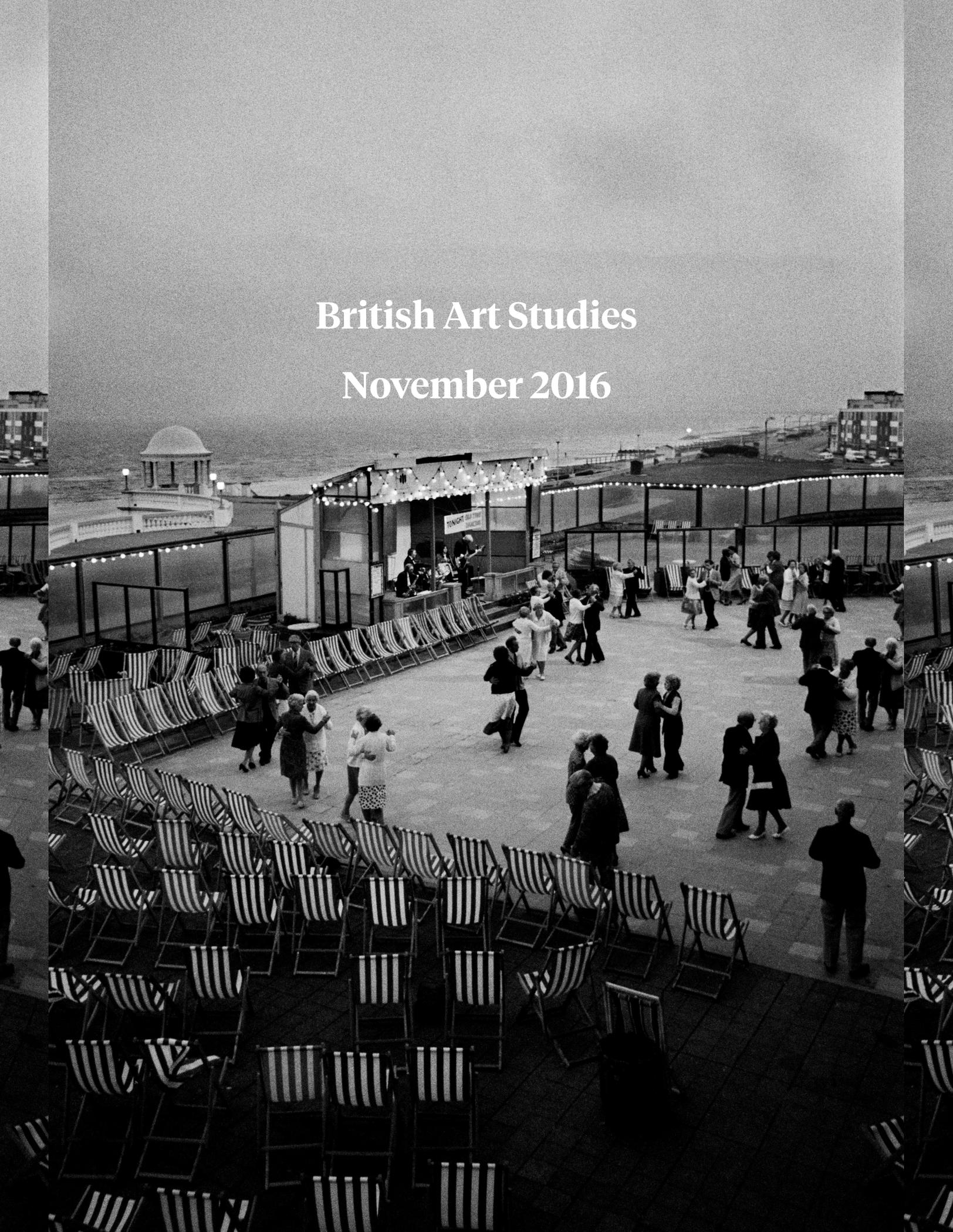


# British Art Studies

November 2016



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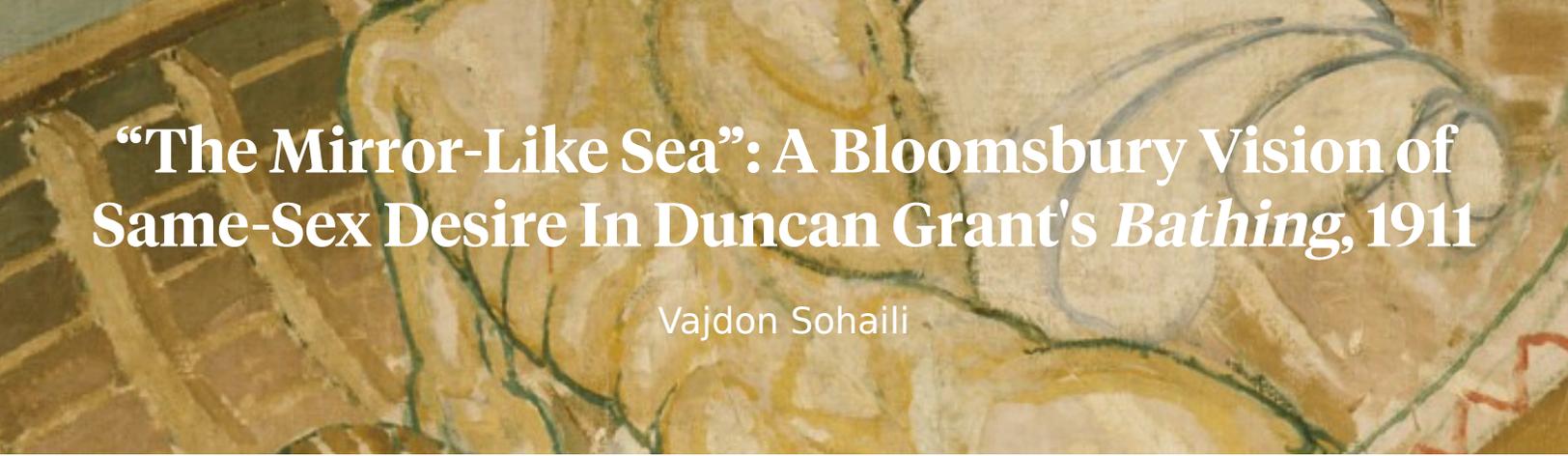
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"The Mirror-Like Sea": A Bloomsbury Vision of Same-Sex Desire In Duncan Grant's *Bathing*, 1911, Vajdon Sohaili



# “The Mirror-Like Sea”: A Bloomsbury Vision of Same-Sex Desire In Duncan Grant's *Bathing*, 1911

Vajdon Sohaili

## Abstract

*Originally installed as a mural in the London Borough Polytechnic, Duncan Grant's Bathing (1911) provoked anxieties that it would lead to the moral decay of working-class youth. Employing critical theory, this article finds the root of those anxieties in the painting's linkage of naked homosociality to a subtle but pervasive figuration of desire, which Grant constructs via a sophisticated design programme. Grant's democratic fantasy of homoerotic desire echoes that of his Bloomsbury colleague, E. M. Forster, whose dictum "only connect" induces a state of inoperative touch, made intelligible by Jean-Luc Nancy. The effects of Grant's composition, when viewed through the repetition theory of Gilles Deleuze, create not only a space but a time of desire, a potentiality located in the figure of the peripheral, uncoupled bather. Poised on the brink of sexual self-awareness, this figure invokes a positive form of Narcissus, liberated from the Freudian taint of homosexual non-productivity.*

## Authors

Art historian currently completing his PhD in the History and Theory of Architecture at Princeton University

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I often in my journey by the sea longed to get out and live the rest of my life unbeknownst and lost among the beautiful youths I saw playing about in and out of the mirror-like sea . . .  
—Duncan Grant, letter to Lytton Strachey, 16 June, 1907

Duncan Grant's *Bathing* (fig. 1) depicts seven male figures in varying stages of immersion in a stylized and highly activated body of water. The painting's action is read in a curve from top right to top left, starting with a pair of figures diving off a grey orthogonal podium, to a pair of swimmers, and finally to a pair climbing into a tilting boat. These kinetic duos leave one figure unaccounted for. In the lower left, that figure seems, peculiarly, to hover, not to swim at all. One cannot help but feel a sense of crisis attached to this body; perhaps it is simply his outsider status in this couple-constituted world; perhaps it is the strange, upturned lifelessness of his feet, or the empty, cupping gesture of his hands, the grasp of a blind man who drifts off-target, away from the up-surgings of bodies and diagonals. Or perhaps it is the treatment of his hair. Unlike the sleek, vigorous patterns of the other bathers, the brushwork of this figure's hair seems thin and unsure, a combination of squiggles and cross-hatches through which the underlying scalp is too apparent. I will return to propose an identity for this figure, but for now it is enough to record a first impression of him: a fringe-dweller, inchoate, unseen, holding onto an illusion or reaching for an ideal—a stark contrast to the coupled, driven vitality of the other figures.



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**Figure 1.**

Duncan Grant, *Bathing*, photographed in its packing crate, 1911, oil on canvas, 228.6 x 306.1 cm. Collection of Tate, London (N04567) Digital image courtesy of Tate Images / Duncan Grant Estate, DACS 2016

These other figures attracted most of the attention when *Bathing* was unveiled in 1911 in its original setting, the dining-room of the London Borough Polytechnic. The *National Review* warned that paintings like Grant's would "deteriorate young and sensitive minds". Such exercises in avant-gardism were "travesties" beyond the comprehension of the working-class students of the Polytechnic, and could lead to "degeneracy" through "bad examples and false ideals".<sup>1</sup> Fixated on moral disruption, the language of this critique suggests that sexual panic lies just below its surface. Undoubtedly, the muscular virility of naked male bodies painted on a three-metre-wide canvas was in part to blame. But I contend that moral opposition was responding to something even more subversive and inarticulable: not the bodies necessarily, but their harmonious rhythmic interplay, and the almost palpable sense of yearning that ties them together. In other words, not sex, but desire.

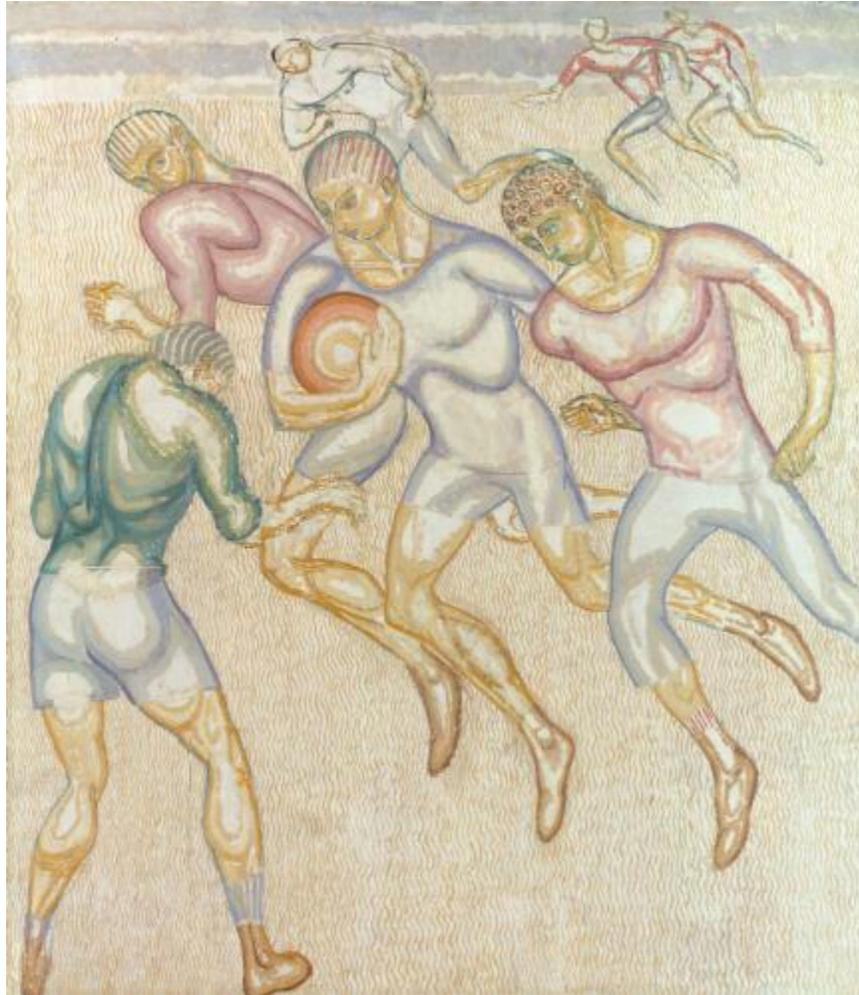
How might we describe desire? What are its figurations? Sex has its language and figures, but desire resists both the linguistic and the formal. In what follows, I will argue that *Bathing* makes an intervention into that recalcitrance by presenting a complex but figural description of desire, situated not in its consummation, but in a suspension of that consummation just beyond reach. To theorize this effect, I will contextualize Grant's painting

within the sexual and social philosophies of the Bloomsbury circle to which he belonged, paying particular attention to the writing of E. M. Forster. Like Grant, Forster longed for an open and egalitarian male sensual community, and he frequently expressed this desire with reference to bathing. However, as I will demonstrate, Forster's famous dictum, "only connect", reveals an ambivalent tension in such encounters, a state of yearning contingent on incompleteness. This connective tension embedded in desire mobilizes the erotic in Grant's *Bathing*. Through decorative strategies, including rhythm, repetition, and difference, Grant imbues his painting with a powerful dynamism constitutive of yearning, and creates an erotic fantasy all the more intense for being suspended on the cusp of consummation. Held together through a circuit of inoperative touch, Grant's picture facilitates a philosophical consideration of the already separate conditions of erotic connection, doing so, radically, through a medium both public and pedagogical. In its staging of multiple encounters—stylistic, physical, and ontological—*Bathing* proclaims desire for a connection among men that is socially inclusive and sexually celebratory, not fraught in its expression, but fluid, productive, and self-affirming.

Living to the age of ninety-three in 1978, Grant was the longest-surviving member of Bloomsbury, that loose alliance of like-minded, mostly literary intellectuals who led the English avant-garde of the early twentieth century. At one time or another, he had been romantically involved with his cousin Lytton Strachey, the economist John Maynard Keynes, and the explorer George Mallory, but he settled down (at least domestically) with Virginia Woolf's sister, Vanessa Bell, with whom he fathered a child. Despite this (probably short-lived) heterosexual contact, Grant continued to enjoy sexual relationships with male friends and working-class models. His daughter said that she never heard him say anything "in any way that made me think that his homosexuality had ever been a real problem to him. . . It always seemed he'd known about it from the word go, and just accepted it." <sup>2</sup> Open to an uncomplicated and plural sexuality, Grant brought a similar promiscuity to his art-making. Grant's art resists any single stylistic characterization; his interests were extraordinarily diverse and wide-ranging, alternating easily between decorative objects and easel paintings, between mythological scenes and still lifes, between Byzantine influences and Fauvist ones. As Virginia Woolf said with her typically acerbic affection, "he has too many ideas and no way to get rid of them." <sup>3</sup>

The commission to decorate the dining-room of the London Borough Polytechnic, a trade college in a working-class neighbourhood of south London, was Grant's most prominent exposure as an artist to date. The history of the commission has been well documented by other scholars, but some details are worth repeating here as they reveal the conceptual and stylistic context in which Grant was working. Roger Fry—the Bloomsbury-

associated champion of Post-Impressionism and the director of the Polytechnic commission—recruited Grant along with four other artists to produce seven mural-sized canvases under the theme of “London on Holiday”. Fry himself painted a scene at the Zoo, and Grant, the only artist to undertake two canvases, painted a game of football in Hyde Park (fig. 2) and a bathing scene in the Serpentine. Aiming for stylistic consistency, Fry suggested that the artists employ a modelling technique inspired by Byzantine mosaics; <sup>4</sup> he had an enthusiasm for the eastern Mediterranean, not only for the decorative expressiveness of Byzantine art (which he compared to Cézanne’s), but also for the temperament of the people, whom he considered friendlier, more sensitive to beauty, and less class-confined than the English. <sup>5</sup> Thus, in concept and style, the murals were designed to produce a harmonious social and aesthetic effect. <sup>6</sup> Their settings would evoke a modernist attitude to recreation and a sensuous engagement of the body, as well as represent urban spaces and activities to which all Londoners could enjoy more or less open and communal access; while their recourse to a Byzantine muralist mode would signal an aesthetic and social sensibility based on plurality and openness.



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**Figure 2.**

Duncan Grant, *Football*, 1911, oil on canvas, 227.7 x 197.5 x 2.5 cm. Collection of Tate, London (N04566) Digital image courtesy of Tate Images / Duncan Grant Estate, DACS 2016

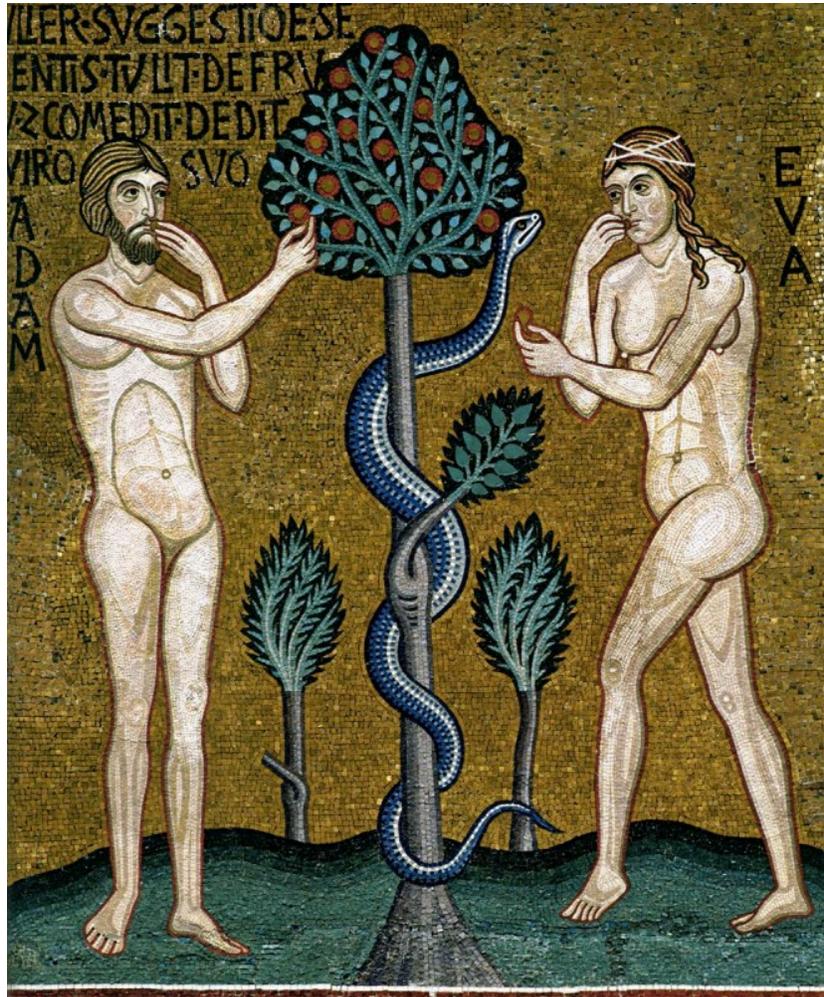
Grant's *Bathing* employs eastern Mediterranean precedents more effectively than any of the other murals in the project, filtering these influences through his sophisticated decorative sensibility to deliver a dynamically modernist effect.<sup>7</sup> His stylized treatment of the undulating water as well as the geometric musculature of his swimmers bears a resemblance to Italian mosaics of the twelfth century (figs. 3 and 4)<sup>8</sup>, while the idealized muscularity of his figures owes much to Michelangelo (fig. 5).<sup>9</sup> Grant assimilates these influences into a harmonious design programme. Amplifying the Byzantine water technique, he imposes a rhythm of blues, greens, and whites that conveys sensorial and atmospheric qualities, and suggests a body of water variegated in its light, depth, and even temperature. This impression is underscored by a sense of environmental

displacement: other than the grey podium, there is no indication that the scene takes place in a city park. The horizon is distant and uninterrupted, and the surface has an energetic quality suggestive of a much larger body of water. Evoking the powerful motion of waves, Grant juxtaposes “layers” of water in diagonal opposition to each other, almost like scenographic flats or panels of a screen.<sup>10</sup> Integrated stylistically with their environment, the swimmers navigate over and between these layers of water, but also within them. In places, the undulating stripes separate to trail across bodies, creating degrees of transparency and opacity that immerse the swimmers in the water as well as in the decorative unity of the image. The effect of Grant’s harmonizing design strategies is to deliver not only a sense of depth and recession, but also a dynamic diagonal movement that guides the viewer’s eye and justifies the muscular exertion of the figures.



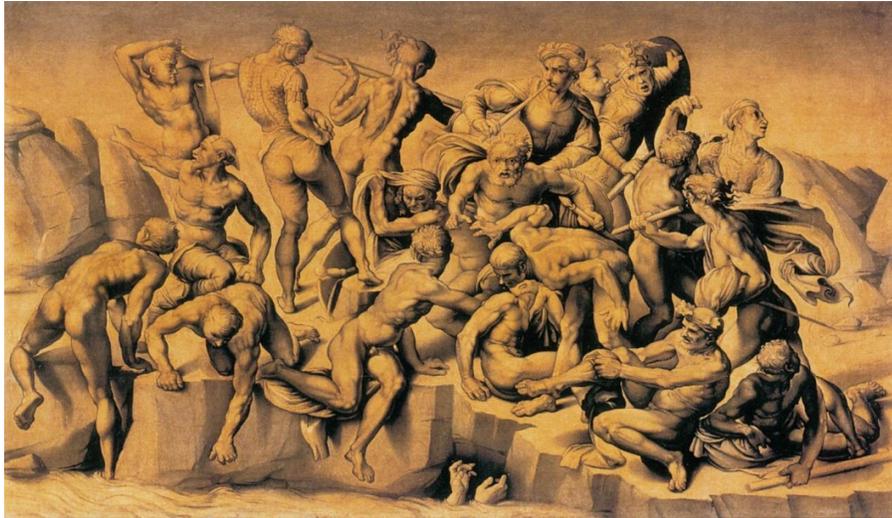
**Figure 3.**

Unknown, Christ and the Fishermen (detail), 1180s, mosaic, north transept, north wall, Monreale Cathedral, Monreale, Sicily Digital image courtesy of Web Gallery of Art



**Figure 4.**

Unknown, Adam and Eve (detail), 1140–70, mosaic, nave, centre aisle, north wall, Cappella Palatina, Palermo, Sicily Digital image courtesy of @Crash\_MacDuff

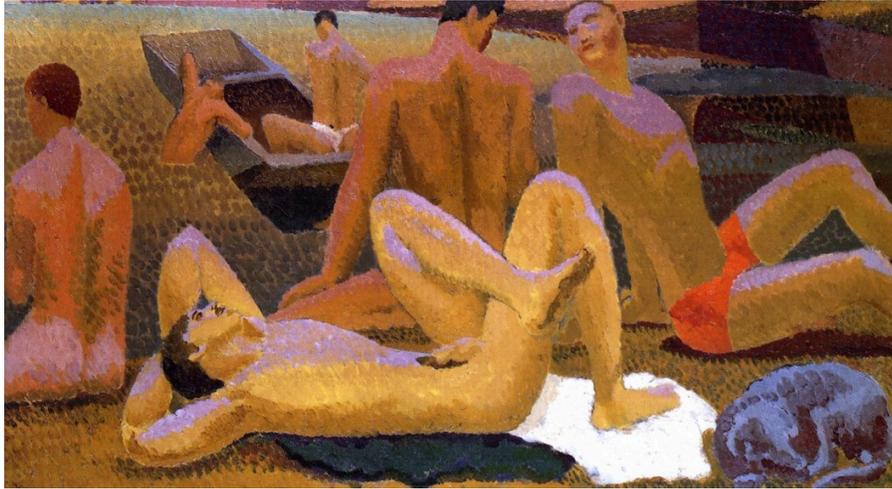


**Figure 5.**

Aristotile da Sangallo, after Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Battle of Cascina*, 1542, oil on wood, 77 x 130 cm. Collection of Holkham Hall, Norfolk  
Digital image courtesy of Lord Leicester and the Trustees of Holkham Estate, Norfolk / Bridgeman Images

If Grant's design sensibilities consolidate his painting's atmospheric effects, his depiction of an all-male bathing scene admits us to its social and erotic dimensions. By the early twentieth century, urban bathing, in most cases separated by gender, was a popular activity among the working classes, influenced by modern ideas surrounding health, hygiene, leisure, and physical recreation. Bathing was also, as Matt Houlbrook notes, a pretext for sex among men, usually at London's numerous indoor baths, but also, undoubtedly, in the bushes around the Serpentine.<sup>11</sup> For Grant, male bathing was a topos of ongoing erotic and artistic interest. A letter sent to Lytton Strachey from Florence in 1907 records his delight at watching the "miraculously lovely" young men bathing naked in the Arno.<sup>12</sup> His bathing pictures from 1920-21—*Bathers by the Pond* (fig. 6) and *Two Bathers* (fig. 7)—represent his fantasy of hosting similar scenes around the pond at his home in Charleston.<sup>13</sup> Borrowing attitudes from Frédéric Bazille's *Bathers (Summer Scene)* of 1869 (fig. 8)—one of the few paintings of male homosocial bathing from the period—and an expressiveness of brushwork that owes something to Cézanne, Grant clearly keys his images to the erotic. The curled-up dog in the corner of *Bathers by the Pond* recalls a convention from Renaissance paintings of Venus (fig. 9), and initiates with a sly, art-historical wink the languid flirtation of the scene. In *Two Bathers*, the extraordinary curve of the supine bather's body echoes the colour palette of the soft rising mounds of water and shoreline. The landscape itself translates as a body—its gently sloping profile is a visual echo of the bather's own

thigh—contributing to a totalizing erotic environment. Through technique and motif, Grant’s bathing pictures appropriate a genre of commonly heteroerotic interest for the homoerotic male body.



**Figure 6.**

Duncan Grant, *Bathers by the Pond*, 1920-1, oil on canvas, 50.5 × 91.5 cm. Collection of Pallant House Gallery, Chichester Digital image courtesy of Pallant House, Chichester / © Estate of Duncan Grant. All rights reserved, DACS 2016.



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**Figure 7.**

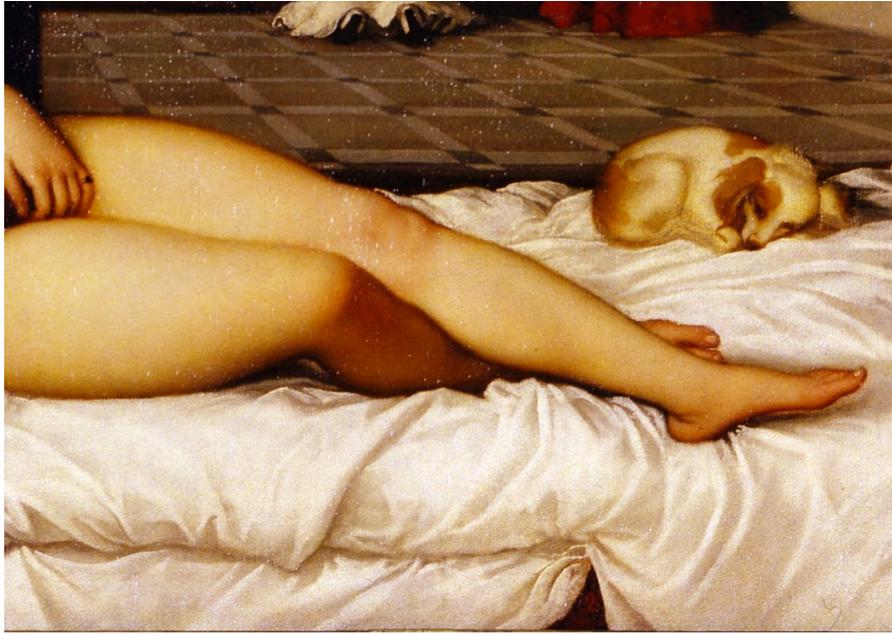
Duncan Grant, *Two Bathers*, 1921, oil on canvas, 59.5 × 89.7 cm. Collection of the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge Digital image courtesy of Hamilton Kerr Institute / Duncan Grant Estate, DACS 2016



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**Figure 8.**

Frédéric Bazille, *Bathers (Summer Scene)*, 1869, oil on canvas, 158 x 159 cm. Collection of Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum Digital image courtesy of President and Fellows of Harvard College



**Figure 9.**

Titian, *Venus of Urbino* (detail), 538, oil on canvas, 119 × 165 cm.  
Collection of the Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Digital image courtesy of Uffizi  
Gallery, Florence

However, unlike Grant's small-scale private paintings, *Bathing* was a wall-sized public production in a pedagogical setting. As such, its disruptions of gender and genre intruded into the social realm, provoking the denunciations of critics who feared the painting would corrupt and confuse the Polytechnic's working-class youths—corrupt their sexuality and confuse their place in society. Still more threatening, these elisions of the sexual and the social across the male body were part of a recent intellectual radicalism that merges into a Bloomsbury genealogy. In the second half of the nineteenth century, British intellectuals were exposed to Walt Whitman's visions of a harmonious egalitarian society based on honest work and a respect for nature, alongside a sensuous appreciation of the male body. Whitman's fantasy of idealized democracy—"intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man"—deeply influenced Edward Carpenter, a one-time teacher at Cambridge, who adopted the American poet's "love of comrades" to inform his own views on social and sexual emancipation.<sup>14</sup> In "The Intermediate Sex", Carpenter gave an impassioned and erudite defence of what he called the "homogenic attachment"—notably, in both men *and* women—arguing for its distinguished history, refuting the pathologizing accusations of the medical and judicial establishment, and situating it within a larger campaign of social and class reform.<sup>15</sup> Practising his own philosophy, Carpenter left Cambridge for a rural commune, and formed a life-long partnership with an uneducated working-class man from the slums of Sheffield.<sup>16</sup> In its intersection of radical views

bearing on both the social and the sexual, Carpenter's philosophy had a powerful pull on Bloomsbury agents, even those without the "homogenic attachment", such as Fry, who described Carpenter as "quite one of the best men I have ever met".<sup>17</sup> Grant's view of Carpenter is not known, but in his sexual tastes he was certainly democratic, enjoying the company of working-class men and not blanching at a criminal record.<sup>18</sup> However, it was Grant's friend, E. M. Forster, who was particularly inspired by Carpenter, visiting him and George Merrill several times at their home at Millthorpe.<sup>19</sup> While there, Forster conceived *Maurice*, and we can see a reflection of Carpenter and Merrill in that novel's idealized conclusion, in which class-transcendent male lovers take to the greenwood to spend their lives together. Like its aesthetics, Bloomsbury's sexualities were underpinned by a progressive, even transgressive social conscience.<sup>20</sup>

Two years following Carpenter's death, Forster would write, "If I am as deep as a pond, and you as a lake, Edward Carpenter was the sea."<sup>21</sup> As these words suggest, in Forster's cosmology, bodies of water were almost mystical sites of an eroticism that could be harmonized both with nature and society. In his novels, Forster frequently stages or tests the connection of the social, the relational, and the sexual in the context of a male bathing scene. In *A Room with a View* (1908), bathing is a comic idyll shared by Freddy, George, and Mr Beebe, who strip down and abandon themselves to a playful prelapsarian communion.<sup>22</sup> In *Howards End* (1910), Charles Wilcox's awkward attempt to go for a bathe is thwarted by his own body-shame and social anxiety.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the unrestrained celebration of nakedness and comradeship in the earlier novel, the failure to connect with nature signifies a deeper human deficiency: an inability to connect to people. Even in *Maurice* (1913-14, though published posthumously), which might seem to present the opportunity for an unencoded celebration of the erotic, Forster resists the overtly sexual bathing scene, preferring instead to use it as an index of intimate relational connection, or of its lapse. From the dissonant attitudes towards bathing of the new lovers, Maurice and Clive<sup>24</sup> —a foreshadow of their romantic rupture—to the unrealized moonlit bathe that the servant Alec suggests to Maurice—a mere fantasy that preordains the full consummation of their relationship later that night<sup>25</sup> —a bathing scene provides the framework for describing the retreat or advance of an intimate and erotic connection.

In this oscillating aspect of retreat and advance, Forster's bathing scenes and, as I will show, Grant's bathing pictures invoke one of Forster's best-known dicta: "only connect". In *Howards End*, published the year before Grant painted *Bathing*, Forster and his protagonists—Margaret and Helen Schlegel—dream of a social harmony that would transcend the divisive

subject conditions of class, gender, age, and—according to theories about the sexual coding of Forster’s novels—sexuality.<sup>26</sup> As Margaret says, “Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height . . . Only connect and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.”<sup>27</sup> To connect would be to dismantle the oppositions and breach the barriers dividing people, spheres, and ideas. Despite the final word of her quote, her intention is not to eliminate either term of opposition, but to facilitate a third space in which “both will be exalted”—spirit *in* appetite, society *in* nature.

This unified third space is not easily attained, as demonstrated by the fraught climax of the novel and the ambivalence of its dénouement. But I would argue that its elusory quality is inscribed in the words “only connect”, which contain an opposition in themselves, a constitutive linguistic tension that conditions their possibility. Taken separately, each word produces variable, even opposing valences. As an adverb, “only” bears several connotations. It can describe pre-eminence or singularity, an action that should be taken to the exclusion of all others. At the same time, it can suggest that an action is easily taken, requiring little effort. A third (though not exhaustive) meaning can qualify an action as mere, insufficient, or even inconsequential, falling short of expectations. We see, then, a word constantly folding back on itself, refuting its own urgency with gestures of dismissal. The verb “connect” is less slippery in its meaning; the OED’s first definition is “to join, fasten, or link together”. In its most common usage, “connect” suggests a completion, a finishing, a measurable success. But “connect” enjoys a range of applications, from the purely mechanical to the spiritually abstract, and where completion or success is measurable in the former order, the latter offers no rubric for evaluation. Indeed, what constitutes success in an abstract usage such as Forster’s is persistence and continuity *in spite of* immeasurability, an always-succeeding that of course requires an always-failing. In their separate states of ambivalence, “only” and “connect” do not quite connect. Together, they host a dissonance between them—an immeasurable completion against a diminishable urgency, an advancement against a retreat.

The quality produced by the rhythmic oscillations of these two words is yearning, a state of activated desire sustained through deferral. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, the constitutive quality of all human encounters is “a relation without relation . . . an exposure made up of the simultaneous immanence of the retreat and the coming of the relation”.<sup>28</sup> Like the linguistic tension between “only” and “connect”, connection between people is always at the same time in disconnection. We observe something of this quality in Grant’s bathing pictures from 1920–1. In *Bathers by the Pond* (fig. 6), bodies appear in sensuous integration with nature, and yet their interconnection remains tenuous. The erotic yearning that pervades the

scene makes itself known in postures of retreat. Backs are unusually prominent; of the six figures, four are pictured facing away. Where we can see them, faces are featureless or obscured by heavy dark shadow, and gazes, such that we can extrapolate, follow trajectories that bypass each other. In this latter aspect, the painting recalls Bazille's *Summer Scene* (fig. 8), in which, as Aruna D'Souza observes, "the circuit of gazes . . . is entirely closed."<sup>29</sup> In the one case where Grant permits direct communication—between the two seated figures on the right—they encounter each other with their backs and eye-contact is peripheral. If the disconnections of *Bathers by the Pond* set the gaze free to roam, *Two Bathers* (fig. 7) makes a bid to seize that gaze, but in a manner that disrupts connection. While the eye may want to wander across the warm, sensuous golds of the painting, it is drawn repeatedly back to the face of the supine bather. The incongruously hyper-articulated facial features of this figure jar with the impressionistic treatment of the rest of its body and the facture of the painting as a whole, creating a stylistic and environmental disjunction. Furthermore, by being turned upside-down and placed at the very bottom of the painting, these features perform a sort of double inversion—both facial and compositional—in the words of Darren Clarke, "inverting social protocol".<sup>30</sup> Direct and piercing in its address, this figure's bid for connection with the viewer in fact produces spatial and atmospheric disorientations. Though the figures in Grant's paintings are in a sense together—sensual bodies co-located in sensuous environments—their relationality produces an ambivalent but productive tension, a simultaneous push and pull that instantiates that frictional yearning between "only" and "connect".

As Nancy tells us, the connective rift applies not only to the gaze, but also to the figure of the touch. Between individuals, he says, "there is contiguity but not continuity . . . All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation."<sup>31</sup> Nancy refers to the state of universal shared separation as "the inoperative community"—that which "undoes the absoluteness of the absolute"—and so we can think of touch in similar terms.<sup>32</sup> To touch or be touched is to exist, and to exist is to accept the inoperation of the touch, its scant but essential distance from that towards which it reaches. He makes this clearer in *Noli Me Tangere*:

Love and truth touch by pushing away: they force the retreat of those whom they reach, for their very onset reveals, in the touch itself, that they are out of reach. It is in being unattainable that they touch us, even seize us.<sup>33</sup>

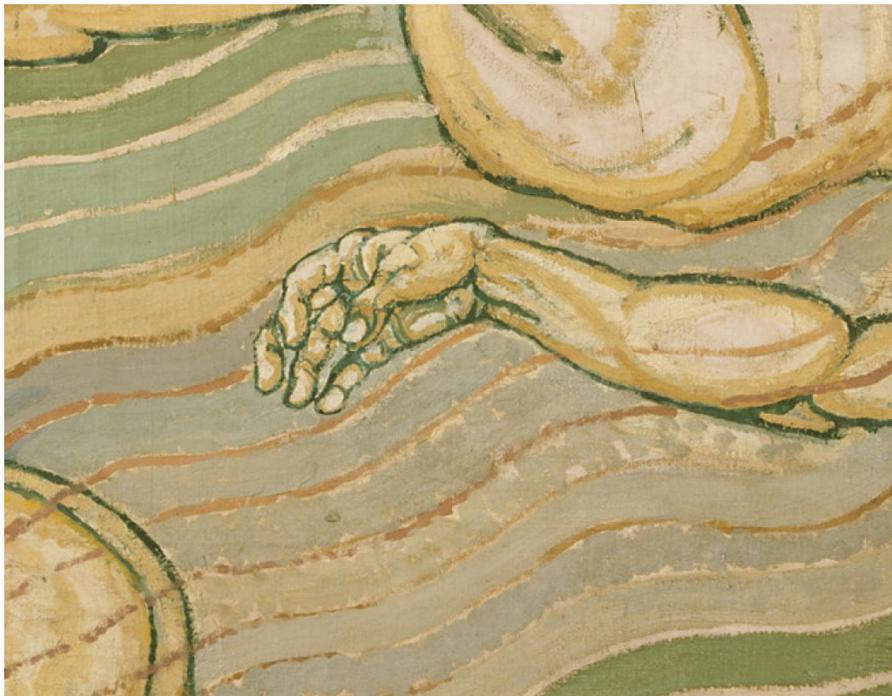
In other words, that which we long to possess always exceeds touch, but it is also this excess that perpetuates our longing. Touch must linger at the margins of an unbreachable divide between itself and the object of desire, but touch governs that divide. In its approach, touch delimits the space of separation, and in its persistence to enter that space, invests it with yearning.

How might we visualize such a touch, one that draws its intensity from a space of separation? In *Leaves of Grass* (first published 1855), Whitman introduces inoperative touch through the “twenty-ninth bather”, an ambiguously gendered figure, despite the poet’s use of the feminine pronoun. At her window, she gazes at the “twenty-eight young men bath[ing] by the shore” and admires their beauty.<sup>34</sup> Physically removed and socially restrained, she is unable to attain her desire. And so she projects that desire into “an unseen hand”, which travels—carried and shared by the poet<sup>35</sup>—to caress their bodies, to descend “tremblingly from their temples and ribs.”<sup>36</sup> Hers, as Whitman says in his preface to the 1876 edition, suggests a “terrible, irrepressible yearning”.<sup>37</sup> The “unseen hand” is the vehicle for that yearning; it is the non-touch by which touch may travel across a space of separation. Simultaneously expressing desire and unattainability, it permits a form of consummation that is, in its non-consummate character, perpetually self-renewing.

Notably, we encounter inoperative touch at a crucial moment in the development of Bloomsbury sexuality. According to Virginia Woolf, Bloomsbury’s sexual phase was launched with a single word, uttered by Lytton Strachey in 1906. “Semen?” he asked, pointing at a stain on Vanessa Bell’s dress. From this moment onwards, as Woolf attests, brazen talk of “sex permeated our conversation.”<sup>38</sup> Though not touching each other but intensified by their physical separation, a pointing finger, a word, and a stain function to create an enduring erotic circuit. This power of the inoperative touch is located, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in the gesture. To point at something “alludes to the supposed self-evidence and immediacy of the phenomenon pointed at, but at the same time to its ineffability, ungraspability, and indeed emptiness of self-nature.”<sup>39</sup> A gesture activates the space between hand and object, producing an “endless vibrancy of . . . resonant double movement”, which occurs, in Bloomsbury’s semen-al moment, in the register of the sexual.<sup>40</sup>

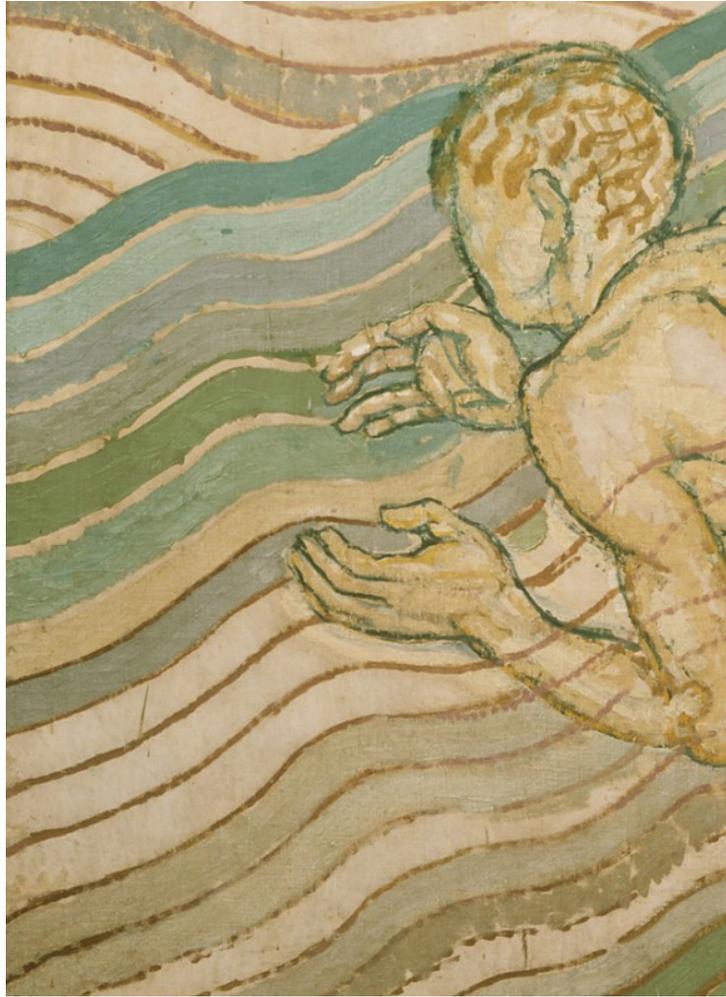
While this discussion of inoperative touch begins as an outgrowth of the tensions embedded in Forster’s “only connect”, it achieves its visual culmination in Grant’s *Bathing*. Indeed, Grant’s painting seems extraordinarily attuned to the tensions induced by “only connect” and the workings of inoperative touch. One of the engines that drives *Bathing* is the

reach that does not quite arrive, but that, in its palpable intention to connect, electrifies the space between. Each bather reaches for the one in front of him, never quite connecting, though investing the attempt with a muscular conviction that perpetuates momentum. In the central foreground, the swimmer with the red swimsuit reaches forward with a hand notable for the manner of its rendering. No other hand in the painting reflects such careful and detailed attention to form, in its marking-off of each digit and crease, and the depiction of the only fingernail in the entire canvas (fig. 10). Curved in a sort of agonized gesture of yearning (counter-productive, it must be said, to any known swimming stroke), it carries an affective power that pulls tension into the space between itself and the buttocks of the figure towards which it seems to reach. This latter figure echoes that same gesture in *his* hands, which, held close together—a gesture facing a gesture—also produce a vibrancy, a space of ambiguous meaning (fig. 11). Like the twenty-ninth bather's hand and Bell's stain, there is an erotic circuitry here. Not produced through contact, it moves along pathways of desire. Through a sort of striving, a straining to reach, it activates a powerful aporetic space between the wanted and the want—"only connect" in diagrammatic form. The painting's space of intimate connection is thus constituted not as one of resolved contact, but as one held on the brink of gratification, a being-with (to invoke Nancy) that is always already separate and together.



**Figure 10.**

Duncan Grant, *Bathing* (detail), 1911, oil on canvas, 228.6 × 306.1 cm. Collection of Tate, London (N04567) Digital image courtesy of Tate Images / © Estate of Duncan Grant. All rights reserved, DACS 2016.



**Figure 11.**

Duncan Grant, *Bathing* (detail), 1911, oil on canvas, 228.6 × 306.1 cm. Collection of Tate, London (N04567) Digital image courtesy of Tate Images / © Estate of Duncan Grant. All rights reserved, DACS 2016.

If there is an intensification of desire in this lower-left quadrant of Grant's mural, it is not isolated there, but the outcome of a strategic system of effects deployed throughout the painting. This is perhaps an observation that little needs stating: no part or effect in any work of art can be entirely isolated from its whole. But, as I have argued, Grant's mural coheres through his decorative sensibility, each element synthesizing within a consummate and harmonious programme. It is worth applying closer scrutiny to the painting's decorative strategies, to discover how they might specifically contribute to an overall scene of erotic yearning. Can we describe, in decorative terms, those disruptions that "draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire'", as Sedgwick describes?<sup>41</sup> Gilles Deleuze tells us that artists do not create a decorative motif simply by reproducing an identical shape or concept. Rather, "they introduce a disequilibrium into the dynamic process of

construction, an instability, dissymmetry or gap of some kind which disappears only in the overall effect.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, the essence of the decorative is contingent on repetition and difference. Each is necessarily tied to the other in a frictional, self-renewing relationality, an analogue for the Self and the Other that bears more than a passing resemblance to Forster’s “only connect” and Nancy’s inoperative touch. And, importantly, like Sedgwick’s eroticizing of the homosocial, their co-occurrence operates on the order of the disruptive.

Grant’s *Bathing* does not read as the seven-fold repetition of a single, serial figure. It’s true that Grant worked from photographs of a male model posed in his studio, and he asserted later in life that *Bathing* should be seen as a single body in serial motion.<sup>43</sup> However, whatever the artist’s intention, there are problems in adopting the single-body reading. As Clarke observes, such a perspective “helps heteronormatise the gaze, allowing the viewer to be untroubled by the sight of naked male bodies together in pleasure”.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, visual evidence refutes the singular view: we observe physical differences among the swimmers, such as the variable treatment of hair and the fact that one figure wears a swimsuit.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, they are not entirely individuated. Six of the figures clearly appear to pair up, not only in activity, but also in physical interrelations. The two divers are most closely aligned. Seeming to share a single pair of feet, the second figure peels away from the first, whose arms and hands in turn flow into and almost blend with the curving musculature of his partner. The two swimmers vigorously stroking the water also exhibit a sort of bodily conflation, the hips of the higher figure seeming to emerge from the foreshortened head and trunk of the lower figure, creating a continuous, powerful form, a kind of four-armed chimera. And while the two figures climbing into the boat are more distinct than the other two pairs, the undulating flank of the lower climber flows without interruption into the flexed forearm of the upper climber. Aligned in their activities, each of these pairs displays a spatiotemporal intimacy that penetrates and merges the limits of their bodies.

Repetition and difference exert a powerful undertow among the three coupled groups. Each group represents a single activity—diving, swimming, climbing into the boat—but each activity is doubled within its group. That is to say, each diver is repeated by another diver, each swimmer by another swimmer, each climber by another climber, and the space between each repetition represents a moment of movement that underscores a difference. Because, as Deleuze tells us, “difference lies between two repetitions”, the pairs in *Bathing* are not composed of identicals; instead, each unit contains a one and an other.<sup>46</sup> But it is through this difference, this shared otherness, that a certain unity is established between them; and it is *in* this difference, the rhythmic stop in the space between them, that the discreet action they

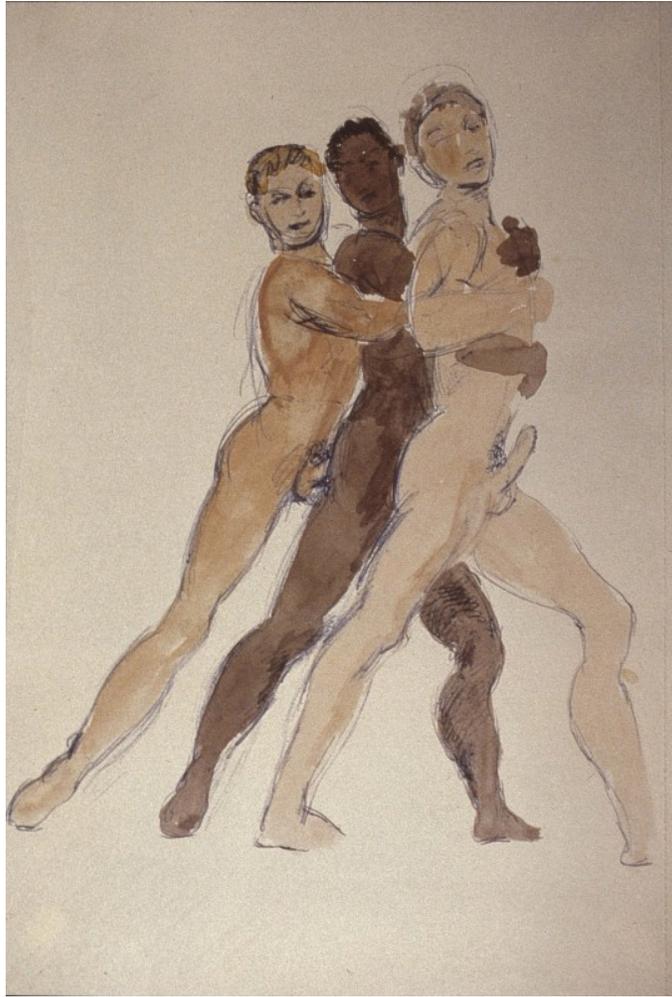
perform achieves a sort of completion or at least is set in motion towards a possible completion. This internal, animating difference is repeated externally—in the consecutive progression from one motion-couple to another—so that “the interior of repetition is always affected by an order of difference”, or in other words, difference animates motion in both the unit and the whole.<sup>47</sup>

But there is another way to read this arrangement of bodies, another unitary scheme that also invokes repetition and difference. Instead of three discreet motion-couples linked into a chain, we might see two chains, each composed of three bathers: a diver, a swimmer, and a climber. No longer constituted by a single action performed consecutively by a couple, each unit now represents a three-stage progression performed by a trio, and this progression is repeated by another unit, but again displaced through a rhythmic difference. In other words, diver one, swimmer one, and climber one can be seen to precede diver two, swimmer two, and climber two by a scant spatiotemporal hair.<sup>48</sup>

There is an important difference between these two ways of reading the repetition scheme in Grant’s picture, and I propose to explore it through a rhythmic conceit.<sup>49</sup> In the first scheme, we experience time rationally and linearly, from the picture’s top-right corner to its top-left. The action has a logical beginning, middle, and end, and each step is inflected, grounded by a couple-form. This is real time, lived time, and its familiarity is underscored by a particular rhythmic quality—double-beat, downbeat, double-beat, downbeat—coronary time. But in the second reading, we are displaced outside linear time. Carried now by singular bodies rather than coupled ones, we experience beginning, middle, and end, only to cycle back and experience the sequence again. A new, accelerated rhythm drives this repetitive cyclicity—triplicate-beat, downbeat, triplicate-beat, downbeat. If the first rhythm suggests the cardiovascular (of the blood, of the heart), that of the trio-form has the quality of the visceral (of the gut, of the affect); unlike the closed, binary oscillations of the couple-form, its restless, syncopative structure drives experience forward, insisting on the repetitive cyclicity of these bodies.

Taken together, these layered, co-existent tempi—of duo and trio, of body and impetus—amount to what I would argue is erotic time. According to Deleuze, experiences that are tied to repression are also tied to repetition. “Eros must be repeated, can be lived only through repetition.”<sup>50</sup> At the same time, he tells us that repetition is “in every respect . . . a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality.”<sup>51</sup> Grant’s artistic repetitions invoke the law—the couple-form—and then transgress it, not only

its gender-configuration, but also its numerical inviolability. Male bodies entwine with male bodies across multiple spectra; they transgress laws of the physiological, the spatial, the temporal; they write and overwrite rhythms. We find similar qualities in Grant's erotic drawings and watercolours (for example, figs. 12, 13, and 14), which he produced prolifically throughout his life, though only for personal consumption. In these sketches, strings of penetrated and penetrating bodies, racially heterogeneous, are arranged in decorative repetitions, converting rhythms of dance, of sport, even of religious ritual into transgressive, concupiscent play. Of course, touch is not complicated by inoperation here; it achieves its target, completes its consummation. It is, perhaps, partly due to this completion of touch that Grant's erotic drawings fall into a register of frivolity. With the state of yearning removed or effectively solved, these images become amusements rather than tensile observations of desire. However, they vividly demonstrate the extent to which Grant imbricated the erotic in matters of decorative invention. *Bathing* is not explicitly erotic nor overtly transgressive, but it bears a familial resemblance to Grant's erotic sketches, perhaps their barely suspended prelude. In the multiple possibility of its repetitive groupings, and its intricate, decorative linkage of male body to male body, *Bathing* also makes erotic mischief. First, it invokes the couple-form in an impermissible homosocial context; and then, it violates the couple-mandate, extending the franchise to a more plural, even promiscuous engagement of bodies.



**Figure 12.**

Duncan Grant, *Pas de Trois (Demonstrating Turnout)*, date unknown, ballpoint pen and watercolour on paper, 25 × 17 cm. Collection of John Whyte and Tom Wilson Weinberg, USA Digital image courtesy of John Whyte and Tom Wilson Weinberg / © Estate of Duncan Grant. All rights reserved, DACS 2016.



**Figure 13.**

Duncan Grant, Pas de Trois 3, date unknown, ballpoint pen, 18 × 23 cm.  
Private Collection Digital image courtesy of © Estate of Duncan Grant. All rights reserved, DACS 2016.



**Figure 14.**

Duncan Grant, *Descent from the Cross*, date unknown, ballpoint pen and watercolour, 33 x 21 cm. Private Collection Digital image courtesy of © Estate of Duncan Grant. All rights reserved, DACS 2016.

If Grant's repetitive schemata are outside the law, what about that which falls outside his repetitions? It is time, finally, to return to the question I posed at the beginning of this article: the identity of the seventh swimmer, the figure who floats beyond the couple or the trio, beyond (it would seem) relationality, outside erotic time (fig. 15). Literally just out of its reach (the hands of the other swimmers seem to grasp for him, without success), he looks away, into the water, and with a sort of trembling gesture, cradles something precious which he alone can see. Prior to the twentieth century, bathing scenes were permissible in academic painting only when framed in allegorical terms. Ancient mythology supplied Diana and Venus as the precedents for female bathing scenes, but there existed no obvious male counterpart, nor any need for one, given the extreme dearth of male bathing scenes. But if there had been such a need, who better than Narcissus to

answer it? Imagine for a moment that Grant's seventh swimmer is reaching for an image of himself he sees reflected as in a "mirror-like sea".<sup>52</sup> This figure, then, readily recalls Narcissus, but a particularly negative, anti-social construct identified with the early twentieth-century homosexual. Even before its best-known telling in Ovid, the myth of Narcissus has carried tensions around same-sex desire. But at the end of the nineteenth century, as Steven Bruhm explains, Freud would retell it as a specifically homosexual pathology.<sup>53</sup> Doomed to desire himself until death, Narcissus is trapped in a closed loop, not a productive repetition, but a sterile reflection unanimated by difference. This concept of Narcissus was certainly the mainstream in 1911 when Grant's picture debuted; it might also have operated behind the picture's critical opposition. The corruptive power of the painting could have derived from the possibility that young working-class men would see themselves in it, as in a reflection, and be drawn into a state of sterile same-sex love.



**Figure 15.**

Duncan Grant, *Bathing* (detail), 1911, oil on canvas, 228.6 × 306.1 cm. Collection of Tate, London (N04567) Digital image courtesy of Tate Images / © Estate of Duncan Grant. All rights reserved, DACS 2016.

But what if this risk were even more subversive? What if the space in which the young men might see themselves reflected was not negative or pathologized, but positive and affirming? If we are to see the seventh swimmer as Narcissus (and it is my contention that we can), then we must rationalize his function according to Grant's own open and unashamed sexuality. There is, as mentioned earlier, an aspect of loss and sadness associated with the figure, a sort of sterile yearning that resonates with the Freudian hetero-disruptive view of Narcissus. But as Bruhm describes, Freud scrubbed Narcissus of an essential, ancient quality—his capacity for self-knowledge through aesthetic contemplation.<sup>54</sup> In the original telling of the

myth, the representative image is invested with transcendent powers, the ability to reflect personal truth back to a viewer, to provoke epiphany and a knowledge of the self.<sup>55</sup> This reading of the myth also has the effect of restoring repetition as a productive theme and redeeming Narcissus from the charge of sterility. For Deleuze, the distinction between reflection and repetition is fine, but fundamental. Reflection is “static . . . occurring by default in the concept”—that is, a matter of ordinary facts laid out for mere perception. On the other hand, repetition is “dynamic” and “affirmative, occurring by excess in the Idea”. Heterogeneous and multiplicitous, it requires interpretation and understanding; it is resistant and incommensurable; it “carries the secrets of our deaths and our lives”; it has “authenticity as its criterion”.<sup>56</sup> In other words, where reflection is fact, repetition is truth. I would suggest that Grant’s Narcissus depicts this incipient, transcendent moment of encounter with personal truth: when the figure sees, grasps, and begins to understand the Idea of himself. He is thus not a figure whose errant desires distance him from the flow of life, but one just on the cusp of embracing those desires, of being gathered by reaching hands, drawn back (with respect to Sedgwick) into the productive, affirmative repetitions of erotic time.

The erotic flows, in multiple and subtle ways, through Grant’s *Bathing*—in the sensuality of its naked male bodies and in its induction of philosophies expounding a male intimate community untrammelled by class divisions. But perhaps the painting’s most extraordinary mobilization of the erotic is in its representation of the connective tensions embedded in desire. Through a sensitive choreography of inoperative touch and carefully calibrated decorative rhythms of repetition and difference, Grant’s painting invokes a powerful atmosphere of yearning, and delivers an intensified eroticism held back from the brink of consummation. These effects are extended outwards, as it were, through the figure of the seventh bather, who operates as a link via which the viewer might apprehend himself, a transition-point into self-recognition and acceptance. Rendered almost life-size in sensuous colour and line on the wall of a public educational institution, where they were seen daily by the Polytechnic’s young working-class students, Grant’s bathers deliver a manifesto of sorts: the declaration of an intimate same-sex desiring community that is vibrant, democratic, and in harmony with nature, and an invitation to be swept up into its beckoning, sensual pleasures. A Bloomsbury homosexual agenda, celebrated in paint.

## Footnotes

- 1 Anon., *National Review* 58 (Dec. 1911), excerpted in Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*, ed. Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture (London: Published for The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 2004), 77–78; and Richard Shone, *The Art of Bloomsbury: Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant*, ed. James Beechey, Richard Morphet, Tate Gallery, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, and Yale Center for British Art (London: Tate Gallery, 1999), 148.
- 2 Simon Watney, *The Art of Duncan Grant*, ed. Quentin Bell (London: John Murray, 1990), 36.

- 3 Virginia Woolf, quoted in Frances Spalding, *Duncan Grant: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 84.
- 4 Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity*, ed. Bard Graduate Centre for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture (London: Bard Graduate Centre for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 2004), 72.
- 5 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 71.
- 6 Fry's resistance to elitist social and aesthetic norms was well established: he had recently ruffled Edwardian feathers by asserting that the viewer of Post-Impressionist painting required no prior cultural or critical training, simply an ability to "look without preconception . . . allow his senses to speak to him." See, Roger Fry, *A Roger Fry Reader*, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), 87–88.
- 7 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 72–73.
- 8 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 69, 74–75.
- 9 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 75.
- 10 Grant would produce both these formats in other contexts, the former for the French stage director Jacques Copeau, and the latter for the Omega Workshops.
- 11 Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 93–99.
- 12 Grant, letter to Strachey, 16 June 1907, quoted in Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 56.
- 13 Darren Clarke, "Duncan Grant and Charleston's Queer Arcadia", in *Queer Bloomsbury*, ed. Brenda Helt and Madelyn Detloff (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2016), 153.
- 14 Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Distributed by Viking Press, 1982), 981; 272.
- 15 Edward Carpenter, *Selected Writings*, ed. Noël Greig (London: Gay Men's Press, 1984), 200–15.
- 16 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 76.
- 17 Fry, quoted in Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 76.
- 18 Spalding, *Duncan Grant*, 335.
- 19 Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 76.
- 20 For more on this parallel, see Reed's excellent article, "Making History: The Bloomsbury Group's Construction of Aesthetic and Sexual Identity", *Journal of Homosexuality* 27, no. 1–2 (1994): 189–224.
- 21 E. M. Forster, quoted in introduction, Carpenter, *Selected Writings*, 9.
- 22 E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View*, Vintage International edn (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 148.
- 23 Robert K. Martin, in Robert K. Martin and George Piggford, eds, *Queer Forster* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997), 268.
- 24 E. M. Forster, *Maurice: A Novel* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1971), 66–69.
- 25 Forster, *Maurice*, 173.
- 26 Parminder Kaur Bakshi, *Distant Desire: Homoerotic Codes and the Subversion of the English Novel in E. M. Forster's Fiction* (New York: P. Lang, 1996), 153.
- 27 Forster, *Howards End*, 195.
- 28 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Of Being-in-Common", in *Community at Loose Ends*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Oxford, OH) (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991), 7.
- 29 Aruna D'Souza, *Cézanne's Bathers: Biography and the Erotics of Paint* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2008), 94.
- 30 Clarke, "Duncan Grant", 163.
- 31 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 5–6.
- 32 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991), 4.
- 33 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2008), 37.
- 34 Whitman, *Complete Poetry*, 197.
- 35 Michael Moon, "The Twenty-Ninth Bather: Identity, Fluidity, Gender, and Sexuality in Section 11 of 'Song of Myself'", in Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings: Authoritative Texts, Other Poetry and Prose Criticism*, ed. Michael Moon, Harold William Blodgett, and Sculley Bradley (New York: Norton, 2002), 855–63.
- 36 Moon, "The Twenty-Ninth Bather", 198.
- 37 Moon, "The Twenty-Ninth Bather", 1011.
- 38 Woolf, quoted in Brenda S. Helt, "Passionate Debates on 'Odious Subjects': Bisexuality and Woolf's Opposition to Theories of Androgyny and Sexual Identity", *Twentieth Century Literature* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 133.

- 39 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, ed. Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 170.
- 40 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 171.
- 41 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1992), 1.
- 42 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994), 19.
- 43 Watney, *Art of Duncan Grant*, 31. The experiments of Eadweard Muybridge and photographic seriality were also influential in Thomas Eakins's *The Swimming Hole*, the début of which provides a late nineteenth-century, North American example of the sort of controversy that attended male homosocial bathing scenes. See, Sidney D. Kirkpatrick, *The Revenge of Thomas Eakins* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 282–293. It is doubtful that Grant knew of Eakins's painting in 1911, given that it had been suppressed by its creator after a mere two disastrous showings in Philadelphia in 1885, the year of Grant's birth.
- 44 Clarke, "Duncan Grant", 162.
- 45 This swimsuit is an oddity, particularly since nudity was in fact a requirement in the men-only bathing area of the Serpentine. See, Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 55. Perhaps Grant's strip of bright-red cloth—a mere gist of a garment—was a late and grudging concession to propriety.
- 46 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 76.
- 47 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 25.
- 48 Indeed, even more complex permutations could arise: D1-S2-C2; D2-S1-C1; and so on.
- 49 There is some precedent here for a musical approach. In *Howards End*, Helen's experience of music is pure picture-making, as demonstrated by her interpretation of Beethoven's Fifth as a drama of heroes and goblins (Chapter V). In Grant's own artistic practice, music could be a means into abstraction, as in his *Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound* (1914)—a work, incidentally, that was the source of a drubbing Grant received from D. H. Lawrence, while Forster looked awkwardly on (Spalding, *Duncan Grant*, 167–68). And in the words of a young mechanic viewing the Polytechnic murals, "this sort of thing makes me want to whistle" (quoted in Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 79).
- 50 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 18.
- 51 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 3.
- 52 Grant, letter to Strachey, 16 June 1907, quoted in Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, 56.
- 53 Steven Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), 4–6.
- 54 Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus*, 69–71.
- 55 Shadi Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 85–86.
- 56 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 24. All subsequent quotations in this paragraph may be found at the same location.

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- Identification of the resource for consideration of removal. Providing URLs in your communication will help us locate content quickly.
- The reason for the request.

The Publishers respond promptly, normally within 21 business days. We may remove the resource from our site while we assess the validity of the request. Upon completion of the assessment, we will take appropriate action and communicate that action to you.