



PsyArt

(Un)Believable Discussion: A Hybrid Narrative of Three People Interacting in a Space between Two Adjacently-Placed Drawings

by

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Abstract

The article oscillates between fiction and reflective-academic writing concerning the dispersal of identity between three people and two visual artworks. Two drawings are seen to occupy the same studio, one of which is presented as the author's, who is also the in-text referenced artist, and the other as the work of a fictional protagonist called Morry. The article concerns a discussion between the artist, Morry, and another fictional protagonist that wavers between belief and disbelief concerning how a drawing practice may involve both the formatting and articulation of ideas of the subject. The author references the Lacanian formation of identity during early infant development, Lacan's idea of the psychical gaze, and Paul Ricoeur's idea of narrative identity through an explanation of one of the two drawings, *Self & Other*. The narrative provides a means of discussing the underlying motivation of both drawings. The question of the narrative's believability is endorsed by a quote from Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* in which a certain decline of human identity is replaced by the essay form.

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Introduction

The article is of a hybrid form, where some aspects of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory are presented in a fictional narrative in which the characters, including the article's author, do themselves variously convey interest in such theory. Insofar as the article orientates around psychoanalytical theory and its application to a semi-fictional narrative, the philosopher Rosi Braidotti (1991, p.32) refers to the "[...] foster of an ironic distancing in relation to written text: to write as if one were quoting the words of the other who inhabits oneself." The question of the other in indissoluble relation to oneself is central to the author's impulse in writing the article.

That Braidotti's 'distancing' may also align with creative writing is initially suggested in the article by reference to the twentieth-century author Robert Musil, whose own writing wavers between fiction and the *essay*. A comment by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1994, p.166) on Musil's minimally maintaining a sense of "I" of the main character Ulrich in his *Man Without Qualities*, such that the character does not disappear altogether from the text, supports the idea implicit in the text that the author is himself the *subject* of and within the writing as opposed to only its *operator*. The philosopher Alain Badiou (2022, p. 40) offers the term "operator" as distinguishable from the "[...] doctrine of the subject" – when writing in the context of the philosopher Georges Canguilhem. The idea of *subject* is therefore supported both academically and in practice through the degree to which this article is creatively written. The fact that both the author and the narrative's fictional *other* are visual artists who attempt to visualise Lacanian theory results in a conversation between the author as a subject of and cited within the narrative along with the fictional characters, naturally drifting towards a discussion of relevant Lacanian theory. By such means, the author articulates his use of Lacanian theory with his visual practice and his interest in how such theory informs his attempt to critique himself as his own subject. This hybrid form of writing enables a working out from the personally subjective, and presentation of the latter in terms that can be shared more objectively with the reader.

The article's two referenced drawings might also be viewed closely in relation to the text, especially, for example, in how the author's enunciated, and therefore eccentrically grammatical, speech is first encountered on one of the two works, with a speech-based expletive in evidence on the other work. Due to the article's use of the

characters *voices*, including the author's own as a character within the narrative, some of the commentary wavers between academic writing and the oscillation of speech within written language. The article's hybrid form enables the oscillation between psychoanalytically-focused theory and a visual practice that underpins (and is discussed theoretically through) a literary creative practice.

The Scenario

Paradoxically, what caused me to be anxious of the meeting with Morry involved the greatest artifice: this would be a story I had willed. I launched tactlessly into the space of the three of us – Morry's girlfriend, Chris, standing alert like a referee – with mention of the first volume of Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1996). After a hundred and sixty of its eight hundred pages, the novel gave me a door just sufficiently ajar to say that I was reading. Morry might have silently exhorted one of several appropriate responses learned from his employment on a market stall. Rightly, one may wonder why I began with Musil. If Morry's exhortation to this unintroduced reference were audible, I would have *crumbled* – to speak figuratively. What I mean is that Morry would have conveyed that I was referring to something without having provided any apparent context. However, the context was that earlier in the day I had written a comment to an artist friend, not directly about her own work, but concerning ideas of narrative.

What had been most useful were two references of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1994, p.149). First, he states that the Musil character Ulrich's gradual "loss of identity" corresponds with a certain reduction in literary narrative. The character steers the sense of the writing as literature towards that of the essay: can one accordingly reformulate the conventions of the article as approximation to the latter? This is a prevailing question in my approach to writing. Ricoeur's second point, which invites close comparison with time-lined visual artwork, is that what holds one's curiosity is nonetheless that "[...] the nonsubject remained one figure of the subject [...]" In this respect, "[...] 'nothing' would mean nothing at all if 'nothing' were not in fact attributed to an 'I'" (Ricoeur, 1994, p.166, citing Musil).

Unconsciously, such interest may have been to avoid or at least defer any more natural contribution of myself to the meeting. In this respect I felt at least as awkward as Morry, firstly for displacing our mutual introduction onto matters of the intellect and then for knowing what I was doing and going ahead with it, without any inclination to

broach the problem. (One might feel the same concerning such artifice involved in article-writing, where one uses various third-person strategies of self-distancing.)

My drawing now hung adjacent to Morry's, although this is not entirely accurate. This was a studio setting, and while his drawing was finished and each of four one-hundred-centimeter square sheets of handmade paper ranged to form a larger square was suspended from its respective eyelets on screws, my own work, as yet undecided, was merely stapled to the studio wall's plywood screens. The works' fixings therefore distinguished them. The material constitution of my work, however, was the same as Morry's: four equal-size handmade paper sheets but ranged to form a long length, both works involving black chalk and acrylic, Figure 1.



Figure 1: Two drawings, the image on the left attributed to Morry, the right-hand image to the narrator, in situ in Morry's attributed studio. © Michael Croft

Chris had advised the juxtaposition, suggesting that not only would the wall-space enable me to continue working on the drawing while moving out of my own studio, but bring Morry and me together through the chance to make comparison. I have to admit that Chris had worked hard to convince me of the benefits of the meeting, not least because I anticipated my lack of empathy towards someone, whether an artist or not, at least thirty years younger. Of course, Morry might have been thinking the inverse of me. However, Chris reminded me that she had only just turned thirty and she and I did not have a problem relating. I do suspect, from my perspective, that there was psychological material driving the prospect of the meeting, concerning the extent to which Morry would be the living presence of the *other* that I had projected into my drawing, with the intention of broaching the question of the conjoining of self and other

in Lacan's (1949) early theoretical speculation regarding the infant's identification with its mirror image during the period of around six to eighteen months, the so-termed 'mirror stage' (Lacan, 2004, pp.1-8). I had in mind also his concept of the prelinguistic Imaginary, and the three psychic structuring registers--Imaginary, Symbolic, Real. At least, this was the kind of story that I needed to tell myself; of little relevance to the drawing's viewer but of possible interest to a *reader* of the drawing's underlying motivational dynamics.

Morry's own drawing referenced his mother, as Chris had informed me, and I imagined that the triangular space between the two works would be pregnant with familial relationship: the evocation, through Morry's image, of my own deceased mother; a somewhat senior image of myself as Morry's counterpart; and the idea of the two of us as rival siblings, albeit separated by an extraordinary lapse of time between our mothers' pregnancies. While the implication was unconsciously regressive, conscious reflection via interest in certain theory, already suggested above, can validate one's fragmentary memory. Perhaps Chris had also read such suggestions into the juxtaposition, since she had witnessed my repeated attempts over a long period to construct a psychological narrative through several drawings.

The idea of pregnancy can imply new growth of thinking. In the architectural context, Baek (2015, p.4, citing Lavin on Otto Rank's idea, after Freud) references the significance of the birthing experience to one's sense of "spatial continuity between the inside and outside" of buildings. For Winnicott (1965, p. 43), this is the "holding" or containing environment: "[...] the term holding is used here to denote not only the actual physical 'holding' of the infant but also the total environmental provision prior to the concept of living with."

While my suggestion of possible reading of adult experience in terms of this idea is regressive, I do not mean to suggest that the triangular space between Morry's and my work will exhibit anything like the tenderness of maternal care that one ideally associates with the psychic movement from womb to the external world. Far from it; the construction of circumstances, even with a degree of declared interest in a psychical narrative, will show more of a predilection for the surreal. That I read the triangular space in bodily terms – I often work in this kind of space – will assist the movement of mental to visual-material artistic space. I am inclined to see threads between the intersecting points of interest between Morry's work and mine, as shown here in the mockup, Figure 2.

I discussed the relationship I had noticed between Morry's drawing and my own with Chris, while Morry stood at some distance behind us. This was not for just a few moments: he *performed* muteness.

"Only by being taken unaware by the shock, say, of visual difference – for instance the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*..." I was saying.

"Ah yes. It's the National Gallery painting in London," Chris interjected enthusiastically. "I know it too well, which means I've long since become indifferent to the effect. It's as if the device can only really work once."

"Exactly. From what I've read of Lacan's interpretation of the anamorphosis (Harari, 2004, pp.116-7), the distorted skull is a metaphor that, once corrected, enables one to see through the symbolically structured psychic order to the Real: the Real as a momentary opening of the unconscious. And also, apparently *tuché* – *Tuché*, goddess of chance in ancient Greek – gives one this; a take on repetition associated with recognition of the accidental (Harari, 2004, p.84)."

"Tuché then, with coincidence as its near equivalent, through my having introduced you to Morry! Let's see!" Chris enthusiastically anticipated.

"If the aim was to disturb the unitary field of the painting," I suggested, following the Lacanian reading, "the sophisticated world of the ambassadors having its metaphor in the painting's phenomenal use of geometric perspective, with insight into their – and our – mortality through the skull that throws such a world out of kilter, this happens most strongly with the anamorphic image's first realisation."

"So, it's a three-staged process, it would seem," suggested Chris. "One, a baffling smeared element already interferes with the painting's formal resolution; two, a walking away and turning back to make the discovery; then three, a return to the painting to experience an unraveling of the world's moral order through the motif of death."

"Then it closes again," I added. What you've said suggests unconscious insight to me, and also a kind of anamorphosis in the play between the words, *morality* and *mortality*, where the latter is a condition of the former."

In this respect my mother's untimely death may have imposed a sense of *moral-mortal*, so to speak, that has locked me in the early relationship in the Imaginary, in Lacan's terms, where my mother herself performs the role of the big Other. The latter being the abstract all-pervasive presence of authority ushered in by the mother in the Imaginary register, and rooted from then on in that of the Symbolic – the "code" from

which we're constituted, which, unbeknown to us, this big Other speaks through (Lacan, 2004, p.337). This fateful experience in my early teens made it a little late for an oedipal reading, unless through its blatant unfairness, as I consider it, at such an age.

"I've read of the opening and closing of the unconscious working in and through language," I continued, "as '*hiatusness*'" (Harari, 2004, pp.68-75). Nice idea, I think; a kind of ad-hoc hiccupping of the unconscious into one's speech! But this interest I have in such theory in relation to drawing can also almost have an anamorphic function; non-perspectival manifestations at least in the Lacanian psychoanalytical sense – again, from what I've read (Adams, 1996, pp.141-42). Am I making too much of this?"

"I can go along with it," Chris ventured. "In a way, we're debunking the embroiled relevance of theory in your work, inevitably distorted through its being implicated, by speaking it."

"There's certainly an awkwardness implicit in its use, like a 'stain' or blur over something that occasionally affords the merest suggestion of a different kind of insight, vanishing as soon as it appears" (Lacan, 1998, section: "OF THE GAZE AS *Objet Petit a*). In the meantime one tries to discuss around the juxtapositions' potential, rather like we're doing now. I'm intrigued by the idea of the unconscious and want access, but from the lay perspective one can really only toy with constructs. What about Morry? Does he debate in such terms?"

"He approaches his artwork more pragmatically," Chris replied. She looked across at Morry as she spoke, and felt no reason to hesitate on this point. "With this piece he wanted to apply his knowledge, recently acquired through reading, of the archaeological process of recording the results of excavations known as stratigraphy to the otherwise elusive phenomenon of depth that can be evoked by the picture plane. He researched stratigraphy; the Harris Matrix, so-termed after its inventor in 1979."

"You mean the calculations up and down the right-hand side? Oh right, they're starting to make sense now!" I strode up to the drawing and inspected the surface as I spoke, Figure 3.

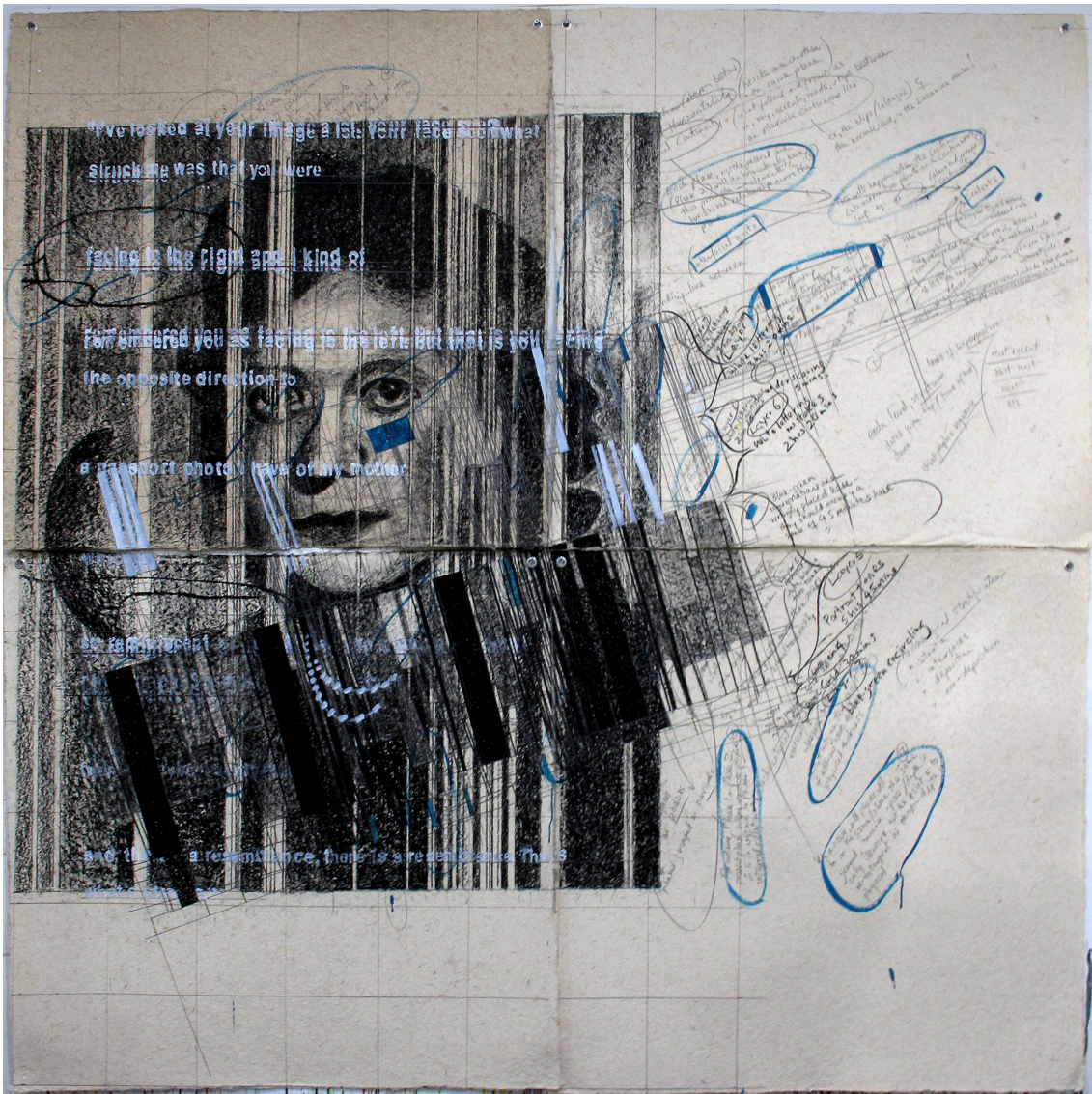


Figure 3: *Mother of Pearl*, drawing attributed to Morry. Pencil, acrylic, black chalk on four sheets of handmade paper, 200 x 200 cm. © Michael Croft

“Hence, the bars that you see below the portrait register differing depths are a physical record of time spent on each respective tone of the image where it’s been scored through. The axis drawn slightly off the horizontal,” Chris continued. “Morry has read the axis as if it were a section through actual physical depth, so the bars are a kind of side elevation of a geological interface. But where you’d probably be more interested is where he’s *exhumed*, to use his term, his mother’s pearls through the bars. It’s meant to be in the way that an archaeologist might expose a long-buried artefact.”

“Right. I can see where he’ll have erased through the black chalk. It’s maybe too small a detail to carry the weight, but I can imagine it as having emerged from an experiential process of searching. Negated somewhat by the pearls’ re-painting – I can

sense that he's done this – to make their presence strong enough aesthetically.”

“A process that has returned, then, into the drawing's elusive depth.”

“To return as to recede,” I added, while aware that Morry was off-stage, as it were, leafing through a sketchbook taken from shelves. A performance, I might have considered, of Morry, of the aesthetic tension amidst push and pull; considered psychologically, a tendency towards diffidence; why he couldn't have joined in. But on the other hand, Chris and I would not then have had the space for quite the same conversation.

“I'm reminded of a tie, a knitted bottle-green one then in fashion, which I was considering buying after a trip into the local town around the time of my mother's final moments in hospital, all of fifty years ago. It may even have been the exact time. Does that sound extraordinary?”

“But another instance of archaeology,” Chris ventured. “How does it relate?”

“I'm thinking of threads that link the eyes between the two drawings (see Figure 2), obfuscating the visuality of their gaze. It's my issue – nothing to do with whatever Morry's may be – projected into the space, so this physical situation, certain conventions of its perception of which we all share, becomes individually subjective. The metaphorical stain or decoy in Lacan that places something *other* in the field of one's vision (Harari, 2004, pp.119-40) is in this case the tie allusion. But this is also misleading. It's not a tie in the literal sense but the idea of its structure. I might say *umbilical*, not so much of myself as the still-birth of my older brother five years before me, and my mother would surely have drawn threads of that experience through to me; a substitute, in a sense, a stand-in.”

“A stand-in?” asked Chris.

“Whatever were my mother's expectations of me, and I guess from what I could glean of them, and perform.”

“You say it with certainty, even as a guess.”

“Yes, I admit there's invention, though based on a reasonable correlation between what I heard then and know now. Anyway, just to return to this question of the gaze, if we've not still been talking about it. The gaze of Morry's mother out from his drawing has connected with my own gaze reflected out from mine, and the threads that I imagine, which recall to mind the tie, then impair their clarity. The resulting blur recalls not only the tie but its surrounding history as well. It's an artificial example, of course, but if it had spontaneously and originally occurred it would perhaps have been an

irruption into perception of the unconscious, and my unraveling of it in the manner of the anamorphic process.”

“Is it desire you’re talking about? There’s something obfuscating, as you term it, in my relationship with Morry,” Chris confessed, “rather fleshy, actually, but that’s a personal matter; the stuff that goes on between lovers.”

Chris again looked towards her lover. Morry had since returned to within an arm’s length of my drawing. I appreciated his newfound curiosity, at least through the intervention of his body in the space. Whether he was listening, Chris and I could have no idea. There was an anomaly, however, in the strident manner in which Morry was now pressing the clear plastic that covered the first and second panels that had enabled me to work over the top of the drawing with oil paint, the better to see the content underneath. The unwitting passivity of his neck, with its Mannerist sleekness, spoke his reluctance to participate.

“The object *a* – you know the term, right?” I addressed this to Chris.

“Lacan’s object-cause of desire, which is a displacement of the actual origin of desire in oneself that’s established very early on in the mother-child relationship, manifests as each of the instinctual drives; oral, anal, scopic, invocatory!” Chris announced (Harari, 2004, p.108). “I actually mean that I attended a seminar on this at college. It’s more difficult to key into this as a woman though – at least, in my opinion – but I do remember the theory.”

“You remember it well then, for someone who didn’t take to it! Gender apart – although I suppose we cannot really ignore the connection of sexual orientation with the drives – in Lacan the gaze is not only about seeing. What you unconsciously notice looking back at you will not be confined to others’ eyes, as such; any object, its texture, inflection or other characteristics, may just as likely return the gaze. There’s a beautiful example of the embroiling of the gaze with desire provided by Lacan (2014, p.228) in his Seminar X, *Anxiety*, where, due to the continuity of hands-on worship by nuns, the eyes of a wooden Budha statue have through the centuries disappeared, yet in the hearts of the devotees the statue still reflects back the invested radiance – and this in the context of what I recall reading as *indeterminacy* of sex.

“I’d need to think about this from my own perspective. Don’t worry though. I appreciate that you can only debate this from your side, your assumed relevance of sex and gender being part of your argument.”

“Well, I’ll have to self-reference even more now! I’m thinking of how, as early

as around five, I'd sit in front of a commercial reproduction of a popular portrait, *Miss Wong*, by Vladimir Tretchikov (1950), that hung above the fireplace in the living room; itself a metaphor for me, no doubt, for where and how to locate desire. I'd draw it; copy it. I recently looked at the picture on the Internet and spoke my thoughts about it into a voice recorder. The main point that I made was that this Asian face imbued with green light, and the fall of her hair, must have reflected something of my mother, the copying an attempt to – I want to say *restitute* but that might mean something like compensate – bring forth the latter at the time that the psychical process was engineering the necessary split. Sounds bizarre, I know, as you'll probably agree, when psychoanalytical theory is subject to lay interpretation, but it does seem to conceptualize what's otherwise assumed as imponderable. Specifically, what I want to say though.... Can I read it to you?"

Chris's smile, an assumed yes, returned something of my mother's.

"I might not be much of a substitute for Miss Wong," Chris said, "but somehow, I'm not too unlike Morry's mum in appearance. I was going to correct myself by saying that Morry makes me feel this, but, heaven forbid, there might be a sense that I *want* to so feel."

She had muffled what might otherwise have been an exclamation, and looked towards Morry, who was still inspecting the drawing's surface. This, Chris seemed to confer, was how the gaze worked: it was as much to do with evocations within language. Morry might in this sense have prompted the comment, through the back of his head.

"*Remember that I used to sit looking at you,*" I read from a notebook, mimicking the enunciation that I had formatted in and as the text. This was an interest of mine; to transcribe speech in such terms that conveyed idiosyncrasies of enunciation, resulting in irregular punctuation, ellipses that should signify long pauses, word-breaks, and portmanteau words and phrases. To read such transcript back to oneself, or to another, re-regularised it as speech, in a sense, whereas it appeared on the page as bizarre flouting of textual convention. "...*to draw you,*" I continued, then, performing the forthcoming ellipse by pausing, "... *and that behind you there's the texture, well, the illusion of texture . . . which . . . is repeated in the upholstery of the sofa and the armchairs. I'm sure my mother would have thought of that the correlation . . . between the . . . background of you . . . and the upholstery of the . . . suite of furniture.*"

I looked up at Chris to be sure that I still had her attention. She was looking

straight at me, however, as if eager to add some detail of her own.

“I’m addressing this to Miss Wong,” I continued. “I’ve written this underneath the transcript. The pauses I’m making might seem artificial, but these are as transposed from my recorded speech. I’m suggesting that while sitting on the sofa that bore the same upholstery as the portrait’s background texture I would, through the metaphor of this physical midway, have been immersed in a psychical process whose aesthetic resonance was through lines, forms and contours of an image that may have contributed to the structuring of my forthcoming adult world. So, the gaze, I might wonder, is in this case the power of the “correlation”; of being caught in the middle. Further to the question of *middle*, Žizek implies that the oedipal crisis is more of a stand-off than ever getting resolved, due to how our identities oscillate between what he refers to as at-once “psychological” and ‘symbolic” – where the symbolic is *us*, as mediums of the Other (Žizek (2006, p.34). While my *copying* the image would mean only graphic realism, one may imagine me as though turned around with the texture on which I was sitting and projected out from the portrait *as* the selfsame portrait. There’s also something anamorphic suggested by this, albeit grotesque: via the correlation of the texture of the sofa under and behind me with the selfsame that’s the backdrop of Miss Wong, I become my mother through identifying with this surrogate image.

“So, the anamorphosis is the texture that, in its noticing, swings you round and mirrors you as your own desirous projection back from the painting?”

“Something like that: correlation; an inaugural streak back to the earliest relationship, such regression of which was concretised only a few years later by my mother’s death. I might go so far as to suggest that I sensed the latter coming.”

“And there’s another correlation, you know!” Chris exclaimed. “I’m increasingly convinced that I’m right to bring you and Morry together. You may not have noticed, but read the white stenciled lettering on Morry’s drawing across his mother’s face.”

We approached the drawing and I read aloud the irregularly written text, which conveyed the enunciation of speech, albeit a fairly disfluent instance that easily passed for my own.

“I’ve looked at your image a lot. What struck me was that you were . . . facing to the right and, I kind of . . . remembered you as facing to the left. But that is you facing the opposite direction to . . . a passport photo I have of my mother . . . which is . . . most reminiscent of you. At her age a young passport photograph. She must have been . . .

about . . . twenty maybe twenty-two . . . and there's a resemblance, there is a resemblance. That's what's strange."

"In the exact style of your own example," Chris retorted, "Tuché! Morry has conflated whoever this commentary is addressed to, with his mother's passport image; debunked it through indexing its surface by forcing a linguistic reference, evidently to someone else, to fit with the visual. I believe I mentioned to you that Morry's mum dresses 50s," and he correlates this with me, to use your term, since, as you see, I also go for the retro look."

Starting in again with Morry

Morry's presence as if he were an audience member of a lecture delivered by me, albeit as one of only two people since Chris would also be there, would re-orientate him.

Chris, I felt I already knew as a friend. Who *she* was had stabilised. Several days had passed since we had agreed the idea, and I had set up a projector angled to the shallow gap between the base of my drawing and the studio floor and laid cushions. The arrangement attested to a need to communicate and empathise.

When Morry arrived, he had not the slightest resemblance to a Holbein ambassador, I mused. I had suspected as much when I learned that he worked on a stall at a local fresh market; *who*, rather than *how*, he would be, as my desire to wonder had diminished over the years. Certainly, no Maurice: I sided with him on his determination, as explained to me by Chris, to have shed his proper name. A *Morry*, however, would hardly be a lumpen oaf! The more I dwelt on the prospect of meeting him, the more my expectations might be said to have orientated around a look from him, unwittingly, that would register with me. His drawing seems older though, than him, with its stratified depth, though that may be a metaphor that would increase his endearment.

Morry had a propensity for sport and, as Chris had informed me earlier, a supportive family; prerequisites ill-established in my own neighbourhood, so to speak. In any case it was too late; the propensity of desire to want both to *have* and *be* another idealised person had also all but gone. However, to look on what might-have-been through the still-incongruous magnetism of the gaze forever rekindled memories. The cushions were not of immediate use, and we paced around them as if they signified an ordained space.

"You're looking at a work that may not be finished"; I addressed both Chris and Morry. "This is a problem insofar as what has interested me about it, or, more than this,

provided the rationale of the whole operation, is now conflated by the drawing's matrix of marks, gestures, vestiges and traces that have occurred over time. There is, as it were, a topmost skin, the final period of working, but even this is impossible to discern except in reproduction, since I record every move I make. The photos and texts that I write not only track the development of the drawing over time, but also articulate my life in relation to the work's process and to it as a form of life."

"And we're working on the *kind* of life," replied Chris. "It's quite poignant, actually, this idea of a relationship with the deceased lived through a form of constantly indexing – scratch, rub, tear, smear, indication of the odd slap, stretching through time."

I had warmed to Chris and was loving her for her empathy delivered with just sufficient parody that I myself brought to the situation; the reason I never totally believed in what I was doing. Morry was standing near us, but was quiet.

"However, while I'm suggesting that I'm interested in the performative requirement of drawing – what happens while it's being made – I wouldn't wish to rationalise the process as performative itself. So, I've caught it." I then turned and looked at Chris that she might better sense the gratitude I wished to convey: "You know, without your gentle interventions of understanding, I might have concluded this conversation by suggesting that I couldn't really expect you to be interested in such speculation on the question of roots of the drawing that were so far away from it in time."

"Actually, sorry if this may be a little deflating," Chris added as her own force of finish, "but I'm not sure that I am interested, as such. You've shown where you're coming from with your work, and it's a singular and private association. I was going to say *obsession*, but it's probably nothing as passionate as that, just what hangs around you. Don't get me wrong on this, but you kind of died with your mother. I'm seeing an aggressive sort of morbidity in this work, as if you're struggling to come back. Maybe your idea of restitution *is* right. While resigned to where you are, you're compensating."

There were several moments' silence while Chris reflected. She eventually stepped back into the fray, more on Morry's behalf than her own in this respect, to ask *how* I work. Morry might have viewed drawing, as indeed many other art forms, as a pursuit that succeeded or failed on the basis of its outcomes. This is not to say that his process was not also *involved*, but it is of the nature of the reflexive to be mute until one steps out of its constituent subjectivity and looks back. Then one turns around, as it were, and becomes the other of oneself in terms that are useful critique of the intuitive

basis of reflexivity that occasionally results in the production of magical forms.

Can one really expect an activity such as drawing to be metaphorical of personal story, the mute motivation often unknown even to oneself? Both Chris and Morry would probably have said no, except as a consequence of conversation that has more to do with the *person* of the work than the visual-material agency. What I would admit to, is my belief in the primary significance of the gaze that can permeate objects and one's relationship to them indeterminately.

“Well, what drives drawing?” I asked as my own invitation to reply. “If you consider that the investment of the personal in the activity is a prerequisite of involvement, then what drives it is a matter of degree. Paradoxically, the more the layers of my drawings accrue, the closer the delving into the psychic domain; at least, this is how I've conceived of the activity, supported if not confirmed by theory.”

Take it or leave it, in this sense, given that visual-material works can of course be read in terms other than psychical. Chris covered another pause that had drifted into silence with a bold statement that she enjoyed the autonomy of artwork; that whatever it had to say was as much up to the dialogue to be had between the artwork and the viewer, as opposed to being a mere conduit of the artist's intentions. Although, she added, Derrida's deconstruction and its indebtedness to the unconscious had revealed the complexity of the notion of intentionality.

What Chris had said conferred with references of Raoul Moati to Derrida:

The sign is detachable from the locutionary presence that sends it at the present moment of the act of communication. This means that the context of the communication's initial inscription (presence of the sender, existence of the receiver) does not exhaust the capacities of signs thus deployed to produce new meanings: the signs may repeat themselves in circumstances that are no longer those of the initial act of communication. The sign will find itself detached from its original “intended meaning” and thus from the subjective will that animated it contextually; it will continue to exist nonetheless graphically in the form of a trace. (2014, p.40)

The only difference, perhaps, with what Chris had said, is that the “detachability” of the sign from any intended meaning does not seem to be a choice: it happens anyway. What is interesting, however, concerns the question of the magnitude of the trace in such communication. On one level, trace may be interpreted as the visual-

material vestiges of previous moves remaining only artlessly visible by, in a sense, what they leave behind of themselves. However, in the Derrida sense, as explained by Moati, a trace is a remnant of intended meaning – shelving, for the time being, the unconscious meaning of trace in the theories of Freud and Lacan.

I referred Chris and Morry both to the first two panels underneath the clear plastic, explaining that the phrase “scuffing the ground” together with the word “self” are written onto an aggravated surface caused by erasure of previous layers on the loosely woven paper of the first panel. Then, the word “other” in relation to the second part of the phrase “smoothly” is written onto the tighter weave of the paper of the second panel, where erasure is not so noticed. The idea, I continued, had been to form an analogy to Lacan’s self & other dialectic, whereby the *self* side of the equation is felt as uncoordinated and fragmented compared with the *other* side of it, the visible or specular mirror image, which is viewed as even and unified. (And of course, glass alone can do this; pull together disparate and disjointed surfaces and gestures, which is how, arguably, one experiences the glazed works of the twentieth century painter Francis Bacon.) The combination of the two sides results in alienation, of which one’s identity is constituted in the psychical sense – implying the relevance of the mirror stage theory in this respect (see theoretical references, above). This, I said, was what I had been trying to visualise as the first two panels of the drawing, with the dialectical outcome represented by the physical split between the two sides, over which I first of all visualised a hand-held notebook with blank pages. At this point I did need the slides, Figure 4.

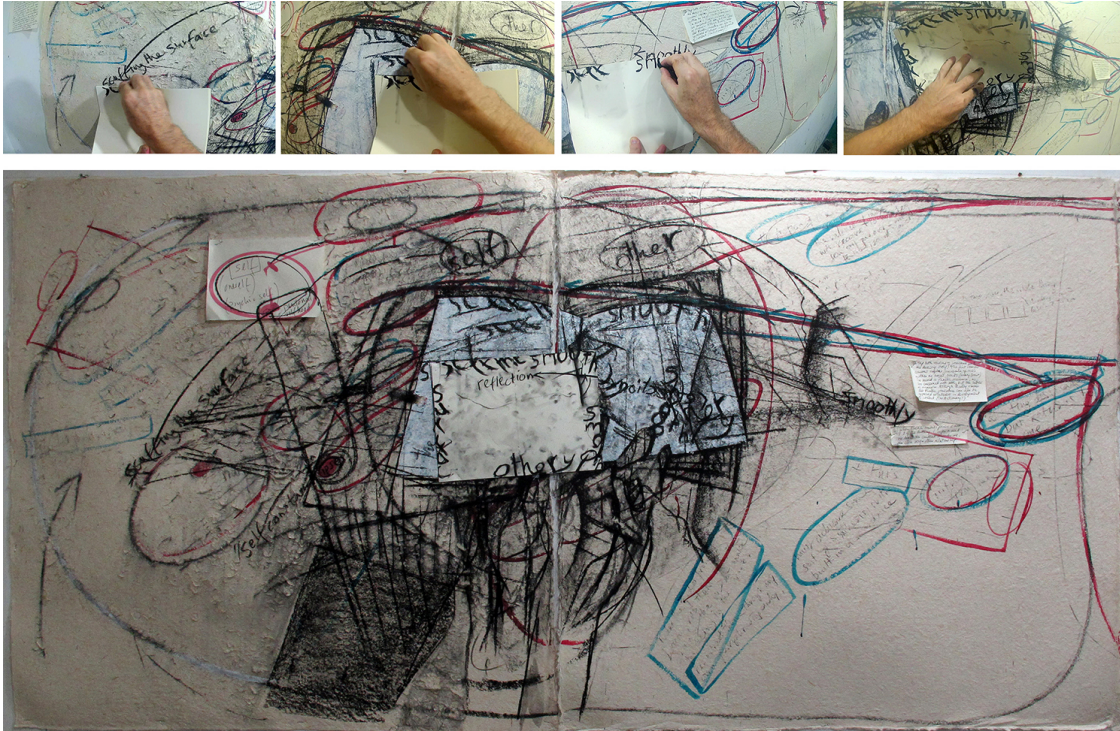


Figure 4: Section of the drawing attributed to the narrator, *Self & Other*, in progress and screenshots from a video of the author working on the same section. © Michael Croft

“Just a thought,” I added, “but the notebook page papers the crack, like the unity of which we delude ourselves as being constituted.”

The writing both iterates the nature of that to which it refers, a scuffed surface on one side and a smooth surface on the other, and visualises the autonomous character of the paper ground. The writing, in a sense, *writes* its own conditions. One may interpret the interaction of the ground, the paper itself, with the text and what it purports to say as a form of unconscious that works variously for and against one’s conscious intentions. Moati on Derrida’s theory of *différance* is useful in this respect. According to Moati (2014, p.106), “For Derrida, the alterity of consciousness must be recognised as a phenomenon internal to consciousness and implied by the precedence of iterability over presence.” In the context of the drawing, this suggests that the terms by which I have described the above example, the complementary rough and smooth, may be discernible to the viewer with or without explanation; in effect, with or without my presence. Whatever is the story has been necessarily abstracted. According to Moati (2014, p.106), Derrida is critical of Freud’s idea of the unconscious in a binary opposition with consciousness. The unconscious in Derrida’s theory concerns a “...profound movement of *différance*, which subverts the conscious ego and its

intentional services *from the inside*, without adding itself onto the ego from the outside as a distinct instance.”

I take the Derrida quote to mean that the unconscious has a kind of autonomy that can collude with iteration, which variably asserts its dynamic interference to the reader-viewer as its initiating human agent. This is useful to the prospect of distancing oneself from one’s work: to give the circumstances over to the work itself. Braidotti (1991, p.23) states that it is “[...] on the level of enunciation that the subject exists, but will always exist, that is, will always be decentred and not a total and abstract unity.” (If this is emphatically the case, then the argument of the present article is an example in practice, theoretically argued, of such decentring.)

In the erasing example, I knew that the action would give me a certain effect – I had had to wet the paper surface first to aid the process – but there is a sense in which, once the conditions are in place, the process does itself, not merely decentres me but dislocates from whatever was my understanding of what I was doing. The Derrida references suggest that the medium almost has its own unconscious, due to there being a certain lassitude for diverse interpretation of the ambiguity of one’s intentions. This bears some relation to the already referenced “code of the Other” (Lacan, 2004, p.337), which, in such code’s insistence, may obfuscate meaning, while language can also manifest in and through other mediums as pseudo-language, such as that of the visual medium.

Morry stepped across the cushions and placed himself between them and the kind of psychological space I was suggesting that the first and second panels intimated as being the dualistic foundations of the self. He then moved across, as if to subvert this reading with an attraction – not so much intended as involuntarily induced, as if by a magnet – towards the references to the Other that I had established on the fourth panel. He stopped, however, at panel three and gestured a little above his own height – Morry’s more physical version of collusion – to where I had encircled and painted what I meant to be the back of my head in crimson. This colour then reached outwards, in effect, and across the entire drawing plane. It was as if this were the indexing of my presence, along with more figural associations and the intermingling of the impulse with the black, which, on the clear plastic, I had physically smeared towards this central point on the third panel, Figure 5.



Figure 5: *Self & Other*, drawing attributed to the narrator. Pencil, acrylic, black chalk, clear plastic overlay, black oil paint on four sheets of handmade paper, 400 x 100 cm. © Michael Croft

This crimson shape was, in effect, Ricoeur’s (1994, p.53) “[...] zero point in relation to which all other points become near or far,” and Ricoeur continues that “[...] the use of ‘here’ in conversation implies a minimum topographical knowledge, thanks to which I can situate my ‘here’ in relation to a system of coordinates [...]” While it is obviously not language that is being spoken, Morry had intuited a type of pseudo-conversation that I’d been having with the drawing. I had scrawled the word *fist* on the far-left panel, and next to that in brackets the term *lapsus* to imply that *fist* had perhaps been a slip of the tongue transcribed as text, and then on the far right a close observer may deduce the word *first*, the letters drawn schematically to suppress any subjective sense. Morry sensed the pulling from the left, mimicked the gestures involved, and, equally, understood that whatever was gestured across to the middle should then be pushed towards the fourth panel. The Lacanian idea, expressed on panels one and two, I considered to intermingle with Ricoeur’s (1994, p.165) use of *ipse*, the basis of identity in self-constancy, and the latter’s pulling across through the movement termed by Ricoeur (1994, pp.165-66) “narrative identity” was propelled towards the *idem* of identity on the right as a more public notion concerning character. Hence, the suppressing of the subjective. Likewise, there was a rough intermingling, as I conceived it, with the Lacanian idea of the authoritative Other, no less rooted in oneself but identified as though indefinite instances of the external.

I projected a digital mockup of the drawing’s layout onto the screen in readiness to explain the idea to my *real-life* reader-viewers, Figure 6.

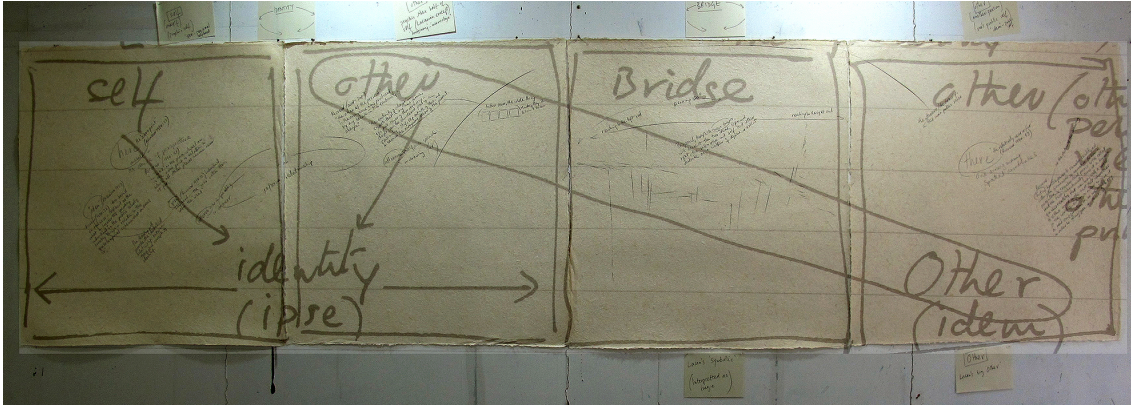


Figure 6: Digital photo-collage mockup to show where ideas from Lacan and Ricoeur would be referenced across the drawing, *Self & Other*, attributed to the narrator. © Michael Croft

It was useful to point out to Chris and Morry, as a dichotomy that had largely been explored through our triangular participation in the intervening space, itself an example of “narrative identity,” that while the conceptual intention of Morry’s drawing was to pull the inwards penetration of the plane out and re-conceive it as a sectional interface using the schema of the Harris Matrix, in my own drawing such dynamics stretched laterally through as much as I could establish of my physical presence inside the drawing’s space. Morry had mimicked this as the *other*, unwittingly, or perhaps with more awareness than I was inclined to acknowledge, which I had had to imagine of myself as also *inhabiting* my drawing. The crimson-coloured silhouette can easily be considered, and not necessarily mistaken for, any other person’s head.

Conclusion

The author here returns to the position of the Badiou-referenced *operator* of and in relation to what he has written. Several new references have been brought in since the article’s earlier drafts to update the discussion, though not necessarily with later recent theory so much as more recent reading. What *is* apparent is that the theoretical orientation of the article is around a relatively early question in Lacanian theory, of threading through the Imaginary via the specular other, all eyes and sense of eyes of which connect across the space of the two drawings, as shown in Figure 2. References to the object *a*, however, which also occur in the article, are towards a more radical non-visible sense of the other: Morry viewed through a more mature lens, as it were, where any desirous implication of him in relation to the author has diminished over time. This

is not to say that desire is no longer there so much as has internalised, rather like the example of the nuns in relation to their Buddha whose seeing eyes they had long since rubbed away, to paradoxically exist, in the context of the Braidotti reference, as decentred from any unity. It is appropriate, in this respect, that the author should be commenting on the article some time after having written its early drafts.

The *seemwhat*, of the face that was said to have struck the author – arguably a rather beautiful portmanteau word in its context – might be the non-visible but compelling object *a* that orients in the immediate next phrases of the transcript as the anomalous gap in the one face looking in two different directions. The author states that his last experience of his mother was some fifty years ago, where he would now have to add at least another eight years to that figure, during which time his reading of Lacan has accompanied his advancing age towards the later period of Lacan’s work; preoccupation with the object *a* and the unconscious as Real. The *seemwhat* may now be argued in the context of decentring, dislocating, existing of the subject with an increasingly weaker link to the mother, and hence, arguably, desire as a weaker compulsion in general. Braidotti (1991, p.30) states: “Insofar as everyone’s first perceptual object or horizon is the mother, thinking is also the gesture which allows one to rationalize both her presence and her absence.” The conversation between the author and Chris, and the work attributed to Morry (see Figure 3), consistently concerns the mother, and this in relation to desire. Again, according to Braidotti (ibid, p.30), thought orients around and “[...] gives meaning to, the absence of the desired object.”

The author wrote the following in an earlier draft of the article: *If Morry were a visitor to an exhibition in which my drawing featured (see Figure 5), there is not of course any clear indication in the drawing that would compel viewers to look around about them for such a human comparison. Yet, Morry would merely have needed to be of a certain type for me to notice him, as if having climbed into the work’s space to occupy, looking back at me, the distant vicinity of my own crimson-coloured silhouette. This is the domain of the specular other – and the author might add to this that a figure such as Morry has, arguably, for him been a surrogate for the originary lost object. From the author’s present subjective position, the silhouette in the drawing might oscillate vaguely between a possible mirror image and a mannequin’s featureless head – the latter of which presently occupies his studio – which has on its fabric face a tiny tear – as in rip, although allusion to an eye’s tear is not inappropriate. The point is that the characteristics of both images are ordinarily beneath one’s notice, each reading of which*

stems from Lacan's developing theory of the gaze.

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