing charcoal) and for painting, black-and-white acrylic, or other opaque water-based paint.

Set up a still life. Include open and closed geometric forms, such as boxes, containers, and pitchers, along with organic forms, such as a potted plant, flowers, and fruit. You could also use a ladder as a background item if you have the space. You want the object-shapes to create an arrangement that you can see through, as well solid shapes that have figure-ground relationships. Make the complexity in the still life comfortable for your level of drawing and painting ability. Beginners should keep it simple.

Notice that your marking tool (chalk or brush) describes both the inside and the outside of shapes. In some places, the black may represent solids, in other places the black may represent voids. In some places there are black areas, in other places there are white areas, the absence of the marks. You can make lines and shapes directly and indirectly.

STILL LIFE DRAWING

Make a drawing of the still life using only the black chalk or charcoal. Develop the drawing by positioning line and shape in reciprocal roles, where the black-and-white reverse figure and ground roles. Use an eraser to re-position. In your final work, you want to see different figure-ground roles for the darks and the lights, independent of the objects, ambient light effects, and shading. (See [Figure 5.5](#) and accompanying description in this chapter.)

STILL LIFE PAINTING

Use only your black paint. Paint the page black. When you have filled the page, let the black paint dry. When the paint is dry, use white paint to adjust and re-position the figure-ground. Continue to re-state the black and the white in stages.

In both the drawing and the painting projects you want different roles for the darks and the lights, independent of the objects, the space, light-logic, or shading.

FACE-VASE PAINTING

Make a painting of the face-vase. Have a colleague take a selfie of you in profile or take a profile of a colleague. Make a line drawing of the profile on one half of a 10 × 10 inches white illustration board. Next, lay a piece of tracing paper over the drawing and trace the original. Flip that tracing and by using a sheet of transfer paper, trace the profile on the illustration board. Then use only your black paint. (Use a water-soluble paint like acrylic, casein or Flashe.) Shape the black paint (see [Figure 5.2](#)).

Once you feel like you have gone as far as you can go, let the black paint dry. When the paint is dry, use white paint to adjust and re-position the figure-ground. Continue to re-state the black and the white in stages.

FAIR WARNING

This exercise is one of the most difficult. It requires both object-directed attention to detail, and ground-directed attention to the field. When you adjust one side of the profile, you must also see the other side of the profile and visa versa. The exercise “works” when the vase appears as strong as the faces. With this exercise, you will also experience how sensitive your eyes are to position and shape, regardless of color or value.

True, you can use photoshop to create the same face-vase result. But that won't develop your ground-directed skill set. If you have read this book thus far, you're probably interested in developing your seeing, and cultivating ground-directed attention. The face-vase painting is a good exercise to practice to obtain this ability.

