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Erotic Responsiveness:
An Ethics of Auto/Biographical Art-Writing

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement of the Ph.D. in Visual Cultures,
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I, Diana Georgiou, declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between auto/biographical art-writing and subjectivity by analysing the work of contemporary writers and poets. I frame art-writing as a psychophysical process that generates an erotic response to artwork. Through this framing, I develop an ethics of auto/biographical art-writing drawing from models of subjectivity that follow a relational ontology. I turn to feminist theories of affect and psychoanalysis as critical methodologies to invent an exploration of subjectivity catalyzed by the process of auto/biographical art-writing. For affect theory, I am mainly informed by philosopher and social-political theorist Teresa Brennan's conceptualisation of affect as the physical transmission of energy between individuals and groups. The main psychoanalytic framework I employ draws from psychoanalyst, artist and theorist Bracha L. Ettinger's conceptualisation of a Matrixial psychoanalysis that highlights the 'nonconscious' dimension of affect and aesthetics, amongst other important psychoanalytic developments. For the term 'auto/biography' I turn to feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who proposes that the individual is essentially relational, co-affected and achieves temporary unity through hearing their life-story narrated by an other person. For the purposes of this research, auto/biographical narratives illustrate the singularity and uniqueness of the encounter between the artwork and the storyteller. I argue that personal memory and nonconscious activity create the conditions for an erotic response to an artwork's ethical demand for what Teresa Brennan calls 'living attention.' That is, the dynamic exchange of affects and energy whose economy is primarily nonconscious, life-driven (Eros), and imprints subjectivity at the start of psychic life (pre-natal). By combining the theoretical advances of these three authors, I formulate a distinct model of relating to aesthetic experience and ensuing auto/biographical art-writing which I term *erotic responsiveness*. Following an analysis of writing by authors who employ auto/biographical methodologies to convey their aesthetic experiences, this research develops a broader framework for contemporary critical thinking about personal narratives, their uses in art-writing, and how they inform subjectivity.

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In the early days, Petra Kubisova has been largely responsible for dismantling my resistance to the maternal. Encountering her artwork was proof of the unsuitability of existing theories to approach artworks that raise questions of female embodiment, maternal agency and expanded photography. After a cocktail consisting of punctums and traces, loss and mourning, oblivion and forgetfulness, I came to terms with Bracha L. Ettinger's Matrixial universe.

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INTRODUCTION



Fig. 1 Nicola Hunter in the book *Beneath the Shadows the Soul Walks* (2012).
Photo by Predrag Pajdic.

As critics, what are our responsibilities toward work that quite literally takes us out of our comfort zone, and toward the audiences who seek out these experiences?

– Jennifer Doyle¹

To access a tattoo parlor in East London, we walked through a narrow corridor by an organic store. Predrag whizzed out of a corner, a foot taller than the first time I met him, teetering aristocratically on unearthly stilettos. His makeup and suit impeccable and at odds with the ungovernable glass of wine in his hand that greeted you with a cataclysmic joy. “You’re going to love this...” he purred into my ear whilst ushering the audience into the hot and crowded rooms.

¹ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 5.

I met Predrag Pajdic a few months ago at a day conference at the Freud museum. We discussed trauma, pain, self-harm, psychoanalysis and spirituality in relation to art more broadly and how it figures in performance art more specifically. Based on our very brief but dense exchange, Predrag insisted that I attend his forthcoming book launch. He was confident that it would elaborate on the two points that we agreed on: firstly, that there is a lack of spirituality being discussed theoretically and that this is a fundamental loss for ritualistic performances that



Fig. 2 Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665).

explore trauma and self-harm; secondly, that psychoanalysis is a stale framework for exploring the sexualities and genders of our immediate milieu and is in need of an urgent reconfiguration. Talking to such a loquacious and animated conversationalist makes it difficult to discern whether our thoughts were actually in sync, or if we were drawn to each other in that all too strange yet familiar way of finding yourself face to face with the only other queer child in a room full of “serious” folk. Difference in affective solidarity. That was how I logically understood the concept of queer.

At the tattoo parlour I spotted the table with copies of his new book. A collection of portrait photographs taken at the break of dawn were accompanied by the poetry of JL Nash. The images were vibrant, too vivid to be real, too saturated for dawn. There were prosthetic wings, extravagant props, butterflies, furs, tattooed figures posing as erotic, mythological creatures garnished in flowers. “Too fashionable,” I thought to myself. I was resentful in my queer solidarity for I didn’t feel that this oeuvre fulfilled the promise of our spiritual and psychoanalytic campaign. I had to accept that this is not what Predrag was doing in his book and I



Fig. 3 Johannes Evers, *Male Gaze* (2011). Image still from performance from video.

wondered whether his claim was simply my own projected desire. A desire to flip book pages that would conjure what Kathy O'Dell terms the "contracted partner". O'Dell contends that documentation of performance art offers the possibility of both a visual and haptic engagement because 'encountering the shared ontology of the body makes the viewer mindful of his or her own physical presence as witness to the pictured event.'² Yet, our haptic experience is selective and often adventitious. Some images will affect more than others. Flipping the pages of *Beneath the Shadows the Soul Walks* I was arrested by the penetrating gaze of Nicola Hunter [fig. 1].³ Even though I had never come across her work, there was something familiar about this image that compelled me to pause and engage. Her nude back straight, yet uncomfortably twisted to stare at you with the type of look that authorises a transaction, a gaze that implores your haptic senses. I am familiar with this pose. From Johannes Vermeer's painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665) [fig. 2] to the video *Male Gaze* (2011) [fig. 3] by Johannes Evers. A pose loaded with an illicit provocation while dangerously eliciting intimacy. Hunter's portrait was accompanied by a cautionary riddle crafted by the poet J.L. Nash that spoke volumes of broken promises:

*How easy it was to forgive every human
Failing except yours and in the aftermath
Of all that I feared I found
Your mask upon the counterpane*

You were reluctant to wear it in bed⁴

² O'Dell addresses how photographic documentation of masochistic and ephemeral practices such as performance art may create a relationship of identification through a visual-haptic engagement. The viewer/reader, of either the live work or the documentation, becomes a partner in a "contract" with predetermined terms. O'Dell argues that in the case of performance art, the contract of engagement, entails a psychodynamic return to 'the domestic site, the home, where identities are first formulated.' See Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 13-16.

³ Nicola Hunter was formerly known as Nicola Canavan.

⁴ Predrag Pajdic and JL Nash, eds. *Beneath the Shadows the Soul Walks* (UK & Australia: The Pandorian, 2012).

“I hope you’re standing comfortably!” Predrag exclaimed while cautioning the eclectic crowd to open up and make room for the next act. The stuffy, sweaty room unfolded like a wallpaper of bodies pressed against each other and pasted onto the walls. Nicola Hunter appeared wearing a pearl-coloured bridal gown and white lilies on her head [fig. 4]. Her every step a graceful calculation of those who have learnt to walk on water after having walked on eggshells. Silent, agile and disarming: a fox in a chicken coop. Despite my reservations, I was struggling to remain unaffected by the work. I felt seduced – drawn to her and her every gesture – an attraction that felt familiar. I recognized her footsteps. I have a memory of the barely audible click of the ankle, toes that spread into a sturdy lightness as if caressing the marble floor. I could almost hear her heels releasing a soothing maternal “shhh...” at every gentle squeeze. Now I recall, the thief that broke into my heart walked this way: with a lullaby at her soles and a passionate lily-scented heart. *She was reluctant to wear it in bed...*

I felt the need to protect myself. Unable to move in the crowded room, my only defense came in the form of critical, fierce, icepick irises contracting. As much as I wanted to remain indifferent, so much more I felt the urge to caress the protrusions of the hexagonal lily-hearts gracing her head. She then raised her right arm, majestically, towards her head. Fingers like snake-shaped pearls made an incestuous entry into the heart of a lily in/on her head. With a stoic execution that resembled an orchestra conductor she released the first flower. Then a few subtle flicks of the wrist and the headband of lilies descended into a pizzicato of bloody strings embellishing her face, dripping into a velvety baroque pattern on her heaving breast.

“I’m not feeling well,” I whispered to my partner as I watched the body-plastered walls fade to black. I don’t recall how I was escorted out. I found myself in the organic store, sipping chocolate soya, eyes protracted, absorbing the slowly diminishing black spots in my vision that were starting to reveal a marble floor.

“You’re so pale, we need to get you something to eat. What would you like?” my partner asked.

“Steak,” I replied. “Rare, raw, blue.”



Fig. 4 Nicola Hunter, *Beneath the Shadows the Soul Walks* (2012). Photo Marco Berardi.

Methodology

My experience of Hunter's performance struck a very personal chord. There was something unbearable for me to sustain. To such an extent, that my body gave up during the experience. Almost as a way to protect me from the insufferable sight and what it infolded on a nonconscious level. The term 'nonconscious' is distinct from the general understanding of the 'unconscious'. The differentiation is, broadly speaking, the idea that there is a psychic stratification which is not exactly the result of repression.⁵ Prior to cognition and symbolization, the artist and psychoanalyst-theorist Bracha L. Ettinger theorizes nonconscious affects as non-representational aesthetic registers that arouse our primordial psychophysical and affective experience.⁶

This nonconscious affective experience foregrounds the theoretical approach to this project prior to any engagement with the socio-political issues and formal characteristics of the artwork and art-writing. Throughout the thesis, I use the term 'art-writing' or the phrase 'writing *with* art' interchangeably, and I set these terms as distinct from the general field of writing *about* art. I explore how writers who respond to artwork through auto/biographical art-writing are engaging in a creative practice that involves an erotic response to an artwork's ethical demand for living attention: a physical, psychic and mental response to an encounter. The term 'living attention' belongs to the feminist philosopher and social-political theorist Teresa

⁵ I am indebted to Dr. Tina Kinsella for conversations *with* Ettinger's theories and the 'nonconscious' that ran well into the night in Utrecht and Dublin and through email correspondence. Kinsella notes that in Ettinger's theoretical work the nonconscious refers to affects that are aesthetic and may be brought into symbolisation in non-representational ways and not solely through metonymy following repression. Tina Kinsella, email to Diana Georgiou, 23 January 2015.

⁶ Ettinger explicates how 'matrixial co-affectation is a transgression of affect' in that it is the process by which aesthetic affects can awaken archaic affects. See Bracha L. Ettinger, "The Heimlich (1997)," in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 159.

Brennan who conceptualizes affect as the physical and energetic transmission of psychic states between individuals.⁷ Brennan's conceptualization facilitates an understanding of subjectivity as relational and co-affected by external agents. For Brennan, the physical experience of affects is foregrounded as a significant factor of the subject's sense of self through an understanding of how affects require a deployment of *psychophysical* energy.⁸

This research on art-writing will address why critical engagement with aesthetics necessitates a conceptual framework that considers how such psychophysical responses make their way into auto/biographical narratives. By stressing how art-writing reveals a corresponding embodiment, I argue that an auto/biographical response to an artwork simultaneously conveys and informs the life experience of the writer as well as the story of the work. The neologism auto/biography has a specific meaning in this context. It is meant to convey both biography and autobiography in a single word. But it is also a conceptual framework defined by the feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero as the desire rooted in each individual to hear their life story, the uniqueness of 'who' they are, narrated back to them in life. By exposing narratives where this desire is disclosed, Cavarero argues that identity is relationally generated through an everyday exchange of stories between the self and other.⁹ Therefore, the auto/biographical act is not simply the desire to narrate our life, or other people's lives, in chronological fashion. The auto/biographical act arises from an ontology of relation which inevitably holds

⁷ Teresa Brennan, *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud & Femininity* (Taylor & Francis e-library, 2003. PDF e-book), 170-171.

⁸ Brennan's aim is to develop a language that can be used to describe 'the physicality of ideas' as well as the exchange of psychical energies. For Brennan, the term psychophysical is a way to 'evoke the conceptual unity of mental and physical processes.' See Brennan, *Interpretation*, 5.

⁹ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000), 72-73.

ethical implications for the relationship between the self and other. To this end, auto/biographical art-writing borrows Cavarero's narrative modality, and ontological framework of desire, to explore 'who' appears in art-writing and what critical and political analyses these narratives unfold. By employing Cavarero's idea that the exposition of a personal narrative informs both the self and the other, while it unfolds the unique story of 'who' is being narrated, the relationship between the subject and the artwork is thus framed as a unique encounter. For this reason, the narratives that ensue preclude universal viewpoints and discourses, or claims of a collective authenticity.¹⁰

Cavarero's work provides a method to consider storytelling under the rubric of a relational ontology and as a practice that gains political force even when conducted in the private sphere. This concept is of vital significance to how I examine the practice of auto/biographical art-writing in order to propose that art-writing need not follow traditional ways of writing about art which are, for the most part, directed at the public sphere. My central aim is to expose why auto/biographical art-writing should be perceived as an activity that has political value and affective resonance even when conducted in private. The relation between the artwork and the writer is of primary significance to the process of auto/biographical art-writing regardless of whether the writing has an audience. In other words, the writing is collateral to the psychophysical impact that the work has produced on the writer.

¹⁰ Cavarero holds that identity is shaped through specific interactions and relations with others. Because of this specificity and the unique encounters we are exposed to, it is impossible to construct an ethics or politics that would be universally applicable to all humans. Neither is it possible to claim that there exists an authentic collective identity which defines groups. For instance, in her analysis of how narrative was employed by the Italian feminist movements of the 70s, Cavarero notes that consciousness-raising put into practice a mode of self-narration that took place in a shared and interactive space. This private space provided an occasion for the narrator to exhibit her uniqueness in *differentiation* to other women and not through the expression of a collective idea of woman. See Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 88. In the same vein, I transpose Cavarero's argument unto the experience of an artwork to argue that as each encounter with an artwork is equally unique, it generates a narrative that rules out universal applicability.

While Cavarero's ethical and narrative propositions are restricted to relations between humans, my thesis transposes these propositions unto the ontological relation between an artwork and a subject. As a consequence, it was necessary to draw from a framework that reconfigures the hierarchical relationship between subject and object, to an intimate relation that can be described as an encounter between two active participants. For this reason, I have selected Ettinger's configuration of aesthetic encounters theorized as a shift towards an 'ethical human contract,' in order to elucidate how the subject is affected by an encounter with art.¹¹

Furthermore, as each unique narrator is inevitably situated in a larger web of connections, Ettinger's model of analysis provides the means to explore the psychic effects of experiencing art and how such a unique experience can inform both the self and their relationship to wider socio-political issues. Ettinger's proposition is grounded in a primordial ethicality which requires measures of both vulnerability and resistance in adult life. Ettinger contends that ethicality precedes the social, political and symbolic economy but may transform our interactions in these spheres when traces of our proto-ethical experience reach consciousness.¹² For Ettinger, the subject of ethics manifests during the negotiation/activation of two psychic faculties:

¹¹ Bracha L. Ettinger, "Fragilization and Resistance," *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 2 (2009): 3, <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.141>.

¹² Ettinger, "Fragilization," 9 & 14. For a more thorough analysis of Ettinger's theorizations of a 'proto-ethical' formulation of subjectivity see Bracha L. Ettinger, "From Proto-ethical Compassion to Responsibility: Besidedness, and the three Primal Mother-Phantasies of Not-enoughness, Devouring and Abandonment," in *Philosophical Studies* 2 (2006): 100-135. What is most useful to a discussion on art-writing, is how Ettinger's proto-ethical formulations meet the aesthetic sphere and the concept of the nonconscious. For Ettinger, proto-ethics precede ethicality and are not of a conscious register. Whereas ethics are a conscious negotiation of our engagement with an other, it is in the proto-ethical stage that ethics find a primordial collective commonality. This significant proposition shifts the moral focus of human ethics towards an understanding of the subject as responsive to an environment of co-affectivity and interaction without predetermined obligation and responsibility. In this sense, it allows us to think of ethical action not as a universal configuration or a rational execution of preordained acts of morality. Rather, ethics are here framed as a negotiation between self and other *in spite of* moral imperatives. As proto-ethics precede the subject, the ethical also necessitates a non-unitary idea of the subject. Furthermore, proto-ethical traces can be found in non-representational form during aesthetic encounters and can therefore impact (and potentially transform) the subject.

fragilization and resistance. Ethicality, in the psychic sphere, requires a measure of self-fragilization when encountering an other, as well as a non-unitary notion of subjectivity that effectuates various modes of resistance. To sum up her key points, in order for the proto-ethical imprint to meet the ethical sphere of our everyday interactions, these specific psychic modalities are activated in the subject: a resistance to the narcissistic-paranoid self which resorts to splitting the ego and enacts fantasies of abandonment; an unblocking of the passages that bar ‘transconnectedness’ and ‘the impossibility of not-sharing’; a withdrawal from sociocultural imperatives that follow the phallic symbolic order, which can lead to the objectification of the other.¹³ One of the ways by which these mechanisms are more predisposed to activation is through interactions with the aesthetic sphere. During an encounter with art, the processes of fragilization and resistance are set in motion because aesthetics can challenge the preconceptions of our rational minds and awaken what can no longer be remembered.¹⁴ Ettinger terms this aesthetic affect ‘fascinace’ and states that it is more prone to enabling psychic transformation because it can bypass ‘linear time and continual space’ as well as our conscious defences.¹⁵ Borrowing from Ettinger’s theoretical model, I argue that auto/biographical art-writing is generated from a psychic mode of relating to an other (artwork, object, subject, non-human) whereby the other’s vital differences in that relationality are respected and recognized – not opposed, antagonized, renounced or

¹³ Ettinger, “Fragilization,” 9-12. ‘Transconnectedness’ and ‘the impossibility-of-not-sharing’ are concepts that Ettinger returns to in a number of her theoretical texts. Both terms are to be thought of as psychic modalities that are formulated in the proto-ethical stage which later underscore our ethical and aesthetic experience, but not always on a conscious level.

¹⁴ Bracha L. Ettinger, “Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze (1998),” in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 146. Ettinger argues that ‘if a work of art can only be born in and out of amnesia, the work of the artist is the working-through and bringing-into-being of that which cannot be remembered. An Event unremembered – yet that cannot be forgotten – is located in a transsubjective borderspace.’

¹⁵ Ettinger, “Fragilization,” 3.

objectified – through such a process of self-fragilization. This is not a way to figure the relation between the subject and artwork as an always harmonious exchange. On the contrary, Ettinger describes the process of self-fragilizing as ‘risky,’ ‘painful,’ and ‘hard to tolerate,’ precisely because it opposes how we are socially acculturated to seek out ‘mental security’ through self-containment and by returning to our habitual guarded modes of relating.¹⁶

Ettinger’s work provides a robust understanding of the psychic mechanisms put into play during an aesthetic encounter. However, in my attempt to articulate the effects of aesthetic encounters that entail the meeting of bodies in space, it was necessary to turn to Brennan’s more physical account of both affects and their impact on the psyche. For instance, how *does* aesthetic affect bypass our conscious defenses? Can we not propose that for a transformation to occur in the psyche it will simultaneously (if not primarily) have to undergo a physical charge on a sensorial level? It is not enough to suggest that something happens on the level of drives without at least a more physical understanding of how our flesh and hormones, our mind and unconscious desires, and external factors such as the social as well as the singular encounter, are all part of a larger synergetic “moment” – an action, a prompt, a cue, a click – that is corporeally experienced. In the case of erotic responsiveness, it is a moment where a transformation has occurred for the subject that leads to a response in the form of a story. I propose that such a response is an intensely psychophysical form of loving and living attention towards an artwork.

By employing Brennan’s work on affect as energetic attention, I argue that in the case of art-writing, an encounter with artwork firstly impacts the physical and psychic registers of an individual. To this effect, I draw further distinctions between

¹⁶ Ettinger, “Fragilization,” 9.

the practice of writing *about* art and art-writing. Writing *about* art is framed as the conventional approach of an author structuring their thoughts about and upon an object external to the self, drawing from a number of theoretical and historical, linguistic and visual sources to consolidate these thoughts. On the other hand, the latter form is in a sense a mode of writing *with* art. That is, permitting the work to primarily induce a sensorial experience that leads to a psychophysical response that takes shape in the form of art-writing (or other creative forms).

I contend that in the case of auto/biographical art-writing, a work of art is experienced as an encounter rather than an object to be written about by a subject. To this end, I figure these responses as auto/biographical forms of art-writing for the way they narrate a story through self-reflection, recourse to memory and emotion, as well as embodied responses to the lived experience of a unique aesthetic encounter. I argue that this dual affective movement between the work impacting the subject, and the subject producing a story that arises from an encounter with the work, is an erotic response.

I propose the term *erotic responsiveness* as the modality produced from these interwoven ideas of affective relationality that arise from a distinct model of psychic activity. I claim that a response in the form of auto/biographical art-writing is an erotic response in that it goes by way of the libido and it is sourced from the life drive. This proposition draws from Ettinger's and Brennan's psychoanalytic accounts of the relationship between subjectivity and creativity.¹⁷ Both authors maintain that a relational model of subjectivity has a closer relationship to the psychic mechanisms of the life drive (Eros). For Teresa Brennan, as relational beings, we are principally

¹⁷ Bracha L. Ettinger, "The With-In-Visible Screen (1996)," in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 93 and Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a new Economy*, (Taylor & Francis e-library, 2003. PDF e-book), 23.

informed by profoundly material and embodied affective and transmitted intensities that illustrate that ‘we are not self-contained in terms of our energies.’¹⁸ The living attention we receive (an energetic attention) is one way to activate the life drive towards an enhancement of psychic flourishing. Accordingly, Ettinger’s theorisations also draw from a relational model of subjectivity where co-affectivity and co-emergence are the conditions that found our coming into the world. Furthermore, in Matrixial theory, not only are affects transmitted between individuals, but affects can be carried by artwork and exposed to perceptive witnesses.¹⁹

Most significantly, the authors’ respective propositions diverge from the conventional conceptualisation of desire as the force of the death drive towards an unattainable object (as for Jacques Lacan), to produce an alternative psychic development that focuses on the process of co-affective experience.²⁰ Through these

¹⁸ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 6. Brennan’s elaborations of a ‘self-contained’ subject and Ettinger’s ‘paranoid tendencies of the self’ are theoretically aligned in their description of a subjectivity that follows phallic-symbolic structures premised on Oedipal constructs.

¹⁹ The convergence of Ettinger’s and Brennan’s work is examined further in Chapter Two. On the possibility of affect being transported through art Ettinger states: ‘I submit that a crypt – with its buried unthought of knowledge [...] and with the affect that had accompanied it – can be transmitted from one subject to another by metamorphosis, because a capacity and an occasion for this kind of transmission, co-affectivity, co-acting, and co-making already occurred in the archaic relations between each becoming-subject and the m/Other. Metamorphosis turns the subject’s boundaries into thresholds, and co-affectivity turns the borderlines between subjects in distance-in-proximity and between subject and object, into a shareable borderspace. In this space, they become partial, riding on the same mental strings.’ See Bracha L. Ettinger, “Transcryptum: Memory Tracing In/For/With the Other (1999),” *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 166.

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1998), 177 & 257. Also, Jacques Lacan, “Position of the Unconscious,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, Heloise Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 719. The argument that Lacan’s thesis on desire leads to the objectification or erasure of women has been addressed by a number of feminist writers. Most notably, feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, once a member of Lacan’s institution *École Freudienne de Paris*, was expelled because of her view that Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis is phallogocentric. See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987. First published 1974). Elizabeth Grosz echoes Irigaray’s critique by also highlighting the phallogocentric nature of Lacan’s work, proposing that ‘like demand, desire is in principle insatiable. It is always an effect of the Other, an ‘other’ with whom it cannot engage, in so far as the Other is not a person but a place, the locus of law, language, and the symbolic.’ See Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1990), 67.

psychoanalytic developments, I argue that affect plays a pivotal, if not primary, role in the construction of subjectivity. It is especially during aesthetic encounters that the affect of love provides the living attention required to generate responses to artwork in the form of auto/biographical art-writing. On a psychic level, I argue that the motivation to do so stems from a relational desire activated in the life drive, rather than a desire propelled by the death drive towards the possession, control or analysis of an object.

The process of auto/biographical art-writing is subjective, not always conscious and may potentially infold and unfold trauma. To reiterate, art-writing is the practice of writing *with* art – a creative practice of narrating an affective experience *with* artwork through writing. Art-writing might produce art criticism and aesthetic description and interpretation, yet, art-writing is distinct from art criticism.²¹ I frame auto/biographical art-writing as an exigency to respond to an aesthetic encounter that has engaged our living attention. The study of auto/biographical art-writing offers another way to question and critically examine the relationship between the self and other and it can provide analytic tools and methodologies to examine both aesthetics and subjectivity. Due to a lack of resources addressing the specific relationship between auto/biographical art-writing and subjectivity, I have drawn instead on theoretical propositions from

²¹ An equivalent perspective on responses to artwork can be found in the art-writing of Hélène Cixous who declares that both the writer and the painter are poets. Cixous' texts on art have been described as an alternative form of writing which is not exactly 'art criticism, nor simply regarded as critical essays, because Cixous responds to the artworks as a poet, reading them as if they were poems.' See Hélène Cixous, *Poetry in Painting: Writings on Contemporary Arts and Aesthetics*, eds. Marta Segarra and Joana Masó (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 2. Similarly, describing the experience of an encounter with a work of art, Kate Love develops the idea of writing *with* experience to inform both the writing as well as the experience of art. Love proposes that instead of creating a binary between practice and theory, 'an auxiliary intention was to posit the idea that we don't have to bring words *to* art but rather that we can use the experience of art as a form of criticism itself.' See Kate Love, "The Experience of Art as a Living Through of Language," in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 157.

psychoanalysis as well as literary criticism and poetics to examine the erotics of art-writing.

The three authors I have chosen as primary co-ordinates have allowed me to conjure in words what I experience when I am moved by aesthetic experience. Ettinger's proto-ethical model of subjectivity, which advances an innovative conceptualization of the role of desire in the relationship between aesthetics and subjectivity, provides new grounds to think aesthetic experience as a profoundly destabilising psychic instance. In Ettinger's account, affect and desire are more closely linked and work in tandem to create the conditions for a process of reciprocal communication between art-writing, the artwork, the artist and an extended but not endless connectivity.

Drawing from Brennan's theory of affect as transmission and Ettinger's psychoanalytic propositions, I highlight valuable critiques and methodologies as a way to challenge the fixity of certain psychoanalytic configurations. I mainly borrow from Ettinger and Brennan alternative interpretations on the following: the life drive and its relationship to creativity; subject-object relations and embodiment; artwork as affective encounter. As a result, I make extensive references to psychoanalytic terms for which I will not always provide accounts of the background.²² I unpack less familiar terms in order to facilitate argumentation, but I am presuming a certain knowledge of psychoanalytic theories by the reader. Lastly, Cavarero's analysis of the 'narratable self', the self as ontologically relational in its exposition, provides the means to examine art-writing under the lens of the ethics and politics of storytelling in order to differentiate it from other forms of discourse or literary practice.

²² For the purpose of brevity, I will avoid elaborating on the historical and theoretical basis of Freudian and Lacanian concepts unless I address specific criticisms to their theories. I will however provide sources for further reading.

This thesis is an attempt to describe, perhaps invent, a way to talk and write *with* art as an extension of subjectivity. It is a mode of relating to aesthetics whereby the boundaries between subject/object, exteriority/interiority and self/other are synthesised or overlapping. Moreover, writing *with* art reveals the interconnections between ontological and ethical strategies, specifically in the way that narrative modalities can undermine the centrality of the self-contained subject as the starting point of ontology. With this proposition, my aim is to forge a link between art-writing and artwork through an ontology of relation that informs subjectivity, namely, the subjectivity of the writer, and how they relate to aesthetics.

Several interrelated points were necessary to sustain the idea that *erotic responsiveness* is a life-driven, ethico-aesthetic activity that is sculpted in the form of art-writing. The combinations of some of these points might seem more convincing than others. Since erotic responsiveness is framed as a primarily nonconscious affective experience, it requires a process of working-through that reverberates both conscious and nonconscious communication and memory in asynchronical and non-linear fashion. Thus, the logic of representation, knowledge and truth in auto/biographical art-writing, both in visual and textual form, will inevitably be liable to omissions, gaps, slips, repetitions, fantasies, excesses, haptic and affective accounts and processes. This inevitable (dis)junction between trauma and its belated aesthetic negotiation has been at the core of visual and cultural theorist Griselda Pollock's work in *After-affects / After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum*, 2013.²³ Elaborating on the effects of artworking on

²³ Pollock refers to the Freudian concept *Nachträglichkeit* (a delayed traumatic reaction to an event that took place in the past which could be triggered by a seemingly unrelated event occurring in the present time) as a useful tool for cultural and aesthetic analysis. See Griselda Pollock, *After-affects / After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), xxviii.

the psyche, Pollock notes that psychic time does ‘not follow the logic of linear development,’ rather, that the chronology between affect and its impact on the subject could be understood more precisely as a time that occurs ‘not only in repetition, but in return and retroaction.’²⁴ To this effect, I will argue that (f)actual experience is always distorted both in representation and writing.²⁵ What matters in the transaction between the aesthetic encounter and the writer is not the ability to disclose auto/biographical truths, nor critical and theoretical inflections. Rather, it is the ability to respond with a unique narrative as it co-affectively unfolds for the subject in the midst of a specific encounter. In turn, to convey or depict in language the *psychophysical* impact that such an encounter has had on the writer, which in turn communicates that the encounter is in itself a condition of relation that bears transformational effects on the level of subjectivity.

This thesis aims to provide a framework for how aesthetics impact the inextricably linked psychic and physical registers of an individual to enable the resulting auto/biographical art-writing. Furthermore, I maintain that *erotic responsiveness* can serve as a critical tool for engaging with the distinct meanings that an artwork can convey and how they are further negotiated by the writer. To my knowledge, there is no singular framework of subjectivity that adequately accounts

²⁴ Pollock, *After-affects*, 5.

²⁵ Writing on the problematic relationship between experience and knowledge, the historian Joan W. Scott argues that while personal experience has provided the means to produce historical evidence from the perspective of minority subjects, it can simultaneously turn ‘experience’ into the ‘bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built,’ leaving aside the geopolitical specificity and the power structures that construct one’s viewpoint. In this way, ‘the evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.’ See Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” in *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer, 1991): 773-797. In keeping with Scott’s vigilant stance on the historical construction of knowledge and difference, I propose that experience in the context of art-writing is not an explanatory model for the reading of artwork, but a creative response prompted by an aesthetic experience. While such writing can contribute to knowledge production and can produce texts that clearly narrate stories of “difference” (to use Scott’s terminology), the aim of auto/biographical art-writing is not necessarily premised on historical fact or epistemological claims, rather, it relies on capturing the *psychophysical* experience of the encounter with the artwork.

for the psychic and physical impact of aesthetics through the examination of auto/biographical art-writing.²⁶ As this research unfolded, I arrived at the conclusion that there *should not* be a singular framework of analysis.

I am aware that this thesis can run the risk of inhabiting a contradiction. By trying to weave together theories in order to better understand the complexity of auto/biographical art-writing, the multiplicity of interpretations and intricacies of such writing may unintentionally be swept under the weave. This would contradict what this project calls for: *unique* psychophysical responses to aesthetic encounters rather than theoretical fixed points to frame art-writing. For this reason, using specific examples of art-writing to illustrate my case for erotic responsiveness has been a strenuous exercise, nevertheless, an exercise that convinces me of the irreconcilable differences between auto/biographical art-writing and other forms of writing.

It is my hope that this research will produce a framework for reading art-writing which can examine instances of universality, ways to critically reflect on subject-object dynamics and, in its more ambitious scope, whittle down the role of criticism and theory in the reproduction of cultural capital, to make room for more varied responses to artworks.

²⁶ Bracha L. Ettinger's theories of subjectivity have been extremely useful for analysing how artwork affects the psychic registers of the subject. However, Ettinger does not focus on art-writing as one of the possibilities that result from an affective encounter. The journal *The Happy Hypocrite* contains excellent examples of contemporary art-writing that shifts away from traditional art theory or art criticism. While this unique resource consists of innovative creative textual responses to art, it encompasses the genre of experimental writing rather than methodologies for understanding and analysing the impact of artwork on subjectivity and the art-writing that ensues. See Maria Fusco, ed. *The Happy Hypocrite*, Issue 1 (2008). See also the work of writer and cultural critic Lynne Tillman who writes stories that are inspired by, in tension with, or simply accompany images of artwork: Lynne Tillman, *This Is Not It: Stories* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002).

Overview

This thesis explores auto/biographical art-writing in three parts. Part one, *Art-Writing, Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity*, provides an overview of the theoretical models that structured the thinking underlying this thesis. In Chapter One, *Interweaving Concepts: Preliminary structures for an analysis of art-writing and subjectivity*, I present theories by Brennan and Cavarero in order to familiarise the reader with the major recurring concepts and terms that will be deployed in the thesis: ‘living attention’ and ‘auto/biographical’. I examine how these terms can be activated in relation to encounters with art. I conclude by proposing a distinction between auto/biographical art-writing and other narrative responses such as art criticism and art theory. Holding this distinction in mind, I propose that an analysis of auto/biographical art-writing requires an alternative conception of the subject producing the writing.

In chapter two, *Incestuous Mothers: Subjectivity and Desire through the Maternal Relation*, I bring the above-mentioned key terms into relation with Ettinger’s concepts. I proceed by outlining innovations produced by the psychoanalytic theorisations of Ettinger and Brennan as to the role of desire in psychic development and its impact on creativity. I examine significant similarities in the work of all three thinkers (Cavarero, Brennan, Ettinger), especially in terms of how the maternal relation provides the basis for re-thinking the ethics (psychoanalytically and philosophically) between the self and other and between subject and object dynamics. In chapter three, it is my aim to flesh out how these theories relate to questions of embodiment, especially in relation to the practice of auto/biographical art-writing. I conclude with my hypothesis that, based on these

intertwined propositions on subjectivity, a new model for examining art-writing emerges which I preliminarily term: erotic responsiveness.

In Part two, *Writing with Art*, I proceed by investigating the relationship between subjectivity and encounter as a way to re-situate the author – their embodied and unique voice – within narrative practices. Furthermore, I examine the notion of becoming as a facilitating tool for thinking through a non-unitary notion of subjectivity and what questions this form of subjectivity raises in relation to ideas of authorship and the construction of identity. I move to laying out the ground for the “problem” with criticism (and hence authorship and identity) especially as it was flagged throughout the 70s and 80s by various feminist literary critics. By doing so, it is my aim to re-problematise the role of theory and criticism especially as to how it relates to or contradicts art-writing practices that have recourse to emotions, memory, embodiment and auto/biography. The first case study I examine is Barbara Christian’s influential essay “The Race for Theory” (1987), which accentuates the sensuality of language as well as the political impetus that drives literary criticism. Christian’s essay highlights how people of colour have always theorized through narrative forms that are beyond the remit of conventional theory or literature. From this analysis, I lead to Cavarero’s principle of storytelling as a political act, to illustrate some of the tensions and resolutions that oral and written narratives have created within the Italian feminist movement. I focus on the case of radical feminist thinker Carla Lonzi, who moved through the writing processes of art criticism, to feminist political texts and, of direct relevance to this research, the diary-writing process.

The third part, *Reading Auto/biographical Art-Writing*, is broken down into three case studies that consist of responses to artworks. I begin with an example of

conventional uses of autobiography in writing about art through the case study of artist Louise Bourgeois. My aim is to highlight some of the contradictions in the traditional deployment of auto/biographical narratives and to differentiate the process of writing *about* art with the process of how an author's unique experience of an artwork generates an erotic response in textual form.

In the second case study I examine the work of American poet Anne Sexton with particular attention to her poem "The Starry Night" which I argue offers an erotic response to Van Gogh's painting of the same title. Aside from exemplifying Sexton's poetry as a form of auto/biographical art-writing, my aim in this study is to implement a reading that foregrounds the life drive as the psychic force that propels creativity, self-discovery and the process of working through traumatic experience.

For the final case study, I provide an auto/biographical account of my experience of artist Tracey Emin's retrospective show *Love is What You Want* at the Hayward Gallery. I follow a non-linear style, beginning the narrative *in medias res*, from a scene where I examine the work two years after the show in catalogue format. I return to reminiscing about my initial encounter with the work to unfold how interpretation can transform over time and with each new encounter with the work. Focusing on Emin's artwork *Why be Afraid* (2009), I weave an analysis of H  l  ne Cixous short story "Love of the Wolf" into the reading in order to elaborate on the relationship between corporeality and the emotions of love and fear. I conclude by illustrating how auto/biographical art-writing counteracts universal interpretations of artworks by responding to an aesthetic encounter with a narrative that foregrounds the unique and embodied interrelations between the work and the writer.

PART ONE

Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity & Auto/Biographical Art-Writing

CHAPTER ONE

Interweaving Concepts: Preliminary structures for an analysis of auto/biographical art-writing and subjectivity

How can the experience of a sound, a color, a gesture, of the feelings of arousal, anxiety, nausea, or bereavement that they provoke, be communicated in words? They have to be translated.

– Laura U. Marks²⁷

In an effort to describe aesthetic experiences that can profoundly unsettle one's subjectivity and perception, both a language for narration and a theory of the psyche are necessary to translate such experience. Auto/biographical art-writing is a response to an experience *with* art in which we can find traces of the singular affective moment where a psychophysical transformation has occurred for the storyteller. This form of narrative practice borrows philosopher Adriana Cavarero's principle of communication whereby two unique existents appear to each other in ways that can be intensely fragilizing, as well as political, and from which the story of the encounter unfolds through the narrator. The aspect of fragility is borrowed from Bracha L. Ettinger's psychoanalytic and ethico-aesthetic stipulations that I transpose unto the storyteller encountering the artwork. The psychophysical and affective dynamic at play, which is axiomatically erotic in creative practice, is adopted from Teresa Brennan's work on subjectivity and viewed through the lens of Ettinger's aesthetic encounters.

²⁷ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), ix.

Even though there are significant similarities between Brennan's and Ettinger's analytic frameworks, to my knowledge, these two thinkers have not been brought into dialogue. The concept of *erotic responsiveness* relies on the productive juxtaposition of their theoretical advances and how they individually formulate distinct yet interrelated ideas of affect, desire and the life drive. The convergence of their work provides innovative methods to discuss aesthetics and ethics particularly in their development of the co-affective and physical dimension and how it inscribes subjectivity with primordial registers of reciprocity, communication and commonality.

All three authors provide unique ways to examine human experience through the dual movement of how the "inside-out" works in tandem with the "outside-in." This form of theorizing can be described as a relational approach, in that accounts of subjectivity necessitate a clear attribution of agency to the humans, animals and (im)material forces that are always – even before we are born – of direct influence to our various becomings.

For the purposes of this thesis, the respective authors' propositions provide new tools for exploring subjectivity and, more specifically, the effects of aesthetic and other encounters on the psyche. These effects are examined for how they interlace words with affects, the sensual and psychophysical as it materialises for the subject and in writing, and how writing can be thought of as an embodied practice. An embodied practice not only indicates that there is a unique body marked by gender, race, ability and so on, that weaves a text together, but that such a body experiences the world on a psychophysical level and in relation to others. The psychophysical aspect is essential to understanding how affects arrive from without and can shape our experience in ways that can be profoundly traumatic.

This chapter elucidates the key theoretical terms that I theorize through and how they are being used to support my propositions that there is a form of art-writing whose logic figures as a writing *with* art; that the auto/biographical is the narrative practice of narrating both the self and the other's story; that the psychophysical experience of artwork is erotic and, in their combination, these processes reveal an ethics of storytelling that can only be theorized through an ontology of relation.

Auto/biography

In the biography given by the other, both the written and the oral put into words above all the uniqueness of an identity which, *only in relation*, is *bios* instead of *zoe*.

– Adriana Cavarero²⁸

To will freedom and to will to disclose being are one and the same choice.

– Simone de Beauvoir²⁹

In *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero uses the neologism “auto/biography” to mean both biography and autobiography.³⁰ I take the term auto/biographical directly from Adriana Cavarero to express the compound biography and autobiography, but also to communicate Cavarero’s theoretical principle that the subject desires above all to hear their life-story told by an other in life.³¹ This desire, rooted in each and every one of us, differentiates each individual from the plurality of others, by exposing the uniqueness of ‘who’ one is rather than ‘what’ one is. Thus, when I make use of the term auto/biographical, I am always alluding to Cavarero’s proposition that the

²⁸ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 85.

²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Carol Communications, 1976), 78.

³⁰ Cavarero credits this neologism to Liz Stanley found in the book *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1992). See, Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 77.

³¹ Cavarero argues that as our autobiographical memory cannot capture our early experience, our personal story remains incomplete and requires its narration by others. It is precisely because ‘the reality of the self is necessarily intermittent and fragmentary’ that it is also a ‘narratable self’ whose ‘story only others can recount.’ She proposes that our desire to hear our story told by an other in life is driven by this gap between birth and our ability to recall and therefore narrate our own life story from beginning to end. However, this gap can only be filled by someone who can tell our story, one who can narrate our uniqueness back to us. See Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 33-39.

desire to expose our ‘narratable self,’ to hear ‘who’ one is as told by an other, is a desire rooted in our yearning for temporary unity.³²

Cavarero’s exegesis presents subjectivity as narratable, unique, singular and unrepeatable through an emphasis on an anti-identitarian quality in her particular ethics of relating.³³ The act of narrating an other’s story – an act that relies on the interaction between unique existents – reveals that reciprocal communication can expose both the story of ‘who’ is being narrated as well as the story, or at least the desire for the life-story, of the storyteller. Exaggerating Cavarero’s principle, I amplify how this proposition also unfolds the desire, and potentially the story, of the narrator’s uniqueness. In other words, as a condition of relation entails at least two unique participants, then two unique stories could emerge from an encounter. However, this would miss the point of Cavarero’s thesis, which holds that it is less about the story than it is about how reciprocal communication is the condition by which we come to appear as unique existents to one another. Furthermore, Cavarero argues that a political horizon unfolds in the process of reciprocal communication as ‘actively revealing oneself to others, with words and deeds, grants a plural space and therefore a political space to identity – confirming its exhibitivistic, relational and contextual nature.’³⁴

In keeping with this theoretical principle, stories will figure in this thesis as a way to illustrate the condition rather than the result. In other words, an encounter with a work of art is the occasion (condition) by which the artwork and the writer

³² Cavarero is careful to note that the unity experienced by the narration of our story is a temporary and fleeting experience of the story of one’s life and should not be interpreted as a proposition for a coherent or authentic identity. See, Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 63.

³³ The terms ‘unique’ and ‘singular’ are used interchangeably in Cavarero’s work. While Cavarero borrows the term ‘uniqueness’ from the political theorist Hannah Arendt, the broader understanding of the terms ‘uniqueness’, ‘singularity’ and ‘unrepeatability’ is that all terms appeal to a relational ontology and monistic philosophy of the subject.

³⁴ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 22.

appear to each other in a unique reciprocal exchange. I propose that an artwork holds affective potential that can instigate the viewer to narrate the story of the encounter. While the narrator's story discloses the aesthetic encounter, the artwork can also, sooner or later, come to narrate the narrator. In other words, as artwork carries affective agency, an aesthetic encounter can potentially destabilize perception by affectively impacting the subject on a psychic level. Such a psychic impression can make its way into the story told, leaving traces of the unique encounter between the viewer and the work.³⁵

I stress the role of the narrator as a way to contextualise art-writing within narrative discourses but most significantly to highlight the political significance of this particular form of storytelling, especially when it is not directed towards explicit political ends. Obviously not all acts of narration are political and can be less so even when they are produced with political intent, for example, when narratives are employed to strengthen political ideologies that can lead to propaganda. In Cavarero's work, politics and the political are thus terms that she addresses from a distinctly Arendtian angle where politics necessitate self-exposure in a 'plural – and therefore political – space of interaction.'³⁶ This space is not restricted to the public arena of politics such as the town hall, the parliament, the streets or other spaces of assembly. Even though Hannah Arendt marked the *polis* as the necessary and ultimate political space of action, Cavarero notes that 'the polis, according to Arendt,

³⁵ My proposition is here drawing from Cavarero's framing of the auto/biographical impulse that arises from a "narratable self," however, in the context of aesthetic experience I am also incited by Ettinger's concept of 'wit(h)nessing' described as an encounter with an artwork which can potentially revive archaic psychic knowledge. Ettinger argues that 'painting captures in producing, or produces in capturing knowledge of the wit(h)ness-Thing. A possibility of ethically acknowledging the Real emerges in transferential wit(h)nessing, when someone else apprehends in place of the subject the subject's own non-conscious matrixial sites. Suddenly, in metamorphosing with the artwork, you might find yourself in proximity to a possible trauma, as if you have always been potentially sliding on its margin.' See, Bracha L. Ettinger, "Traumatic Wit(h)ness-Thing and Matrixial Co/inhabit(u)ating," *Parallax* 5, no. 1 (1999): 92.

³⁶ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 58.

is not situated in a physical territory. Rather, it is a space of interaction that is produced by the reciprocal communication of those present through words and deeds.³⁷ For Cavarero, it is the *action* of self-exposure that reveals the uniqueness of ‘who’ one is, and while this can be a public space with ‘a plurality of spectators,’ it can just as well be a space embodied by a single person – what she calls the ‘necessary other’ – who can narrate our story back to us.³⁸

Storytelling, as distinct from discourse, manifests a political dimension precisely because it emerges from a condition of relation between a specific *you* and *I*. After all, the title of Cavarero’s book in Italian is *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* which in its literal sense translates as *You who sees me, you who narrates me*. Discussing the rhetorical power of language, the literary critic Barbara Johnson refers to the structural linguist and semiotician Émile Benveniste who argued that modes of address such as the common use of personal pronouns (I, you, he) ‘destroy[s] the notion of “person.” “Person” belongs only to *I/you* and is lacking in *he*.³⁹ Johnson explicates,

the notion of “person” has something to do with presence at the scene of speech and seems to inhere in the notion of *address*. “I” and “you” are persons because they can either address or be addressed, while “he” can only be talked *about*. A person who neither addresses nor is addressed is functioning as a *thing* in the same way that being an object of discussion rather than a *subject* of discussion transforms everything into a thing.⁴⁰

³⁷ Cavarero argues that Arendt’s work can ‘overturn that crucial movement, from the outside to the inside, which characterizes the modern conception of the self,’ because Arendt frames the self as ‘expressive and relational, and whose reality is symptomatically external in so far as it is entrusted to the gaze, or the tale, of another.’ See Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 41. However, for Arendt, in the case of politics, it is in the *polis* that this self must find expression as *vita activa*. On this note, Cavarero quotes Arendt’s analysis of the ancient Greek citation ‘Wherever you go, you will be a polis,’ to restate that the Greeks considered interactive spaces those where action and speaking could occur, where ‘politics takes place, but it is not a place.’ For more on this distinction see, Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (California: Stanford University Press), 204.

³⁸ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 24.

³⁹ Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971), 217 quoted in Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 6.

⁴⁰ Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 6.

In this sense, Cavarero's 'you' is not an innocent bystander to one's biography, neither are they a haphazardly chosen narrator, rather, they actively address the person (*I*) whose story they narrate through a mutual exposition at the scene of speech. In fact, the storyteller is in a position of immense power over the other's story. Faced with this great responsibility, the narrator can purposefully or unintentionally produce an undesirable effect to the vulnerable and now exposed protagonist.⁴¹ This dilemma can raise questions regarding the viability or utopian resonance underlying Cavarero's framing of storytelling as an altruistic ethics.⁴² As Cavarero indeed affirms, 'the narratable self thus re-enters into what we could call a relational ethic of contingency; or, rather, an ethic founded on the *altruistic* ontology of the human existent as finite.'⁴³ However, self-exposure entails the inevitable risk of being misunderstood or poorly portrayed by the other narrating our story. This risk is briefly touched upon but certainly not denied by Cavarero in her work.⁴⁴ She often refers to the fragility, vulnerability, fear and courage that comes with the act of self-

⁴¹ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 59. I find productive resonances between Cavarero's framing of the "necessary other" and the ethical "respons-ability" that arises in Ettinger's theorisations. For Cavarero the desire for one's story can be the result of a 'justifiable fear that the partially unexposed is partially non-existent.' Focusing on the disavowal of collective and historical trauma the art historian and theorist Griselda Pollock states that Ettinger's ethics propose a way 'to remember the obliterated [which] drastically calls for an intersubjective respons-ability to the trauma of the other.' See Griselda Pollock, "Thinking the Feminine: Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metramorphosis," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no.1 (2004): 14.

⁴² I am grateful to Dr. Alice Andrews for her incisive commentary during my upgrade examination on the possible risk in self-exposure. On the open-endedness and ambiguity of Cavarero's 'altruistic ontology' see Ann V. Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 85-94.

⁴³ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 87.

⁴⁴ In his introduction to *Relating Narratives*, the translator Paul A. Kottman offers a clarification on how Cavarero's theory moves beyond theories of interpellation, through the example of how hate-speech works on the level of interpellation: 'hate-speech comes not solely from *what* one is being called, but from the fact that one's singularity, a singularity that exceeds any 'what,' is utterly and violently ignored, excluded from these semantics. Put quite simply, it is the total disregard for *who* one is that makes hate-speech so painful. In addition, in so far as this disregard prevails, to varying degrees, in *all* scenes of interpellation, one could not hope to radically counteract hate-speech without also offering alternative versions of social existence that do *not* rely chiefly upon 'interpellation' as the model for the formation of linguistically vulnerable beings. On this point, perhaps, Cavarero's thinking might offer just such an alternative.' See Paul A. Kottman, translator's introduction to *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, by Adriana Cavarero (London: Routledge, 2000), xix-xx.

disclosure. However, Cavarero does not propose that there is an ethical imperative to disclose one's story, rather, whether we choose to appear to an other or not, our decision either way, does not eradicate *the ontological desire* to have our story, the uniqueness of who we are, narrated back to us by someone who *acknowledges* this desire. The narratable self is then ontologically relational in the sense that our story can only ever be told through a condition of mutual exposure.

Most of the case studies that Cavarero puts under the test of a 'relating narrative' or a 'narratable self' reveal more about the methods of relation rather than the two unique participants of the story. The reciprocal exposure of 'who' the protagonists are is an effect of the very act of relating to one another, where individual identities are produced through their interlacing with other specific and equally unique lives. The plot of the protagonists' exchange, its dramatic unfolding or happy end, is of little, if any, significance to Cavarero's principles of communication. In fact, the story is to some extent evacuated from what is generally considered "a narrative," rather, the process of reciprocal communication demonstrates that we are inevitably consigned to one another.

I superimpose Cavarero's methodological oddity onto the less popular narrative practice of art-writing, to explore the 'you' who experiences and narrates a work of art. This strategy serves the purpose of analysing how writing *with* art can reveal 'who' the narrator is, as well as to delineate how the 'gift' of an artwork's story appears in narrative form.⁴⁵ To this effect, the art-writing I have selected for analysis is not strictly autobiographical.⁴⁶ It is less about the identity of the writer

⁴⁵ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 19. Cavarero conceptualises the action of relaying one's story back to them as "the gift of the story", which consummates how 'the uniqueness which pertains to the proper is always a given, a gift.' See also, the chapter *On the Outskirts of Milan* in the same book.

⁴⁶ Cavarero is careful to note that standard 'autobiography is a mistake of desire' because telling 'one's own story is to distance oneself from oneself, to double oneself, to make of oneself an other.' To make this differentiation clearer she offers the example of the writer Gertrude Stein who hands

who writes about art autobiographically (even though there are auto/biographical accounts woven into the writing).⁴⁷ It is more about how artworks expose the story, or the desire for a story, of the singular affective experience of the encounter between the narrator and the artwork. By transposing this equation unto the practice of art-writing, I argue that writing *with* art resonates with a similar desire for (self-) narration and that, as storytellers, our desire is to reveal the ‘who’ of the subject of our engagement: the uniqueness of the artwork imparted in our reciprocal communication.

In search for an alternative model for thinking through the experience produced by the agency of art, the writer and artist Kate Love narrates an encounter with the artwork of artist Gabriel Orozco as a moment where she was able to capture ‘the artist’s consciousness, as it was intended towards its object.’⁴⁸ Love describes her experience as being left ‘with a vivid and very living impression of something which I had previously understood only as a theoretical concept – that is, that the constitution of subjectivity as entirely dependent on the “other” for any estimation of

over her story to her lover Alice B. Toklas who in turn writes Stein’s story in autobiographical format. The title of this work is *The Autobiography of Alice Toklas* by the author Gertrude Stein which nevertheless is a biography of Stein narrated in the first person by Toklas. Even though Stein stages, orients and exhibits her own biography through Toklas’ autobiographical narrative, Cavarero differentiates this exhibitionistic act from a narcissistic impulse. Cavarero proposes that the self is inherently exhibitionistic and that our desire to hear our story narrated back to us relies on a necessary exposure which renders the self both ‘fragile and unmasterable’, and which also reveals that identity can never be created in isolation, or in ‘protected spaces or private rooms of impenetrable refuge for self-contemplation.’ Furthermore, Toklas’ first-person narrative unfolds ‘the expositive and relational reality of the self,’ where Toklas is not simply a ‘literary artifice,’ but ‘the necessary other’ who makes clear that one’s life is interwoven with the stories of others. See Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 81-84.

⁴⁷ An excellent example of auto/biographical writing that responds to the genre of literary art can be found in the philosopher Jacques Derrida’s part-memoir, part-critical analysis and theoretical exposition *H. C. for Life, That Is to Say...* In this book, Derrida offers a critical recollection of the work of his lifelong friend, the writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous, through a narrative that unfolds his early encounters with Cixous’ work. Simultaneously, Derrida provides an overall analysis of the differences between their work which he formulates as a type of writing which is “for life” in the case of Cixous, while his own work gravitates towards death. See Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life. That Is to Say...* (California: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁴⁸ Kate Love, “The Experience of Art as a Living Through of Language,” in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 172.

the “self”.⁴⁹ Love’s analysis can provide a sense of how the auto/biographical tale that arises from an encounter with a work of art reveals the narrator’s relational interdependence and vulnerability. An exposure between the self and the work can result in the production of a story that narrates an aesthetic encounter from an embodied perspective, where the story of the work takes on a unique life, capable of shaping and being shaped by the lives it encounters.

To return to Cavarero’s exposition of storytelling as a political praxis, while the auto/biographical gesture or the “narratable self” opens up a narrative space for politics and a relational identity, more strategically, it exposes how philosophical discourses are unable to grasp the uniqueness of “who” one is.⁵⁰ As the aim of philosophy is to elucidate the category of the human, and not the unique individuals that constitute the category, philosophy provides universal narratives for human matters relating to ethics, aesthetics, epistemology and ontology. Subverting this tendency, Cavarero argues that the narratable self is ‘*constitutively* altruistic, rather than by choice, the ethics and politics of uniqueness indeed speak a language that does not know general names.’⁵¹ Correspondingly, as the discursive tools of art criticism have been shaped by similar philosophical and theoretical discourses, it is no surprise that writing about art has embraced the domain of universality.⁵² In line with Cavarero’s postulation, this thesis seeks out narratives that expose the relational

⁴⁹ Love, “Experience of Art,” 172.

⁵⁰ Cavarero cites the “rational and political animal” of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and the *homini lupus* of the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes as examples of ‘universalizing ethics (or politics) that are founded on Man, and those that champion the modern individual,’ as doctrines that ‘ignore the *who* and focus instead on the *what*.’ Cavarero argues that their ‘individualistic theory’ fails to grasp the ‘competitive nature of the single, or “dissolves” it into the political principle of equality.’ In her critique of these forms of individualism Cavarero articulates how ‘*residing together* [stare insieme]’ becomes an ‘artificial’ and disciplined form of politics whereas ‘*being together* [essere insieme],’ conveys that our uniqueness is constituted through a plural space of appearance. See Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 88

⁵¹ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 90.

⁵² Questions of universality will be examined further in the section *Art-Writing is in the Situation of a Fulcrum*.

context of the story: the insubstitutable protagonist and the necessary other in the form of an embodied narrator. I argue that a transposition of Cavarero's 'narratable self' can elucidate aspects of art-writing that appeal to the singularity of the reciprocal engagement between the writer and the work. Such idiosyncratic forms of auto/biographical art-writing produce incongruous forms of narrative practice which are often excluded from traditional fields of cultural analysis. Nevertheless, this distinct genre, tradition and methodological approach, can offer equally significant contributions to critical discourses. More radically, precisely because of its appeal to 'constitutively altruistic' relational and narrative forms, art-writing produces a form of storytelling, politics, ethics and desire that art criticism cannot partake in.

To conclude, by focusing on the element of desire for our story, which figures the other as a necessary protagonist, I explore what new configurations this desire can produce in terms of psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity. Do we all, without exception, share this desire? Why is it that Cavarero's male heroes seek their story in the public sphere while women are able to expose their political selves in private?⁵³ If we seek each other out as unique existents that share this desire to be narrated from without, does that mean that our desire is indeed the same within? As Cavarero proposes, if 'the ontological status of the *who* – as exposed, relational, altruistic – is totally *external*,' what is it then that *drives* our desire from within?⁵⁴ In other words, in the desire for self-disclosure, is there something that can be disclosed about the mechanism of desire as it relates to the psychic dimension of our lives?

⁵³ See, *A Tale of Two Births: Embodiment and the Exchange of Gazes* in Part One, Chapter Two of this thesis.

⁵⁴ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 89.

Living Attention: Psychophysical Creative Organisation

Cavarero's analysis of storytelling indicates that the ontological basis of self-exposure has at its root a 'loss of unity' which then 'gets turned into the lack that feeds desire.'⁵⁵ Drawing from this argument, I examine what psychic mechanisms are activated in the desire to narrate the story of the encounter between the narrator and the work of art. While Cavarero's principle of communication relies on an exchange between two subjects, my aim is to transpose her argument unto the relation between a subject and an artwork. However, in order to accomplish an effective transposition, it was necessary to draw from theories that frame artwork as holding affective agency that can arrest the viewer.⁵⁶

The properties of what will constitute an artwork with agency will depend on the relationship between the viewer and the work. That is, what the viewer brings with them in terms of personal history as well as the unpredictability of one's emotional disposition during the encounter.⁵⁷ An artwork can also capture one's

⁵⁵ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 39.

⁵⁶ I concentrate on Bracha L. Ettinger's elaborations on the relationship between aesthetics and affect as they provide a strong framework to examine subjectivity more broadly and through the lens of psychoanalysis and ethics more specifically. From a different perspective but on the same topic, the anthropologist Alfred Gell considers how the agency of artwork elicits powerful responses such as love, hate, desire, awe and fear in the viewer, to the extent that these responses seem to be directed towards another living person and not an inanimate object. Gell states that the viewer enters into a personal relationship with the artwork as if it were a person because of the way artworks bear similarities to personhood in that they too 'come in families, lineages, tribes, whole populations, just like people. They have relations with one another as well as with the people who create and circulate them as individual objects. They marry, so to speak, and beget offspring which bear the stamp of their antecedents. Artworks are manifestations of "culture" as a collective phenomenon, they are, like people, enculturated beings.' See Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 153.

⁵⁷ In response to the school of *New Criticism* and specifically the text "The Affective Fallacy" authored by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1949), the literary critic and theorist Jane P. Tompkins presents the "reader-response movement" as an oppositional approach to the form of textual analysis provided by *New Criticism* which insisted on formalism, objectivity and unemotional criticism. For instance, Wimsatt and Beardsley claim that 'the report of some readers [...] that a poem or story induces in them vivid images, intense feelings, or heightened consciousness, is neither anything which can be refuted nor anything which it is possible for the objective critic to take into account.' See William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (1949): 45. On the contrary, reader-response theory proposes that the reader is an active agent who produces a

affective response in different ways depending on the context of its manifestation. It is at this injunction – the spatial and material aspects of an artwork as they are perceived by an embodied viewer – that the work of writer and artist Kristen Kreider provides a critical methodology to examine how artworks ‘that combine poetic, artistic and spatial aesthetic strategies are capable of communicating symbolically.’⁵⁸ Kreider draws our attention to how the experience of a work of art will depend on the unique perspective that arises from a *specific* body: ‘the viewer’s height, trajectory, speed.’⁵⁹ But also, the specificities of a space such as light conditions and placement of work. Kreider’s project places emphasis on the artwork’s agency, figured as a form of speech or a “voice,” and that we, as embodied recipients, are located in an ethicoaesthetic transaction that has captured our “listening.” The “voice” of the artwork is to be considered in its expanded sense as a metaphor for communication, while “listening” gains an ethical dimension in that it captures our attention in a way that inevitably solicits a response.⁶⁰ In similar ways to Cavarero’s strategy, Kreider also draws on Arendt’s formulation of political action as the interaction of a specific “you” and “I” in the public space of appearance, to propose that the ‘ethical contract’ lies in the desire of artists and critics ‘to communicate precisely through what we do not (or cannot) know or understand.’⁶¹

unique performative textual response to the work. Central to this movement is the value of reader specificity, including the psychological effect that a text incites in the reader. For instance, Tompkins argues that a poem ‘cannot be understood apart from its results. Its “effects,” psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader.’ See Jane P. Tompkins, introduction to *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), ix.

⁵⁸ Kristen Kreider, *Poetics and Place: The Architecture of Sign, Subjects and Site* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 1.

⁵⁹ Kreider, *Poetics and Place*, 50.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

In line with this particular aspect of Kreider's analysis, I too examine the interaction between the work and the viewer, while concentrating on the affective and psychic impact that leads to an art-writing response. I contend that such a response is not only ethical, but it is also erotic as it employs the writer's *psychophysical* faculties and their *living attention* – terms that I will shortly elaborate on. However, my argument is nuanced by Cavarero's modulation of Arendt's thesis, where Cavarero dematerializes our understanding of public space, instead proposing that the space of appearance is the material *effect* of an interaction between a specific *you* and *I*. I suggest that the consequence of Cavarero's subtle gesture has radical effects for how we, artists, critics and viewers, engage with artwork when the work is no longer materially defined by the physical properties of its exhibition (gallery, institution, and so on), neither by the imperative to respond to the work in a "public space" as defined by legitimized areas of literary or critical production. As mentioned in the previous section, Cavarero proposes that "it is the *action* of self-exposure that reveals the uniqueness of 'who' one is," and for this reason the story told in the case of auto/biographical art-writing captures a unique experience while resisting a universal narrative for interpreting an artwork.

However, some artworks will fail to affect us regardless of the material, spatial and poetic efforts that an artist has implemented to "voice" their ideas. This acknowledgement orients my analysis to the subjectivity of the storyteller, while simultaneously disorienting the experience of art as one which has at its basis an instrumentalization of aesthetic experience for the production of art criticism. In other words, in spite of the strategies taken by the artist to produce an artwork, the prompt to respond is not only subjective to the writer, but almost random and contingent on the conditions of the encounter: the subject's memory bank and lived

experience; their training in, or lack of, art historical discourses and, most significantly, the level of fragility or resistance experienced during the encounter. With these observations in mind, my aim is to develop an understanding of the relation between artwork and subject which is not simply a consequence of representation, vision and interpretation. In this regard, Brennan's reframing of affect as energetic transmission is essential to interpreting experience beyond perception. Through Brennan's hypotheses, visual affectivity moves beyond the elemental science of intromission and gains a *psychophysical* register when it is (co)affected by forces beyond the self-contained subject's control. Simply said, vision is not a matter of looking *at*, rather, it is a physical experience whereby our perception can be arrested (or transformed) from without. This element of psychophysical co-affectivity and response between a specific *you* and *I* is what renders the encounter political.

However, this is not an attempt to trivialize the artwork's intended message, or the thoughtful strategies deliberated by the artists to produce a work which can communicate effectively to a viewer. On the contrary, Kreider's astute analysis clearly demonstrates that these aesthetic negotiations are indeed "heard" by their interlocutors. However, my argument is that these artworks arrest our attention because of their ability to bypass our resistance and affect us on a nonconscious level, prior to our conscious interpretation of the intended message.

Considering the relationship between trauma and aesthetics, Griselda Pollock proposes that trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally 'through non-verbal and non-intentional communication.'⁶² Furthermore, that traumatic experience infiltrates

⁶² Pollock, *After-affects*, 8.

the artwork in ways that the artist may not be fully aware of, even while returning to the same process of artworking:

Trauma is not an anterior source from which imagery is generated by a knowing subject. Trauma is the not-yet-experienced non-thing *towards* which a lifetime of making art might be unknowingly journeying.⁶³

In her analysis, Pollock centralises the role of affect in the experience of art because it affords ‘an opening towards something or a complete enclosure in its grip such as depression,’ that it is more readily ‘transmitted via mediated experience of the aesthetic.’⁶⁴ In the same vein, I argue that a response to an encounter with art in the form of auto/biographical art-writing, arises from the affective impact that an aesthetic experience has produced. But how *does* affect determine our experience of something or someone as the agent that invokes our desire for storytelling? How is it transmitted from the work to the storyteller? Furthermore, what does the response, the living attention directed towards a work, do for the storyteller and the work?

In this section, I focus on the affective dimension of an experience with art as it is the affect that creates the possibility for the auto/biographical art-writing process to manifest. I propose that a response to artwork in the form of auto/biographical art-writing is prompted by an affective and ethical imperative, which requires an alternative model of subjectivity to examine such responses. To support the argument that affects can induce a creative response, I borrow feminist philosopher and social-political theorist Teresa Brennan’s conceptualisation of affect as energetic transmission.⁶⁵ Brennan’s argument is complex, and I will return to and expand on

⁶³ Pollock, *After-affects*, xxvii.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁵ Brennan, *Transmission*, 5. Brennan maintains that affects and emotions are distinct yet overlapping psychophysical processes. Succinctly phrased, ‘by an affect, I mean the physiological shift accompanying a judgment. [...] Feelings are not the same thing as affects. Putting it simply, when I feel angry, I feel the passage of anger through me. What I feel with and what I feel are distinct. [...] I define feelings as sensations that have found the right match in words’.

several terms throughout the course of this chapter. For now, I will offer an abbreviated account of the connections between affect and creativity, in order to lay out the ground for how I am employing Brennan's framing of 'living attention' in this thesis.

Brennan maintains that affects have a distinct physiological effect and transmission both *prior to* (nonconscious) and during conscious assessment. Affects are mobile in the sense that they can be projected from one individual to another, and may therefore become psychically contained. Affects that are projected towards us can turn into repressed images. They can also be internalized projective judgments (from without) which become distorted and 'enmeshed in fantasy and memory.'⁶⁶ Brennan contends that the role of psychoanalysis has traditionally aimed to free the subject's life drive from draining internalised affects such as projective judgments and repressed images.⁶⁷ However, she notes that this can be an increasingly difficult process unless psychoanalysis embraces a theory of transmission: the understanding that certain affects are not necessarily our own and that projecting them (energetically) is one way to release their negative effects.⁶⁸

While psychoanalysis provides one course of action to bring a feeling into consciousness, or a way to unlock a repressed image, the other way is through creative activity. In fact, it seems that the creative process is more prone to embracing a theory of transmission as it is the condition whereby one works in a way that strives to make connections and to bring thoughts, feelings, things and situations into harmony. My proposition draws from Brennan's stipulations on the force of the

⁶⁶ Brennan, *Transmission*, 113.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

life drive to bring about such harmony, even though the aspect of creativity is not the focus of her research.

The parallelism between psychoanalytic work and creative work is also briefly touched upon by the psychoanalyst Anna Freud in her foreword to Marion Milner's book *On Not Being Able to Paint*.⁶⁹ However, in the below extract, Freud also draws an interesting distinction between the analytic and creative process which I think provides some clues as to why Brennan undertook such a long journey into the realm of affects:

the legitimate result of analysis is the inner experience of formerly unknown affects and impulses which find their final outlet in the ego processes of verbalisation and deliberate action. The creative process in art, on the other hand, 'remains within the realm in which unknown affects and impulses find their outlet, through the way in which the artist arranges his medium to form harmonies of shapes, colours or sounds'; whether deliberate action is affected or not in the last issue, the main achievement is, according to the author, a joining of that split between mind and body that can so easily result from trying to limit thinking to thinking only in words.⁷⁰

Anna Freud proposes that on the one hand there is analytic work which relies on very tangible effects such as bringing affects into consciousness through "verbalisation and deliberate action" – this being the work of the ego. Assuming this holds true, the question is, how does the affect move from "the unknown" inner place to one's tongue? According to Brennan, it is the *feeling* – an internal sensation that has become conscious – that finds articulation. By this logic, words can be thought of as vehicles that "carry" feelings (and not exactly affects: the affects drive the

⁶⁹ Anna Freud, foreword to *On Not Being Able to Paint*, by Marion Milner (2nd ed. New York: International Universities Press, 1967. First published 1958), xiii-xv. While similarities can be drawn from Freud's foreword that can support Brennan's convictions of the duties (and oversights) of psychoanalysis, Freud nevertheless differentiates analysis from creativity.

⁷⁰ Freud, "Foreword," xiv.

feelings) into symbolisation which then become released from repression.⁷¹ On the other hand, Freud states that the “outlet” of affects through creative processes, unlike analytic work, “remain” in the realm of creativity, or in the resulting artwork.⁷² Even though this may sound as if Freud was proposing that an artwork can be the depository or the container of affects, she certainly does not explicitly phrase it this way. Milner, on the contrary, makes this effect quite clear throughout her book, for example, when she states that ‘when the drawing was finished the original anger had all vanished. The anger had apparently *gone into* the drawing.’⁷³

The language of psychoanalysis is laden with words that indicate that affects involve at least some degree of mobility. Psychic activity has often been expressed through a topographic language such as “underneath” or “underlying” the ego, and as requiring movements that can “expel”, “push”, “charge”, “discharge”, “go into”, “release” psychic phenomena from the unconscious or preconscious into representation – particularly linguistic representation.⁷⁴ The differences between

⁷¹ Queer-feminist theorist Sara Ahmed explores how objects can become ‘saturated with affects as sites of personal and social tension.’ For example, Ahmed notes that the affect of anxiety can be “sticky,” as in contagious and attached to objects, which means that the affect ‘sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects.’ See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 29-44.

⁷² Anna Freud places this phrase in quotation marks, ‘remains within the realm in which unknown affects and impulses find their outlet, through the way in which the artist arranges his medium to form harmonies of shapes, colours or sounds,’ which leads the reader to assume that this conviction is expressed by Milner. I have not been able to locate this quote in Milner’s work so I will assume that it either belongs to Freud or it is found in the first edition. It is more likely that Milner believed the creative and analytic process to be indivisible in terms of freeing the subject from psychic blockages. For instance, she notes that ‘[...] drawings [...] are intended to illustrate the gradual discovery both of ways by which the creative process is freed and of the content of unconscious ideas which interfere with that freedom.’ See Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, 2nd ed. (New York: International Universities Press, 1967. First published 1958), xxi.

⁷³ Milner, *Not Being Able*, 5 (italics mine).

⁷⁴ For instance, Sigmund Freud states that intolerable experiences could lead to a successful psychic defence mechanism where the experience and ‘affective consequences’ become ‘expelled from consciousness and from the ego’s memory.’ However, in the case of hysteria, ‘what had been expelled pursued its activities in what was now an unconscious state, and found its way back into consciousness by means of symptoms and the affects attaching to them, so that the illness corresponded to a failure in defence.’ See Sigmund Freud, “My Views on the Part played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of the Neuroses (1906),” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 1-24, ed. Ivan Smith (2010): 1580. The point on hysteria will be of relevance to Brennan’s stipulations on the transmission of affect especially for how it renders the subject defenceless. See the section *Sublimation: A Matter of Life & Death*.

analytic work and creative work are plenty in terms of processes, but psychically, I will argue, the results are strikingly similar if Brennan's transmission of affect is taken into account.

Anna Freud frames the distinction between the practices as follows: the process of analytic work is "discursive", hence linguistic, and perhaps this suggests that creative work is not equally effective outside the realm of language. All other forms of symbolisation, of imaginary potential, deliberate or otherwise, remain locked in the realm of their (non-linguistic) processes, in this case painting. Simply said, an artwork can *contain* the affect, but it cannot *release* it the way language does. The idea that language directs from the inside out, while artworks contain from the outside in, sets up an inequitable relationship that favours the agency of the subject rather than the artwork.⁷⁵ This idea reveals how, in psychoanalytic theories, there is a tendency to divide words from other forms of action, to create clear-cut distinctions and hierarchies in what qualifies as agency in discussions of subjectivity.⁷⁶ The distinction here is one where primacy is given to a linguistic process over any other process, where 'deliberate action' arrives in the form of language and its close association with consciousness, the ego and the mind. What this distinction means in terms of broader divisions such as mind and body, nature and culture, word and image, subject and object, will be examined further, and with a

⁷⁵ Contrary to this assertion, Bracha L. Ettinger proposes that encountering 'an image can carry a transformative potentiality for a subject when the subject enters into relations of fascination with its site (or timespace) of fascination.' The term fascination is elaborated as an alternative subjectivizing stratum parallel to Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze as *fascinum*. For more on this topic see the essay "Fascination and the Girl-to-m/Other Matrixial Feminine Difference," in *Psychoanalysis and the Image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Griselda Pollock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 72. See also, *The Matrixial Gaze: Vision as Non-verbal Intensity* in this chapter.

⁷⁶ The writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous boldly states that 'organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organizations subject to man.' Critiques of logocentrism and phallogocentrism in psychoanalysis can be found in a number of Cixous' works. See Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," in *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 64.

stress on the relationship between subjectivity and art-writing in Chapter Three, *The Physicality of Ideas: Writing and Embodiment*.

For now, it will suffice to say that words can be thought of as the expression and hence release of negative/positive affects. However, when we follow the quote through, Milner offers the second clue, that “thinking only in words” has created a “split between mind and body.” Milner suggests that artworking, thinking in/with images, does something that brings the mind and body closer together.

However, how the affect moves from the subject and *goes into* the object is eclipsed. And it is this information which is crucial to an understanding of how the mind and body work on a continuum during creative processes. For this reason, Brennan’s hypothesis that the life drive incites a form of living attention that unites the mind with the body, provides the theoretical ground to unpack what “thinking” means when it is structured or directed otherwise. When the divisions between subject and object, mind and body, are not clearly divisible and when they are expressed through non-linguistic processes. Or, even in ways where language can be the form of expression, but one where “deliberate action” is not entirely deliberated by the subject. That is, when the subject is no longer in control of the activity (because of the affective impact it entails) but feels inspired to act, create or respond without pre-meditation based on an affective encounter with a work of art. I propose that auto/biographical art-writing is such an activity, and this activity has much to reveal about the ego during the process of living attention it repays.

Brennan theorizes living attention as a biological force, an energy that can be transmitted from one individual to another through the affect of love.⁷⁷ Unlike

⁷⁷ Brennan provides examples of studies of children whose physical growth was below average because even though they were provided with material needs such as food, they lacked the material effects of love and attention. See Brennan, *Transmission*, 34-35.

negative affects such as greed and envy, the affect of love is the condition by which the subject thrives and where intellectual, creative and emotional growth can come into being. Brennan asks that we take into consideration Sigmund Freud's analyses of the psyche through the mechanisms of drives and instincts for it is here that we can think of how 'one's basic driving energy is sexual,' and how it is 'also and simultaneously a life drive.'⁷⁸ As noted earlier, psychoanalysis aims to "free" the life drive from affects that have been repressed. The libido, 'shaped in its interactions with its objects, whether these objects exist in reality or in fantasy,' manifests in the sexual drives as well as in processes that require intellectual concentration, coherence and organization.⁷⁹ Considering the close (indivisible yet distinct) associations between love, libido and the life drive, we can deduce that creative organisation is erotic.⁸⁰

But how does thinking *with* images, reflecting upon, writing *with* them, or producing them, bring the mind and body closer together? Art historian and critic James Elkins declares that 'paintings repay the attention they are given [...] the more you look, the more you feel.'⁸¹ How does this form of attention come into effect or, what does this type of attention have to say about subjectivity? More interestingly, how are artworks able to shape what Griselda Pollock defines as,

unacknowledged psychic economies that enable encounters with traumatic moments that can be processed transitively, hence be shared, transported and

⁷⁸ Brennan, *Transmission*, 35. Brennan notes that Freud assumed that the life drive and the libido are the same, while he made the distinction that the life drive is originary whereas our libido is constructed. Brennan, extends this thought to propose that the libido, as a distinct element, is not only designated to the sexual drives but it is also an active force in the attention that allows intellectual concentration.

⁷⁹ Brennan, *Transmission*, 36.

⁸⁰ I elaborate on this distinction and the role of the life drive in the section *Sublimation: A Matter of Life and Death*.

⁸¹ James Elkins, *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), PDF e-book, 6.

passed into another bearer, be that the artwork or the willing partner who comes to meet it.⁸²

This can only be understood retroactively. That is, through Brennan's notion of 'self-containment' we are offered a detailed account of how and why a subject 'presupposes that thinking can be clear of emotion and that affects can be studied as objective physiological states.'⁸³ It is self-containment that prohibits the subject from "discerning" that affective transmission is taking place.⁸⁴ It is also the process by which the ego comes to support the 'belief that it is self-contained in terms of the affects it experiences,' and it does so by separating thought from emotion, sensation from knowledge, and the self from the other.⁸⁵ These divisions also contribute to the way we employ language. So, while language can carry the affect and release it from repression, the disavowal of affective transmission can influence the associations we make between words and objects, images and others. Words can simply be words that carry no affective trace even if they are directed outwards. A moment of silence can be laden with grief or overflowing with serenity and can fill up a room even when there is no apparent action taking place.

With this information at hand, I am able to better elaborate why the practice of art-writing can be thought of as a relational, emotional, affective, physical, erotic and psychic praxis.⁸⁶ It will require an application of Brennan's hypotheses and an

⁸² Pollock, *After-affects*, xxiii.

⁸³ Brennan, *Transmission*, 1.

⁸⁴ Discernment has a specific meaning for Brennan. I use it here in its common significance as a means for distinguishing or recognizing differences, but also in Brennan's sense of doing so through the employment of sensorial faculties and educated reflection described further in the section *Brennan's Hypotheses* in this chapter.

⁸⁵ Brennan, *Transmission*, 95.

⁸⁶ I would like to clarify that I do not claim to know whether artworks are capable of transmitting energy in the way that Brennan proposes that the hormonal transmission of affect can be perceived through the faculties of smell. Rather, I am claiming to know more about how making or encountering an artwork can be an energetically charged process that arouses the viewer on a biological level. Throughout this thesis, the physical transmission of affect between viewer and artwork (sculpture, painting and all object based work) is considered as unidirectional from the subject. It is the engagement with the work, the living attention directed by the subject onto the artwork, or by the

examination of the liberating effects that can manifest when the burden of self-containment is lifted and consciousness is extended through feelings.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the practice of art-writing reveals one model of subjectivity with an ethics founded on a distinct mode of relating which I term *erotic responsiveness*. I will expand on this model at different instances in this chapter and how it conjoins Brennan's hypothesis in the sections to follow.

Brennan's Hypotheses

Brennan has been an important thinker at the intersections of psychoanalysis and feminism, relentlessly challenging established psychoanalytic and philosophical theories of subjectivity, sexuality, maternity and subject/object schemas. In 1989, in her introduction to the edited volume *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, she addressed the necessity to develop models that moved beyond phallic symbolic economies.⁸⁸ This vibrant engagement between psychoanalysis and feminism led to robust critique being developed across the fields of both clinical and cultural

creative response that it arouses, that unfolds the affective experience. An artwork and an object can nevertheless inspire or evoke feelings through the visual associations one makes. Or, and according to Ettinger, a work of art can be imbued with the artist's affects, or as Milner notes, the artist's affects can "go into" the painting. I am interested here in the idea of affect having/being a psychic nonconscious impact – prior to its emotional and therefore discursive status – prompted by an encounter with art. The encounter that prompted my thinking occurred during the live art event I attended which I describe in the introduction. In agreement with Brennan's assertion that affect is energetically and hormonally transmitted through the senses, I propose that during body-based performances physical energies are actually exchanged between artists and their audiences and can be experienced with varying degrees of intensity.

⁸⁷ Brennan contends that there are (at least) three liberating effects that are brought about by an awareness of the transmission of affect. First, the "scientific" claim is that we can 'explore communication by smell and sound in ways that can heal.' Secondly, that such an awareness would bring about an altered state of consciousness which is more attuned to feelings. Thirdly, the "spiritual" proposition is that it offers 'an understanding of our lacks and faults and sins.' See Brennan, *Transmission*, 95.

⁸⁸ Teresa Brennan, introduction to *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1989), 1-23.

analysis.⁸⁹ However, as much as the critique was significantly tackling the problems of phallic binarism, there were very few alternative developments to the symbolic dimension of sexuality and subjectivity and how it is informed by the imaginary.⁹⁰ Brennan has been amongst many feminist theorists who insisted that psychosis is not the only possibility outside Oedipal logic⁹¹, but she is one of the few to have developed that possibility specifically through the reconceptualization of affect as physical transmission. Brennan highlights how transference, counter-transference, projection and projective identification are all psychoanalytic methods that support the idea that affects may be transmitted. She cites Wilfred Bion's "alpha function", Daniel Stern's account of the mother/infant relationship and Jean Laplanche's theory of the "enigmatic signifier" as examples where affect is framed as unconscious communication and inscription.⁹² However, Brennan notes that even the object-relations theorists hesitate to 'think physically', which makes her argument on affects

⁸⁹ In Britain, since the mid-seventies, the work of Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose has aimed to reconcile feminism and psychoanalysis (especially the work of Freud and Lacan) while remaining critical of phallogocentric views on femininity and female sexuality. See Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1985). In the field of social psychoanalysis, Nancy Chodorow draws from the work of Karen Horney (*Feminine Psychology*, 1967) in the vein of object-relations theories and towards the development of pre-Oedipal concepts that focus on the mother-child bond. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (California: University of California Press, 1999).

⁹⁰ In an effort to develop psychoanalytic accounts that respond to female sexuality, feminist psychoanalysis has had the pitfall of developing models that respond to heterosexual and heteronormative subjectivities. Furthermore, new binaries develop when identities are framed as either socially and culturally constructed or essentially and biologically determined. See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" in *Signs* 5, no. 4 (University of Chicago Press: Summer, 1980), 631-660. Toril Moi, states that 'psychoanalysis still needs to be creatively transformed for feminist purposes, the fact remains that feminism needs a non-essentialist theory of human sexuality and desire in order to understand the power relations between the sexes.' See Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine," in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 131.

⁹¹ See Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Cornell University Press, 1984) and Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁹² Brennan, *Transmission*, 32 & 41.

unique in that it stresses the physical dimension of affective transmission and how it is later rationalised (processed or repudiated) in the mind of the subject.⁹³

Brennan's theoretical premise differs from general psychoanalytic understandings of affect by forging two main distinctions.⁹⁴ Firstly, Brennan puts forward the hypothesis that affects are 'independent of the individual experiencing them' and may be transmitted from one individual or group to another.⁹⁵ Brennan broadly termed the study of affects and their transmission (or connective capacity) as 'energetics.'⁹⁶ She makes a persuasive claim that 'energetic connections' have been eclipsed from current discourses on affect due to the conventional 'tendency to think in subject/object terms,' developed since the seventeenth century philosophical shift towards interior consciousness.⁹⁷ By framing affect as self-originating and often

⁹³ Ibid., 23 & 41.

⁹⁴ While there are ongoing developments in work that examines the intersections of psychoanalysis and affect, Brennan's innovation lies in articulating affect as energetic transmission. Brennan's recourse to physiology (smell, hormones) to establish the psychological shift during transmission is not the focus of this research. An emphasis on neurophysiological proof of affect (and less so transmission) has similarly been the basis of research by Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique*, no. 31 (1995): 83-109 and William E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). I retreat to Brennan's elaboration for how her hypotheses may provide useful ways to reexamine the connection between the life drive and creativity through a psychoanalytic framework. For an overview of affect, transmission and psychoanalysis in relation to new materialist vitalism in studies of sociology and cultural theory see Lisa Blackman, "Affect, Relationality and the 'Problem of Personality'," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (2008): 23-47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407085157>. For an overview of theories on emotion and affect see Kristyn Gorton, "Theorizing Emotion and Affect: Feminist engagements," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 3 (2007) 333-348, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107082369>.

⁹⁵ Brennan, *Transmission*, 13.

⁹⁶ Teresa Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a new Economy*, (Taylor & Francis e-library, 2003. PDF e-book), 10.

⁹⁷ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 10. Barbara Johnson also notes that 'the distinction between "persons" and "things" may here be a legacy of the Enlightenment in the twenty-first century.' See Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 3. The Subject of Enlightenment and interiority has been the basis of much feminist and postcolonial critique and the literature is too vast as to be able to condense it here. Brennan's work on the subject/object distinction traces a pre-socratic non-unified conception of the subject that transforms with Plato's inauguration of the unified individual who embodies clear subject/object parameters. Brennan notes that from Plato onwards there are few western and modern exceptions to the idea of the self-contained subject such as the work of philosopher Baruch Spinoza. See Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 45-51. For an analysis of how philosophers (Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche) and psychologists (Francis Galton amongst others) dealt with aesthetics and value in this period in a way that perpetuated gender, racial and class bias in the arts, see the still pertinent chapter "Scientific Facts and Aesthetic Values," by Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 124-133.

unconscious, psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity provide narratives that perpetuate the idea that the human is ‘the source of all agency’, ‘energetically separate’ and inside a ‘shell [...] called the ego’.⁹⁸ To this effect, psychoanalysis figures the individual as the “subject” in relation to all its others as “objects”.

The philosopher Kelly Oliver has lauded Brennan’s notion of intersubjective energies, their exchange and circulation between people, as one of the ‘most revolutionary’ theories that can offer ‘tools to develop an ethics and politics of difference with a radical responsibility for others and the environment.’⁹⁹ The notion of “energetics” can be traced back to Brennan’s first book *Interpretation of the Flesh* and it is repeated and applied throughout her work albeit in various forms and for different end results (from the psychic mechanisms of femininity and masculinity to the psychology behind environmental destruction). It is also of cardinal significance to the development of her hypotheses on affective transmission in her last book, and especially of interest in that “energetics” turned to biology and the sciences for “proof” of transmission. This is a noteworthy point, for it seems that the transmission of affect (a revolutionary idea) has had no basis for verification when it was corroborated by equally untenable methods such as psychoanalysis, metapsychology or, Brennan’s most criticised approaches, theology and mysticism. Following the publication of five books and numerous essays on the topic, her “hypotheses,” as well as her personal infectious energy, have always been met with an equal amount of passionate inspiration as well as scepticism.¹⁰⁰ This paradox remains.

⁹⁸ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 11.

⁹⁹ Kelly Oliver, “Living A Tension,” in *Living Attention: On Teresa Brennan*, eds. Alice A. Jardine et al. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 14 & 21.

¹⁰⁰ It is interesting to note that there are a number of expositions of Brennan’s work which involve an elaboration on her character described in terms of her affective energy. While most writers attest to her personal energy they do not always respond to her thesis on energetics with an equivalent amount of persuasion. See Alice A. Jardine et al., eds., *Living Attention: On Teresa Brennan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007). While the majority of Brennan’s work deals with self-

The second distinction can also be traced back to *Interpretation of the Flesh*, where Brennan introduces her thoughts on how the self-contained, self-originating subject came to be the norm rather than the exception. Within a year, Brennan followed up with the publication of *History after Lacan*, to expose how the illusion of the energetically self-contained subject originates with the “foundational fantasy”: the fantasy that the primary caregiver is the passive container of the infant’s projected affects.¹⁰¹ Brennan tracks how this ‘hallucinatory fantasy’ produces a self-contained subjectivity typically described in the work of psychoanalysts Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein.¹⁰² The purpose of exposing the “foundational fantasy” is to demonstrate how our natural environment has become the surface for the human ego to “act out” originary fantasies of separation from the mother. Brennan carefully attends to how psychic mechanisms of separation, distanciation and objectification become naturalized processes by which the subject comes to define their distinct identity. She argues that if these are the culturally endorsed processes by which we come to define ourselves “against” others on a psychic level, then it is no surprise that the same mechanisms are at play when we seek to define (and hence control) the external world.

The effects of Brennan’s “foundational fantasy” can be demonstrated in a number of systems that rely on subject-object antagonisms whereby the subject is always located at the centre of meaning and action.¹⁰³ For instance, technology, the

containment, energetics and subject/object distinctions, it is the final work *The Transmission of Affect* which deals exclusively with proving that physical energy is transmissible.

¹⁰¹ Teresa Brennan, *History After Lacan* (Taylor & Francis e-library, 2003), PDF e-book, 11-12.

¹⁰² By thinking through intersubjective relations in energetic terms Brennan seeks to shake ‘the illusion that subjects’ mental or psychical processes are individually self-contained, an illusion that can only be maintained when these processes are regarded as unphysical.’ The concept of the ‘foundational fantasy’ borrows from her earlier work *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud & Femininity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), 34.

¹⁰³ In *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916-17), Freud asserted that there had been three great wounds to the ‘naïve self-love of men.’ Firstly, the Copernican revolution made man recognise that he is ‘not the centre of the universe but only a tiny fragment of a cosmic system,’ secondly, that

environment, animals and culture can all be considered as the objects created and/or regulated by humans. In order to cement this perception into place, it is necessary for the subject to hold on to the illusion that these objects have no agency or affective ability, thus denying that they too can have an effect on the subject's mental and physical state.¹⁰⁴

I rely on this hypothesis to examine how writing about art may similarly reproduce a pattern whereby aesthetics are the "object" of analysis by a self-contained subject. And, that there is a lineage of practice and thinking whereby the writer of aesthetics must necessarily "objectify" an artwork (or artist) to formulate, or rigidly hold onto, his/her own distinct identity. Therefore, the idea of "acting out" onto the artwork/artist (the two are often regrettably conflated) can also be figured as the effect of the 'foundational fantasy.' A process that entails a denial of affective transmission, in order to maintain a distinct identity from the object under analysis. I aim to make this argument clearer in the section *Art-Writing is in the Situation of a Fulcrum* by elaborating on the disparity between art criticism and art-writing, both as literary forms and for how they consequently activate distinct psychic mechanisms during their production. In the next section I elaborate on some of the productive associations between Brennan's hypotheses on subjectivity and how these can relate to art-writing.

Charles Darwin reduced man's 'privileged place in creation' to animal nature and, lastly, 'human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind.' See Sigmund Freud, "Fixation to Traumas - The Unconscious," in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 1-24, ed. Ivan Smith (2010), 3361.

¹⁰⁴ Brennan, *Lacan*, 14.

If Brennan's hypotheses encountered art-writing what would they do?

Returning to Brennan's hypotheses, it is with her final book *The Transmission of Affect* that her theories come full circle. Brennan's sources are vast, drawing from psychoanalysis, science, group psychology and theology. As the philosopher Susan James notes, Brennan employs a different set of tools and languages to grab 'the attention and sympathy of scientists, historians, philosophers, psychoanalysts, phenomenologists, and theologians.'¹⁰⁵ In some ways, Brennan directs her ambitious project to the very theories that have consolidated the 'historical aberration' of the self-contained subject of the Western tradition.¹⁰⁶ Brennan argues that because self-containment requires a structure of subjectivity where affects are perceived as isolated in the person, the subject maintains a sense of self by (consciously or unconsciously) fixating on the idea that feelings stem from the individual and are therefore predisposed to regulation and control. Contrary to this common assertion, Brennan claims that fantasies, symptoms and impulses are not sourced from the individual's psyche, but they are the effect of a broader social order.¹⁰⁷

This is not to be confused with psychoanalytic postulations such as Jacques Lacan's theory that the subject is interpellated by the (always phallic) symbolic, or feminist philosopher and theorist Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity'¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Susan James, "Repressed Knowledge and the Transmission of Affect," in *Living Attention: On Teresa Brennan*, eds. Alice A. Jardine et al (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 47.

¹⁰⁶ Brennan, *Transmission*, 25.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹⁰⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1997), xiv-xxv. While this might seem like an outdated position on the construction of identity, on which Butler has offered much more nuanced perspectives with work such as *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (California: Stanford University Press, 1997), it remains a dominant framework of analysis to examine artwork and performance that makes reference to identity politics, especially at the intersections of gender and sexuality. See Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield. *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 12 & 41. For a relational approach to performativity that aims to bridge the gap between the material and the discursive see Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to

whereby identity is constructed through the reiteration of sociocultural acts, even if the construction of identity *also* entails these processes. Unlike these examinations of how language, culture and discourse shape and impact the psychic and social realisation of the subject, Brennan posits the affective dimension *before* its symbolic and representational conscious register. Affects do not rely on linguistic/discursive transmission; they are extremely physical, prior to cognition, and can produce material impact even when outside symbolization. In fact, Brennan goes to the extent to propose that ‘affects and impulses pre-exist the infant’ and what is enacted on the level of the social is a fantasy that is realized ‘in the social order, rather than the psyche.’¹⁰⁹ Of course, the social does “get inside” the biological and Brennan’s theory of the transmission of affect provides exactly that: the *means* by which something gets inside. By focusing her analysis on the pre-Oedipal stage of identity, Brennan does not deny that social factors shape sexual, gender and overall identity. Rather, she understands “social force” as that which eventually cements the Oedipalisation process into fixed identity structures, demonstrated for instance in the

Matter,” *Signs* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 801-831, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>. For performativity in the arts and as a mode of political mobilisation see Judith Butler and Athina Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Polity Press, 2013): 176-183. The authors here postulate a plural notion of performativity which constitutes a ‘performativity of plurality and performativity in plurality.’ Interestingly, Athanasiou states that ‘affect, in this context, signifies affecting and being affected by the corporeal dynamic of relatedness, mutual vulnerability, and endurance. It involves being beside oneself: taken out, given over, moved, and moving.’ It is in the aggregation of bodies that publicly protest that ‘corporeal vulnerability and revolt become each other’s indeterminate condition of possibility. The body becomes a turbulent performative occasion, one that both constrains and enables action qua embodied situatedness and extension. Perhaps this multivalent interaction of bodies, in all its affective and political intensities of empathy, kindness, and alliance – but also of tension, distress, or conflict – opens ways for thinking the materiality and affectivity of embodied agency without restoring the body as a hypostatized foundation of identitarian action and agency.’ This extract indicates an interpretation of affect that could benefit from Brennan’s theorizations of affective transmission. For instance, one could examine how an otherwise inert subject can be mobilized through ‘empathy’ and ‘kindness,’ as Athanasiou posits, but also of ‘attention’ and ‘love’ towards the other that had until the moment of collectivity been insufficiently received. Brennan stipulates that through the concept of energetic transmission in gatherings we can better understand how, for instance, ‘working-class participants are carrying the affective refuse of a social order that positions them on the receiving end of an endless stream of minor and major humiliations, from economic and physical degradations in the workplace to the weight of the negative affects discarded by those in power.’ See Brennan, *Transmission*, 67.

¹⁰⁹ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 8-9.

correlation between masculinity equating activity, or femininity corresponding to passivity.¹¹⁰ The fundamental difference being that for Brennan the social force bears a *psychophysical* force, more than it does a cultural or socio-economic impact. Furthermore, this psychophysical force can equally alter our biological make up. In fact, becoming attuned to the psychophysical powers of the world, is one of the ways by which we can shake the fixity of our bounded selves or protect ourselves from influences that affect us from without.

Brennan's theorisations, especially in *The Transmission of Affect*, aim to refigure ideas of human relationality by proposing a way to understand how we can come to 'feel another's feelings.'¹¹¹ By exposing how the subject is predisposed and socially upheld by the illusion of self-containment, Brennan aims to offer an alternative model for human relations. One of the concrete actions she proposes is the process of tuning into 'finer feelings' which she terms 'discernment.'¹¹² Finer feelings are feelings that assess sensations (produced by affects) that through a process of self-reflection, meditation, psychoanalytic sessions or exchanges with friends can lead to an accurate articulation.¹¹³ Brennan's succinct explanation is that 'feelings are sensations that have found a match in words' and in this sense feelings are differentiated from affects, as affects can be transmitted in the absence of language.¹¹⁴ However, the necessary process for matching thoughts to the affects that we feel requires an activation of the logic of living attention. In Brennan's words,

¹¹⁰ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 226. Brennan states that 'The available socio-economic material opportunities are evidently critical in relation to social force as much as social circumstance, if not more so. Understanding their effects on, and the concept of, the physical force of masculinity and femininity in general, takes us back to the two-stage imprinting process, and then back to the father.' The two-stage process and its correlation with language are examined further in the section *The Physicality of Ideas: Writing and Embodiment* in this chapter.

¹¹¹ Brennan, *Transmission*, 27.

¹¹² See the last chapter "The Education of the Senses" in Brennan, *Transmission*, 116-138.

¹¹³ Brennan, *Transmission*, 121.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5, 19 & 120.

any faculty of discernment must involve a process whereby affects pass from the state of sensory registration to a state of cognitive or intelligent reflection; this does not mean that the process of reflection is without affect, just that the affect is other than the affect that is being reflected upon.¹¹⁵

By Brennan's argument, a process of "sensory registration" requires an active deployment of the physical senses to calculate, reason and infer in words. The assumption that one is energetically self-contained will often transpire as the main obstacle to reconnecting thinking with sensing, the mind with the body, the self with the other.

However, psychoanalytic and literary scholar Amber Jacobs, notes that Brennan's strategy to reveal the 'illusion of the autonomous unified affectively self-contained subject – in the humanities at any rate – is well and truly undermined, and [...] the critique exhausted.'¹¹⁶ I should remind us here that Sigmund Freud stated that psychoanalysis is a threatening enterprise precisely because it undermines the liberal and rational subject of the Enlightenment by introducing the destabilising agency of the unconscious.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, a century later, Brennan's work clearly indicates that the strategies provided by psychoanalysis are still in need of extensive revision, especially when affective agency is regulated by the self-contained mechanisms of the ego.

Written in 2006, it seems that while Jacobs' critique that the self-contained subject is undermined holds true, the illusion of self-containment nevertheless persists in numerous fields and new forms.¹¹⁸ Art criticism has been considered a

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 120.

¹¹⁶ Amber Jacobs, "Perspectives on Teresa Brennan's The Transmission of Affect," in *Women: A Cultural Review* 17, no. 1 (2006): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574040600628724>

¹¹⁷ In this thesis, see the section *Brennan's Hypotheses*, p. 52, footnote 100 for Freud's 'three great wounds'.

¹¹⁸ Work on subjectivities in the humanities has certainly been proliferating. Not only is the 'self-contained subject' undermined, but alternative subjects have been theorised through more relational theories. See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Patricia MacCormack, *Posthuman*

field entrenched in modes of perception enabled by what literary theorist Rita Felski describes as the general tendency in fields of critical reading: ‘analytical detachment, critical vigilance, guarded suspicion; [...] the uncontrollable urge to put everything in scare quotes. Problematizing, interrogating, and subverting are the default options, the deeply grooved patterns of contemporary thought.’¹¹⁹

Writing *about* art follows similar patterns of analysis where, as Felski notes, value is found in the ‘reading and none to the objects read’; when critical engagement means ‘keeping one’s distance from a work of art in order to place it in an explanatory frame, whether drawn from politics, psychoanalysis, or philosophy.’¹²⁰ Such a modality of reading and writing from a distance has encompassed the field of art writing, art history, art criticism and theory of art where the hierarchical pattern of subject over object reproduces itself even in the most astute poststructuralist (and post-“self-contained”) elaborations. While the humanities offer robust critique to de-center the hegemonic subject, in the case of art criticism, there is the danger that criticism can decenter the artwork or artist in order to centralize the critic’s reading and interpretation.¹²¹ In other words, by dismantling

Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory (Ashgate, 2012. PDF e-book); Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (London: Duke University Press, 2007). However, this proliferation might be a necessary way to ensure that the self-contained subject *remains* undermined. Furthermore, Puar’s work is a good example of how alternative subjectivities are necessary to respond to the epidemic of nationalism, xenophobia and white supremacy. An epidemic which is increasingly sentient in the last few years and indicates that the “undermining” that happens in the humanities is either not accessible to a broader audience, or that there is still much more work to be done.

¹¹⁹ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 3.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹²¹ I am here thinking of recent work by new materialist feminist approaches such as Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Wilson or Vicki Kirby whose analyses focus on the material effects of human embodiment. Posthumanist approaches pose a challenge to anti-humanist or poststructuralist strategies to “decentralize” power particularly by bringing the body centre stage. These perspectives promote theories of relationality, intersectionality and the inextricable interconnections (and power relations) between the subject and technology, environment, non-human others and so forth. But while art and culture are being analysed through the synergies provided by posthuman theories, there is little comprehensive work that examines the materiality of art-writing responses to artwork and their effects on the human psyche. Kirby argues that textual strategies that draw from anatomy in order to theorize, are then interpreted as metaphorical references to anatomy, in order to purge them of any essentialist claim. Kirby argues, ‘the pervasive yet unpalatable belief that the anatomical body locates the

the myth of the autonomous unified artist-subject we often run the risk of replacing it with an “autonomous unified affectively self-contained” critic. As the cultural theorist and critic Mieke Bal observes in her monograph *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider*, most ventures that select a single work of art are ‘an attempt to redirect art-writing to the art it writes about but too often subordinates and subjects to the derivative status of illustration of the art-writer’s argument.’¹²²

Jacobs is right to point out that simply highlighting the illusion of self-containment might not be enough. However, she concludes with a more optimistic note, suggesting that perhaps Brennan’s strategy was aiming to conceptualize

theories, cultural and epistemological models and discourses that are underpinned by a different logic, a different structure in order to break the stagnation of contemporary theory-making that can only critique and not innovate.¹²³

While Brennan’s work in a sense provides a different logic, through recourse to biological evidence, it rarely draws from culture to substantiate or give examples of the mysterious exchange of energies and affects and what positive effect they might have on a creative and ethico-aesthetic level.¹²⁴ However, by bringing

unarguably real body, the literal body, the body whose immovable and immobilizing substance must be secured outside the discussion. This improper body is quarantined for fear that its ineluctable immediacy will leave us no space for change, no chance to be otherwise, no place from which to engender a different future.’ See Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (London: Routledge, 1997), 70.

¹²² Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 7.

¹²³ Jacobs, “Perspectives,” 114.

¹²⁴ A similar observation is noted by Jacobs where she states that Brennan ‘did not take examples from life or even other disciplines/practices outside psychoanalysis in which the transmission of affects have surely been experienced.’ See Jacobs, “Perspectives,” 112. Conversely, I have come across ample examples where Brennan draws from various disciplines to substantiate her argument, such as, mysticism, Christian moral philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas’s typologies of passions and philosophers such as Benedictus de Spinoza and his notion of affects (*affectus*). A number of examples taken from “ordinary” life can be found in Brennan’s descriptions of fantasies of revenge (pp.134-135), sensorial responses (p.136) as well as examples taken from lived experiences narrated by psychoanalysts Darlene Ehrenberg and Wilfred Bion (p.126-127), to name but a few. However, on the topic of art, and the relationship between affects and creativity, there are few and scattered references, most notably on the writings of mystics ‘capturing some part of the union of spirit and sensuality that was lost with the fall into a divided mind and body - into the feeble form of recollected

Brennan's conceptual frameworks into relation with cultural analysis, it is my aim to outline a cartography of alternative responses to aesthetics – responses that embrace emotional, physical and intellectual elaborations – to argue that another model of subjectivity is necessary for examining auto/biographical art-writing. For this reason, the consilience of Cavarero's framework of storytelling as a relational ethic with Brennan's development of living attention as the basis of human flourishing can provide an important framework to examine a new variant of the art writer and apply it to the art-writing response. This innovation will become clearer when the discussion turns to subject/object dynamics and through the analysis and unfolding of art-writing. In turn, Brennan's hypotheses provide an original way to re-examine the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, self and other, specifically through the problematizing of subject/object schemas within philosophical and psychoanalytic discourses on subjectivity and creativity.

By amplifying the distinction between writing *about* art and writing *with* art, the former is figured as following the mechanisms of a self-contained subjectivity while the latter relies on a psychic and erotic activity closer to the way Brennan figures the mechanisms of the life drive and/or love and positive affects. *Erotic responsiveness* relies on the proposition that writing *with* art is mobilized by the life drive because of the subject's deployment of psychophysical energy. In other words, living attention towards an artwork requires a subjectivity that seeks to communicate and make connections with others, diverting from the routine of a subject analysing,

words.' (p.159). However, there are enough references across her work and ample in depth work on the senses, particularly in relation to vision (simultaneously an enabling and disabling sense for the purposes of art-writing), that when pulled together can strengthen the part about creativity and living attention. See Teresa Brennan, "The Contexts of Vision from a Specific Standpoint," in *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, eds. Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (New York: Routledge, 1996), 217-230.

dissecting and interpreting an object. In this sense, writing *with* art, moves beyond a bounded notion of the self and towards a relational model of subjectivity.

“Art Writing is in the situation of a fulcrum”¹²⁵

At the brink of meaning, poised between abjection and regression, writing as *doing* displaces writing as meaning; writing becomes meaningful in the material, dis/continuous act of writing.

– Della Pollock¹²⁶

Professor of philosophy and film critic Noël Carroll states in his book *On Criticism*, that criticism is in fact an ‘operation of evaluation’ whereby the critic engages in ‘methods of description, contextualization, classification, elucidation, interpretation, and analysis.’¹²⁷ The primary purpose of this “operation” is to produce a type of criticism that can ‘say what is *good* in a work.’¹²⁸ This activity proposes that the critic contrives meaning, assesses an object under analysis and employs methods that can “fix” an object into a position for (good or bad) evaluation. Securing an object at a distance (energetically speaking) or establishing the object’s existence as a separate entity from the self, can facilitate an interpretation or viewpoint *about* the object. However, what happens in cases where the relationship to an artwork overturns

¹²⁵ The title directly quotes a co-authored manifesto produced when the MFA in Art Writing was running at Goldsmiths University of London by the teaching team Maria Fusco, Yve Lomax, Michael Newman and Adrian Rifkin, *Eleven Statements Around Art Writing*, <http://blog.frieze.com/11-statements-around-art-writing/>

¹²⁶ Della Pollock, “Performing Writing,” in *The Ends of Performance*, eds. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 75.

¹²⁷ Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (New York & London: Routledge, 2009), 9.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

presumed physical and energetic boundaries? For instance, in the live performances of artist Adrian Howells, where physicality is a necessary part of the work and the audience (and critics) are entering a space of intimacy and engagement with each other's bodies, emotions and senses.¹²⁹ Or, how do we assess forms of writing that respond to a painting or sculpture in unorthodox ways such as lyrical and evocative descriptions that borrow from the age-old tradition of ekphrasis?¹³⁰ What can an exploration of these unconventional forms of practice, process and creative response tell us about the way meaning is constructed through writing *with* art? And, how or why is writing *about* art a distinct form?

It is no surprise that forms of art that resist fixity, such as performance, public actions and experimental theatre, are accompanied by substantial literature that both questions the methodologies of art criticism, while producing unconventional forms of art-writing *as* criticism.¹³¹ As Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson declare in their introduction to the edited volume *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, live art is a process which is 'no longer viewed as a static object with a single,

¹²⁹ For a description of a "missed" encounter between Howell's work and a critic see the first chapter of Jennifer Doyle, "Introducing Difficulty," in *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (London: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹³⁰ The art historian Jaś Elsner argues that 'art history [...] is nothing other than ekphrasis, or more precisely an extended argument built on ekphrasis.' See Jaś Elsner, "Art History as Ekphrasis," *Art History* 33, no. 1 (February 2010): 10-27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2009.00720.x>

¹³¹ For a well-known example of art-writing that fuses autobiography and theory see Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1996). Writing that interlaces autoethnography, diary writing and letter correspondence, which reads as a manifesto and a critical commentary on the role of performance art within the general sphere of the arts and society, see Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "In Defence of Performance Art," in *Live: Art and Performance*, ed. Adrian Heathfield (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 76-85. On the topic of performing knowledge and the similarities between performance and writing, see an autoethnographic performative writing approach by Heather M. Carver, "Methodology of the Heart: A Performative Writing Response," *Liminalities* 3, no. 1 (2007). For more recent examples, the groundbreaking work of Portuguese writer, theorist and artist Grada Kilomba whose interdisciplinary work fuses performance, lecture, postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, poetry and autobiography as a way to decolonise the Eurocentric production of knowledge. See Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*, 2nd ed. (Munster: Unrast Verlag), 2010.

prescribed signification that is communicated unproblematically and without default from the maker to an alert, knowledgeable, universalized viewer.’¹³²

Attempts to force apart the alliance between criticism and universalism persist to this day, despite the overwhelming scrutiny the field of art criticism has received since the advent of foundational texts such as artist and art historian Giorgio Vasari’s *The Lives of the Artists* (1550) to contemporary art theory such as Hal Foster’s influential book *The Return of the Real* (1996).¹³³ While these texts, and the general sphere of art criticism and theory, have offered tools for interpreting the culture we encounter, it has been noted that “culture” cannot be a catch-all enterprise, because it is often the result of a particular intimate milieu, a geographical and socio-political context and especially the critic’s background that come to define what counts as worthy of cultural interpretation.¹³⁴ While I agree with a number of critiques from the hard and perpetual work of minority discourses and politics that highlight criticism’s exclusions, meritocratic standards, elitism, discrimination and short-sighted understanding or lack of investment in the diversity of knowledge production, I do not take up these operations of bias as central to my argument

¹³² Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, introduction to *Performing the Body, Performing the Text*, eds. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), PDF e-book, 1.

¹³³ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*. Trans. by Julia Conaway Bondanella & Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the end of the Century* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1996).

¹³⁴ The art historian Linda Nochlin instigated the discussion on ‘how the white western male viewpoint, unconsciously accepted as *the* viewpoint of the art historian, may – and does – prove to be inadequate not merely on moral and ethical grounds, or because it is elitist, but on purely intellectual ones.’ This quote is found in the 1971 essay “Why have there been no Great Women Artists?” in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 146. On the production of the “male genius” in the arts see the incisive historical work of Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women’s Press, 1989). For an excellent critique of how hegemonic euro-patriarchal and euro-feminist discourses have led to the erasure and marginalization of black female voices in the arts see the 1993 essay by Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, “In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists,” in *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*, eds. Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), PDF e-book, 231-270. Most recently, the artist and writer Hannah Black made a powerful exposition of how artists who address race and gender in their work are employed as ‘evidence of the institution’s purity,’ serving as a marker of ‘universality, [...] artificially cleansed of race/gender’ while simultaneously being ‘called on to represent it.’ See Hannah Black, “The Identity Artist and the Identity Critic,” *Artforum* 54, no. 10 (Summer 2016): 338.

between art-writing and art criticism. I do however take stock of these critiques to address the generalizable and hegemonic stance afforded by texts that provide interpretative tools with the expectation that these tools (and the resulting interpretations) would work across contexts and cultures in their multifarious pluralities. They don't. But the issues are not strictly a matter of clarifying what type of discourse is appropriate for a designated field.¹³⁵ Instead of setting up art-writing and art criticism as oppositional fields, it must be emphasized that it is the concurrence of both methods within narrative practice that has led to major innovations in both art-writing and traditional criticism.¹³⁶

For the purposes of this research, I am interested in elucidating the complexity of auto/biographical art-writing – a distinct field and methodological approach – what it can reveal about psychic processes and in turn what can be gleaned from these narratives to account for discourses on subjectivity in psychophysical terms. In a similar move to Jones and Stephenson who claim that an 'embodied reception of visual artworks is a process that can be engaged as performative,' I try to bring the performative, the embodied as well as the erotic function to the fore, to assess how it figures in textual form as well as how it implements different modes of reading and response.¹³⁷

However, the embodied affective impact should not be restricted to looking, that is, it is not solely the visual or representational that can affect us, and neither

¹³⁵ Part Two of this thesis addresses the distinctions between theory, criticism and art-writing in more depth, drawing from feminist and black writers.

¹³⁶ For work that advocates for new forms of writing and criticism that do not follow hegemonic discourses, see the collection of essays by Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red. Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York & London: Routledge, 1991). Drawing from autobiographical accounts and postcolonial theory see bell hooks, *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995). Fusing personal narratives and prose to examine artwork, see Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Vintage, 1996). An excellent example that merges the personal with the critical, the humorous with the theoretical, see Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹³⁷ Jones and Stephenson, Introduction, 2.

does the affect necessarily find adequate expression in language. As art historian, critic and theorist Griselda Pollock notes, the material aspects of an image, their tangibility and affective force, cannot be divorced from the psychophysical effect they produce beyond our visual senses:

We think of images as visual, yet in art they are material and tangible. A material object, a painting, creates a field not simply of vision. It solicits our gaze not at the object but *with* what it tips into the field of vision through colours and gestures that trigger sensations of pulse, rhythm, and movement – as actually deposited by the painting body in its creative work. In turn, these sensations open up time as we are drawn further towards their energies, flows, and above all, their affects. We are led to affectivity through the psychological strings that the materials themselves set vibrating.¹³⁸

Auto/biographical art-writing attempts to convey the “vibrations” that galvanize the story that arises from a psychophysical aesthetic encounter. This venture presents a new set of difficulties both for the narrator and the reader’s engagement with such narratives. As Kate Love argues, it might not be possible to properly communicate an experience with art, when the ‘sensual, affecting, bodily *and* cognitive moment that is experience is seen as either outside of or as entirely collapsed to language.’¹³⁹ Love advocates for writing that attempts ‘to retain some sort of estimation of what actually *experiencing* something feels like, in contrast, say, to the feeling of *understanding* or *knowing* something [...] to think about the work that the word experience *does*.’¹⁴⁰ I turn to responses that attempt to capture these occasions that Love describes as “sensual” and “affecting”, psychophysical instances that can lead to confusion and incoherence or a disjunction between action and speech. Moments where our cognitive faculties struggle to translate an aesthetic

¹³⁸ Griselda Pollock, “Between Painting and the Digital: Matrixial Aesthetics Creates Matrixial Thought-Forms,” in *And My Heart Wound-Space*, ed. Bracha L. Ettinger (Leeds: The Wild Pansy Press, 2015), 262.

¹³⁹ Kate Love, “The Experience of Art as a Living Through of Language,” in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 169.

¹⁴⁰ Love, “Experience of Art,” 169.

experience in words. Love describes these encounters as located ‘both in language but yet *not quite* in language, at the limit of language but unequivocally not *beyond*.’¹⁴¹

I figure the embracing of these moments in the form of auto/biographical art-writing to mean that the writer has taken on the task of responding to the experience of an artwork with what Brennan formulates as loving, living attention. Brennan argues that as ‘love [...] cannot really be divorced from attention and, therefore, from thinking,’ it only follows that reason and logic must necessarily flow from the affect of love.¹⁴² Attentive love, or living and loving attention, manifest ‘forms of resistance’ that counteract negative affects through the deployment of energy which is both ‘erotic and cohering.’¹⁴³ I propose that the auto/biographical art-writing task does not merely follow cognitive exercises or purely performative forms of writing. As Love suggests, an aesthetic encounter can enable a recognition of what we

have just lived through (as an experience) was in some way an experience of a negotiation *with* language – or that there is language – a feeling which corresponds to the openness of experience that is made possible by experience itself.¹⁴⁴

While Love’s description resonates with my framing of erotic responsiveness as an attempt to write *with* aesthetic experience, what differentiates auto/biographical art-writing from performative writing or writing *with* experience, is an emphasis on the psychophysical impact that such experience has on the subject. By focusing on the psychic dimension of experience and response, I aim to outline both a new formulation of the subject, as well as an ethical aspect that arises from the process of

¹⁴¹ Love, “Experience of Art,” 169.

¹⁴² Brennan, *Transmission*, 132.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Love, “Experience of Art,” 169.

writing *with*, that draws from a relational ontology. For this reason, I have selected Cavarero's theoretical exposition of the narratable self as a suitable framework to posit experience as an unrepeatable encounter between the work and the subject writing *with* the work. The auto/biographical art-writing response is produced by the subject narrating the other's story and, to some extent, the encounter is revealed in language.

Cavarero's stress on the uniqueness of each individual provides a way to examine the intelligibility of aesthetic responses that are not restricted to the domain of art history, criticism or theory as the only legitimate forms of engaging with works of art. Rather, auto/biographical art-writing discloses not only the unrepeatability of the encounter and its unique participants, but also, that such narrative practice can only be theorised through a relational ontology of the self. While it is important to address the literary aspects of writing *with* art, it is equally significant to consider the psychic implications of responding to and with a work of art, without eclipsing the effects of such writing on subjectivity.

Auto/biographical art-writing should not only be understood as an evaluating or utilitarian mechanism, but as an emotional and/or affective response to an image or event that has impacted the writer. The primary purpose is then to express the resonance of the affective encounter (good or bad judgements are of little significance). An evaluation of the "quality" of the work, or the artwork's eminence in a variety of contexts, might not be mediated by the subject responding to the artwork. The only evaluation that might be considered would be a re-assessment of the subject's sense of self, after the subject's perception has been destabilized by an aesthetic encounter.

Conventional methods of critically approaching a work of art leave little room to elaborate on how critical operations can have a transformational effect on the subjectivity of the writer, which is where *erotic responsiveness* is of centrality.¹⁴⁵ As I shall demonstrate, there exist alternative writing practices where the subject/object distinction is radically altered. The distance between the subject and the work, in energetic terms, is bridged by the impact the work creates on the writer and by the attention that the writer bestows on a work of art. Such forms of writing *with* art call for readings that approach the writer's subjectivity in its physical, embodied, affectively and physiologically informed materiality produced by an aesthetic encounter.

The important point is not to simply produce a different technique or methodology for reading art-writing responses, but to keep in mind that a different framework of analysis is required – one that corresponds to an altogether different subject responding to artwork. A framework that considers how the storyteller is affected from without and compelled to respond to a work of art without necessarily relying on the methods of “description, contextualization, classification, elucidation, interpretation” described by Carroll. Case studies of art-writing processes and the psychic impact they produce on the subject will be examined further in Part Three. In the meantime, I turn to a deeper examination of subjectivity and how it has been reframed psychoanalytically and philosophically by employing the category of the maternal in the work of Cavarero, Brennan and Ettinger. By doing so, I aim to clarify

¹⁴⁵ For an overview of the field of “critical reading,” its professionalization, institutionalisation and how it has become the dominant discourse that postulates “uncritical reading” as the ‘unsystematic and disorganized’ form of reading susceptible to ‘identification, self-forgetfulness, reverie, sentimentality, enthusiasm, literalism, aversion, distraction’ see Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 13-38.

how new models of subjectivity have been advanced by the respective authors that propose ethical and political alternatives to the self-contained subject.

CHAPTER TWO

Incestuous Mothers: Subjectivity and Desire through the Maternal Relation

The girl needs to find ways, and many times she fails again and again to find them, for sharing in the secrets of femininity with a m/Other whose fascination she must catch in/for their shareable space. She looks for a Woman-Mother figure whom she might adore and whose secrets she would be able to share on condition that such a m/Other would open herself to allow such a sharing and accommodate her gaze. She looks for proofs of the desirability of this figure by images and symbols. Any rejection or betrayal of and by such a figure feels catastrophic for the girl who is trying to become a woman.

– Bracha L. Ettinger¹⁴⁶

The maternal as a category of inquiry in the fields of philosophy and psychoanalysis is a relatively recent enterprise in the history of Western thought.¹⁴⁷ Both Brennan and Cavarero have offered significant contributions and radical reconfigurations of the maternal in these fields. There are a number of parallelisms between their work, particularly in their unfolding of how philosophical and psychoanalytic dualisms such as mind and body, subject and object, male and female, have been hierarchically and unequally developed where the first term reigns over the latter through a negation of maternal agency or through symbolic matricide. The idea that the foundations of subjectivity begin prior to the genital stage, before the Oedipus

¹⁴⁶ Bracha L. Ettinger, “Fascinane and the Girl-to-m/Other Matrixial Feminine Difference,” in *Psychoanalysis and the Image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Griselda Pollock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 67.

¹⁴⁷ Albeit from a more sociological perspective, important work that put this category of analysis on the map includes Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995. First published, 1976) and Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995. First published 1989).

complex, and even during the prenatal stage, has been explored by a range of psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic theorists such as Alison Stone (2012), Julia Kristeva (1984), Donald Winnicott (1956) and Melanie Klein (1948) to name just a few.¹⁴⁸ However, at the intersections of subjectivity and the maternal, it is the work of artist and psychoanalyst-theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger that has been able to consolidate a framework of psychic development to produce a truly comprehensive method and vision for an alternative psychoanalytic dimension of the subject.

Ettinger's concepts provide insight into how prenatal and prematernal encounters shape psychic development and affect aesthetic experience. These concepts also lay out the ground for an ethics and politics of the subject premised on a relational ontology. While Brennan's work concurs with many of Ettinger's stipulations on the resignification of maternal agency, Brennan's analysis hinges on the role of affect and its physical as well as psychic effects. It is through Brennan's psychophysical account of affects, as they are set against the self-contained subject, that we can come to conceive of new systems of interpersonal and environmental co-affectivity, as well as responsibility. My aim is to furnish the practice of auto/biographical art-writing with an ethicoaesthetic and political dimension drawn from these new configurations of subjectivity. Even though Brennan figures creativity as a form of energetic attention sourced from the life drive, there were very few examples in her work that demonstrate how creative action or response is made to work. For this reason, Cavarero's narrative strategies can be thought of as one modality of creative resistance through living attention directed towards an other.

¹⁴⁸ Alison Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2012). Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). Donald Winnicott, "Primary Maternal Preoccupation." *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (London: Tavistock, 1956). Melanie Klein, "Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict, 1928," in *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis 1921-1945*, ed. Ernest Jones (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1948), 202-214.

Despite the many similarities between these key thinkers, there are distinctions between their approaches that can offer different functions and valuable strategies to elucidate how we respond to art as artists, writers and audiences. In the sections to follow, I will unfold the respective author's progressive concepts in more detail in order to delineate their alternative frameworks of subjectivization. These new models for thinking through the subject will be employed to consider auto/biographical art-writing responses and their effects on a psychophysical level.

Embodiment and the Exchange of Gazes

Adriana Cavarero's significant contributions to continental feminist philosophy and rigorous work on a re-evaluation of western metaphysics can perhaps only be paralleled to the work of the philosopher of sexual difference Luce Irigaray.¹⁴⁹ In fact, Cavarero explicitly notes that her work at the intersections of feminism and philosophy owes 'an enormous debt toward Luce Irigaray, second only to the one I owe Hannah Arendt'¹⁵⁰ It is by converging the thought of these two thinkers (Irigaray and Arendt) that Cavarero produces a strategy that subverts traditional readings of philosophical texts. Through a rigorous criticism of the conceptual and epistemic flaws purported by ancient Greek philosophy, Cavarero argues that reason, objectivity and methods for questioning life and ethics, have solely drawn from lives and experiences that are gendered male. Cavarero's innovation lies not only in a vigorous critique of the implicit misogyny that excludes a female symbolic from philosophical texts, but on how philosophy precludes the possibility of theorising the singularity and uniqueness of each individual. The philosopher Rosi Braidotti

¹⁴⁹ Sexual difference is a strategy that examines theoretical, philosophical, social and political propositions which are structured on the interests and perspectives of the male subject and as such do not translate or apply to the experience of women. This strategy brings embodied and epistemological perspectives to the fore in order to counteract universal claims purported across culture, society and politics. Sexual difference rejects any totalising viewpoint of subjectivity or gender. For instance, social categories such as "man" and "woman" are not necessarily structured in opposition or antagonism to each other, cannot be naturalised as if they had an essential common denominator that defines all members of that category, but should be approached as the 'the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference, and others.' See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 4. Luce Irigaray's work on sexual difference has been foundational in shaping contemporary feminist theory and literature, political movements and cultural representations. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (New York, Cornell University Press, 1985. First published 1977 by Editions de Minuit). On the influence and eventual schism between Luce Irigaray and the Italian feminist movement see Teresa De Lauretis, introduction to *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice. The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective*, ed. Teresa De Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 16-17.

¹⁵⁰ Elisabetta Bertolino, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with the Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 19, no. 1 (2008): 148.

elucidates in her introduction to *In Spite of Plato* how Cavarero's work involves the following strategies:

the desire to transcend patriarchal dualism and to reintegrate the subject in a continuum of mind and body, starting from a radical redefinition of women's relation to the mother. In this regard, following Irigaray, Cavarero traces both a historical account of phallogocentric thought and also the itinerary of female transcendence from it. I would define this as Cavarero's own brand of mimetic strategy, which is a subversive political move inspired by Luce Irigaray's work.¹⁵¹

For Cavarero, the sites of antagonism are found between the literal and the metaphorical uses of female figures and the conceptualisation of the feminine in male-authored narratives. The struggle to provide an alternative story to hegemonic portrayals of a "living for death" necessarily takes place in the fields of myth and metaphysics.¹⁵² Cavarero's tactic is to repossess and rewrite male-authored female characters found in ancient Greek philosophical texts in order to return these figures to 'their literal, as opposed to their metaphorical, significance.'¹⁵³ That is, by reappropriating these female figures, Cavarero aims to enrich the representational and symbolically impoverished culture of the feminine and of woman. Through this strategic reclamation, what becomes evident in the book *In Spite of Plato* is that in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition 'embodiedness' has often been set in opposition to mind and reason.¹⁵⁴ Cavarero unveils how the history of philosophy is

¹⁵¹ Rosi Braidotti, introduction to *In Spite of Plato*, by Adriana Cavarero, trans. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Aine O'Healy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), xiv.

¹⁵² Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, trans. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Aine O'Healy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 24-30. Cavarero draws from figures such as the mythical Odysseus narrated by Homer, or the philosopher Socrates accounted for by Plato. Both protagonists are granted heroic status not only for their accomplishments in life, but for how their acts were more significantly marked by the danger of being met with death. As Cavarero argues, 'Both are cases of a "living for death" where death itself is the emblematic figure of a kind of finitude defeated and eternalized at the same time, by the legend that grants immortality, and by philosophy that dwells near the eternal.' See Cavarero, *Plato*, 30.

¹⁵³ Cavarero, *Plato*, xiii

¹⁵⁴ Cavarero, *Plato*, 28-29. Cavarero argues that, in the case of Plato's *Phaedo*, philosophical discourse defines life by its relation to eternal life, where immortality is the achievement of the 'true life of the soul' that can supersede physical death. On the other hand, 'mere life' is represented by the

founded on a strategy that not only separates body and mind, but which simultaneously establishes a series of metaphysical operations that repetitively culminate in the production of a subject founded on matricide. Cavarero tracks how this operation is made manifest, for example, in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The god Hades abducts Persephone from her mother Demeter and takes her to the underworld to live with him. By doing so, Persephone who was Demeter's daughter, now becomes Hades' wife, and in this sense, is rendered motherless. In this first attempt to negate the role of the mother, the possibility of a 'mutual exchange of gazes between mother and daughter' is obstructed, which leads to devastating consequences which I will shortly elaborate on.¹⁵⁵

Cavarero's use of the term "gaze" is a metaphor for describing Demeter's persistence to *see* her daughter, but also to be *seen* by her.¹⁵⁶ This metaphorical exercise proposes that the exchange of gazes between mother and daughter are a necessary process of subjectivization and identification beyond the reductive prescriptions offered by a patriarchal society.¹⁵⁷ Through the lens of sexual difference philosophy, Cavarero argues that there exist a dual set of gazes directed at the mother which figure differently for each sex. Cavarero states that 'humans are bisexually differentiated, and that the common origin of both male and female is

body, a mortal entity which ceases to exist upon death. Juxtaposing two different heroes, Odysseus and Socrates, and contrasting them with the figure of Penelope, Cavarero reads a very different story in the act of Penelope's weaving, which here manifests as a reconnecting of the mind and body. Cavarero notes that, 'If untying is the work of philosophy, Penelope [...] simply weaves together what the philosophers have undone.' Penelope is presented as a figure who experiences life as a unity 'where mind and body are joined indissolubly together.' This strategy of creating an alternative interpretation to how women have so far been figured – mythicized, exoticized and used to support male-authored claims – runs throughout Cavarero's work.

¹⁵⁵ Cavarero, *Plato*, 64.

¹⁵⁶ Cavarero's development of a reciprocal exchange of gazes resonates with a similar concept found in the work of sexual difference philosopher Luce Irigaray's essay "Universal as Mediation," in *Sexes and Genealogies*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 131-132.

¹⁵⁷ Cavarero, *Plato*, 64. Cavarero is careful to note that this is not an obligation for daughters to become mothers. It is more about women formulating their distinctiveness in differentiation to other women rather than through patriarchal interpellation.

gendered in the feminine.’¹⁵⁸ To concede that the regeneration of humans is an innate ability specific to the female sex is hardly a mystery, yet, it is strangely this very ability (and thus power) which narratives from philosophy to literature seek to undermine or vilify.¹⁵⁹

In the case of the myth of Persephone, the sabotage is conducted in two ways and through two gazes. As described earlier, the first is executed in the myth by a male figure who intentionally seeks to obstruct the “mutual gaze” between the mother and daughter. In the second instance, the masculine gaze looks towards the direction of death (a living for death) and this outlook can only be made possible if the subject abandons any sense of origin. In other words, by foreclosing their maternal origins, the subject is (self-)directed without any genealogical recognition and no responsibility for those that have shaped their history (or their very existence).¹⁶⁰ As this form of matricide has become both naturalised and culturally endorsed, for Cavarero, the opposition can only be undone if we pay attention to the significance of a ‘maternal continuum’ through ‘an endless backward movement toward our origins.’¹⁶¹ That is, in tracing the past of every human to their origin – the recognition that all beings are born from a mother – Cavarero also highlights how

¹⁵⁸ Cavarero, *Plato*, 62.

¹⁵⁹ The writer and historian Marina Warner examines mythical representations of the grotesque and monstrous embodied by the female form, especially in relation to motherhood. Warner argues that these fictitious depictions can dangerously misrepresent women’s power when it is portrayed as ungovernable, cunning, voracious and of supernatural proportions. Warner makes the case that the historical construction of female monstrosity has distorted our understanding through a ‘chronic scaremongering about female behaviour, about wild sexuality and aberrant maternity,’ which can affect present-day ‘matters of urgent social policy, the proper provision of childcare, tax reform, job training and retraining, nursery schools, housing, play areas all sink into a quagmire of prejudice.’ See, Marina Warner, “Monstrous Mothers,” in *Witches: Hunted, Appropriated, Empowered, Queered*, ed. Anna Colin (Montreuil: Éditions B42, La Maison Populaire, 2012), 89. For a discussion on the occlusion of the maternal in psychoanalysis see Amber Jacobs, *On Matricide: Myth, Psychoanalysis, and the Law of the Mother* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹⁶⁰ Cavarero, *Plato*, 63.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

‘coming into the world has birth, not death, as its standard and measure.’¹⁶² It is this radical shift of perspective that Cavarero argues can allow us to consider our ‘finitude, contingency, and irreducibility’ by looking ‘toward the origin of the living individual to find its own measure, and not toward its fateful end.’¹⁶³ And it is with this definition that Cavarero’s thought meets the conceptual framework of Ettinger’s ethics of subjectivity.

The Matrixial Gaze: Vision as Non-verbal Intensity

The matrixial gaze of *fascinace* is an affective vibration: not an *objet a* but a *link a*.

– Bracha L. Ettinger¹⁶⁴

A dual order of gazes can also be found in Ettinger’s psychoanalytic theorisations, where a similar strategy, reminiscent of Cavarero’s “maternal continuum,” is developed into distinct psychic trajectories and elaborations on the gaze. Cavarero affirms that sexual difference contributes to the uniqueness of each individual from their inception, that ‘the one who is born does not yet have any qualities; and yet has

¹⁶² Cavarero, *Plato*, 56. Cavarero is here inspired by her long-standing scholarship on the work of political theorist Hannah Arendt. Arendt states that ‘since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.’ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (1958; Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9. Arendt proposes that since action is the basis of politics, the category of birth as starting point, as the introduction to something new, can be thought of as the ultimate configuration of action. Arendt terms this conceptual framework “natality” to examine how freedom is actualized but also to elaborate how metaphysical thought stands in opposition to political thought. For Arendt, metaphysics relies on thinking rooted in mortality while natality considers action as the fundamental basis of living-together and politics. Cavarero extends this line of thought in Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 28.

¹⁶³ Cavarero, *Plato*, 82.

¹⁶⁴ Ettinger, “Fascinace,” 85.

a sex.¹⁶⁵ I understand Cavarero's assertion to mean that sex can significantly shape 'what' we become but that sexual difference should here be understood as a fundamental aspect of 'who' we are from the start. In other words, in a society significantly dominated by heteronormativity and patriarchy, the socially prescribed roles that are assigned to men and women can limit 'what' one is permitted to embody. While social expectations can be defied – to the extent that 'what' one becomes moves beyond the designated limits of one's gender – sex is nevertheless an irreducible marker of one's uniqueness (a fundamental aspect of 'who') that predates and subsists in the 'what' of our becoming.

A comparable argument is found in Ettinger's analysis of how accounts of the feminine, female sexuality and desire, have so far lacked robust interpretative tools or, in the case of psychoanalytic thought, have been subsumed into perspectives and symbolic representations that were modelled on the male infant and further developed into a paranoid masculinity or a pathologized (hysterical, neurotic) femininity. However, for Ettinger there are more than two gazes, but her initial hypotheses also draw from the understanding that the gaze is, from the outset, sexually differentiated. Ettinger states:

I would like to deepen the analysis of the phallic gaze and briefly delineate the difference, *within the phallic scope*, between the post Oedipal "active" gaze emanating from the "armed eyes" and linked to gender identification, and the pre-Oedipal "passive" gaze as an *objet a* linked to lost archaic part-objects. Thus at least three kinds of gazes should be differentiated, (a) a phallic, post-Oedipal gaze, which recuperates the object in an imaginary way, through domination and control; (b) a phallic *objet a* tracing loss or archaic lack through castration; and (c) a matrixial object/*objet a*.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 38.

¹⁶⁶ Bracha L. Ettinger, "The Matrixial Gaze (1994)," in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 51.

The concept of the gaze has been traditionally associated with an active subject, one who possesses an “armed” sight that they can direct onto an other. This association derives from a configuration of subjectivity that must undergo the above-mentioned processes where the phallic gaze, following oedipalisation and castration, will either conjure an imaginary phantasy of control or repress an originary experience as loss. This experience of control or repression will eventually be redeemed through the postulation of a phallic *objet a*.¹⁶⁷ But what kind of act is gazing when it is not a visual act? Can the psychoanalytic concept of the gaze exist outside a scopic field and if so, what are the consequences on subjectivity and creativity?

Ettinger’s conceptual framework takes to task psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s theories on the gaze for fundamental exclusions in his analysis of human psychic development. Nowadays, it is no revelation to say that Lacan did not consider the plurality of genders and sexualities and our manifold ways of relating to aesthetic experience.¹⁶⁸ Lacan’s theory of the gaze unfolded the relationship between vision and the development of (a paranoiac) identity by comparing infant activity with the sexual development, or “mirror stage,” of pigeons and locusts.¹⁶⁹ For Lacan, the

¹⁶⁷ The *objet a* and the *matrixial link a* are further examined in this section, pp. 81-85.

¹⁶⁸ For an analysis of the absence of a sexed “concrete living body” in Lacan’s work see Toril Moi, “From Femininity to Finitude: Freud, Lacan, and Feminism, Again,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 841-878. Julia Kristeva suggests that the pre-Oedipal phase is a feminine modality with processes of signification that pre-exist language and are yet to be separated into the Lacanian real or symbolic register. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 25-30. Psychoanalyst Patricia Gherovici advocates for a closer relationship between psychoanalysis and sexology, given that a number of both analysts and analysands now identify as transgender or non-binary. Gherovici argues that Lacan’s theory of the ‘sinthome,’ which moves beyond the phallus and oedipalisation, allows a rethinking of sexual difference which is not entirely pathological. See Patricia Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis: A Lacanian Perspective on Sexual Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁶⁹ To propose that identity for Lacan can only be a negotiation of a paranoid existence is no exaggeration. Ettinger makes a distinction between Lacan’s early work and his later formulations on subjectivity, but for what concerns the development of the gaze, the paranoid aspect remains. The note on pigeons and locusts, as well as the talk on the mirror stage can be found in the 1949 text/lecture Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic

occasion of an infant seeing their image (what Lacan calls the *imago*) reflected in a mirror, provides the first stage of identification and mastery (an identification of an idealized version of the self, what Lacan termed, following Freud, the “Ideal-I”). This process of identification is crucial for how the Lacanian subject formulates its “spatio-temporal bearings”, to use a phrase from Teresa Brennan’s analysis of the same topic and how it relates to femininity and masculinity.¹⁷⁰ Lacan stipulates that the mirror stage is directly correlated with and conducive of a problematic ‘libidinal dynamism’ on which he goes on to establish ‘an ontological structure of the human world that fits in with my reflections on paranoid knowledge.’¹⁷¹ According to Lacan, human psychic development matures by entering the symbolic sphere – the level of language, discourse and signifiers. In this transition, the subject moves from dependent, vulnerable and defenseless infant to autonomous and self-contained adult through entry into language. Lacan creates a simultaneous analogy and polarity between humans and animals, first by attempting to draw out the biological similarities (see the case of pigeons and locusts) and later by shoring up language as the indissoluble difference between animals and humans, but also as the condition of paranoia. For instance, Lacan explicitly states that ‘human knowledge is more

Experience,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75-81.

¹⁷⁰ Brennan is here referring to Freud rather than Lacan, while Lacan is also developing Freud’s thesis on the ego-ideal, albeit towards what will eventually become an important recasting of the ego as an unequivocally distinct function of the subject. This split, prolific in terms of what it can offer to an analysis of subjectivity, has nevertheless been the locus of scrutiny in both Brennan’s and Ettinger’s close readings of the ego and it’s imperative for sustenance only via alienation. Brennan states: ‘In fact, most people do split the ego’s capacities, maintaining their self-image in the manner laid down by the structure of narcissism and the ego-ideal, at the same time as they direct the ego’s capacities for testing and acting on reality externally. None the less, the external other is a means for consolidating the spatio-temporal bearings a subject needs to establish in order to function in reality. I say ‘consolidate’ because the suggestion here is that it is establishing bearings in time and space that bring repression, and, with it, the unconscious and subject-to-be, into existence. As I have indicated, when the subject-to-be represses a hallucination, it establishes a fixed reference point for itself (the beginning of a sense of time) at the same time as it makes the repressed wish or hallucination as real for it now as it was then (that is to say, ‘timeless’).’ See Brennan, *Interpretation*, 33.

¹⁷¹ Lacan, “Mirror Stage,” 76.

independent than animal knowledge from the force field of desire because of the social dialectic that structures human knowledge as paranoiac.¹⁷²

Examining Lacan's essay in isolation can lead to a misapprehension of his ideas, or at least a misconception of the gaze, especially as it progressed in its later developments. The role of the gaze in Lacan's later work moves beyond the scopic field and takes the shape of the "objet a," where Ettinger notes that the 'subject and *objet a* are as inseparable as the front and back of the same fabric, the recto and verso of the same sheet of paper.'¹⁷³ In this sense, the primal phase of the mirror stage becomes a much more complex formation of desire because desire is figured *as* the relationship between identification and repression that continues throughout one's life as the *objet a*. Lacan claims that the primary experience of the reflected self during the mirror-stage is frequently repeated with new instances of subjectivization, for instance, when 'the "ideal-I" [...] the rootstock of secondary identifications,' subsumes 'the libidinal normalization functions.'¹⁷⁴

But what is meant by "libidinal normalization" in the phallic sphere? The normalizing aspect of desire, the aspect that both produces paranoia and keeps it at bay, is a libidinal form of regulation, what Lacan affirmed earlier as the "knowledge" that arrives with the dialectic of language and maintains our independence from the throes of desire. It is here that Lacan develops the concept of the gaze from vision and self-reflection to a more complex fantasy that also entails being gazed at by the object that we are looking at, as well as by an omnipotent other. The gaze in this

¹⁷² Lacan, "Mirror Stage," 77.

¹⁷³ Ettinger, "Matrixial Gaze," 41.

¹⁷⁴ Lacan, "Mirror Stage," 76.

sense becomes a psychic self-regulation or self-censoring from without – an *extimate* experience and fantasy.¹⁷⁵

This significant theoretical shift has allowed cultural analysis to move beyond the field of vision and representation and towards an intersubjective relation between the self and other, and between the viewer and culture. However, this was not exactly Lacan's aim, or, put differently, the "inter" part of subjectivity, the shareable aspect of relating and relations between subjects, and not subjects and their objects, was elaborated as an ungraspable or antagonistic relation – a 'reciprocal imaginary objectification.'¹⁷⁶

Ettinger remarks that Lacan's formulation problematically renders vision into 'an erogenous zone with the gaze as its *objet a*, at the level of lack.'¹⁷⁷ Due to such psychoanalytic tendencies to theorize human relations "at the level of lack," the possibility of a reciprocal relation is reduced to 'a missed encounter.'¹⁷⁸ Ettinger resituates the encounter as an essential part of her conceptualisation of the gaze, which moves from an assessment of our representational world towards a 'psychic field of vision.'¹⁷⁹

Ettinger argues that what we understand on a visual level – and what we can interpret from our scopic field through 'thinking reason' – is only one aspect of our visual experience.¹⁸⁰ Drawing from Matrixial theory, Griselda Pollock argues that it

¹⁷⁵ Lacan employs the word *extimate* to create the compound meaning of "existence" and "outside". Here, Lacan's ontological thesis borrows from philosopher Martin Heidegger's notion of being as "ek-sistence". The translator Bruce Fink notes that, 'Lacan uses it to talk about "an existence which stands apart from," which insists as it were from the outside, to talk about something not included on the inside, something which, rather than being intimate, is "extimate".' See translator's endnote 11,3 in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, 767.

¹⁷⁶ Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, H  lo  se Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 40.

¹⁷⁷ Ettinger, "Matrixial Gaze," 43.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 123.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

is not possible to fully represent or (re)perform the affects that we experience during a traumatic event. Nevertheless, that it is through an aesthetic encounter that,

something of trauma's radical otherness may be intimated and hence encountered aesthetically and affectively. *Something* is the key word here. Not everything, but some aspects may be allusively *encountered*, but never mastered and not fully seen.¹⁸¹

As the psyche is the register for emotional and affective impact, and since such impact can carry information that bypasses 'optical laws' – laws that regulate our comprehension of visibility as an experience that entails a subject/object dynamic – the psychic field of vision opens up a space where emotions and affective impact may be processed.¹⁸² With this substantially different protocol for examining visual culture, Ettinger moves beyond 'reciprocal imaginary objectification' and presents us with new tools for understanding the relationship between vision and its relation to sexuality and desire. For the purpose of clarity, I offer in Ettinger's words an interpretation on the difference between the phallic and matrixial gaze in this brief excerpt:

The phallic gaze alleges that something was there and is now lost. The matrixial gaze indicates that *something happened* and the event has passed, and also that *someones were there* and these *someones have already changed*.¹⁸³

Antithetically, Lacan understood intersubjectivity as the limit of our ability to truly share or know someone's viewpoint, while the desire to (re)experience this impossibility both haunts and regulates our actions. This impossible or "lost" mode

¹⁸¹ Pollock, *After-affects*, 7.

¹⁸² Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 123.

¹⁸³ Ettinger, "With-In-Visible Screen," 119.

of relating and its relationship to language and desire is succinctly captured by Lacan in a seminar from 1964 as follows:

desire is situated in dependence on demand—which, by being articulated in signifiers, leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it, an element that is not indeterminate, which is a condition both, absolute and unapprehensible, an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued (*méconnu*), an element that is called desire.¹⁸⁴

In the Lacanian sense, human intersubjective experience is based on a failure to truly relate to one other, or, we could also say that according to Lacan, human relations can only be experienced through misrecognition (*méconnaissance*).¹⁸⁵ Ettinger argues that Lacan’s theory illustrates that the subject can only formulate their distinctiveness through a mode of relating that simultaneously objectifies the other and alienates the self:

the metaphor of seeing myself from the spot where I am seen is a metaphor of self-observation, reflectivity, reason, consciousness, and control all combined. When I look at myself in a process of relating to the other, I don’t actually relate to the other as to another subject, but as to an object. Since I also observe myself, I am also alienated from myself as a subject and become an object by the same gesture; I act in a theatre in which both I and the other are objects. In this sense, consciousness – to know myself as knowing – is, for Lacan, an illusion and alienation that first appears on the plane of specular images in the “mirror stage”.¹⁸⁶

It is precisely this alienating formulation of desire that Ettinger aims to supplement with a theory that traces inscriptions from a pre-Oedipal stage to inform

¹⁸⁴ Jacques Lacan, “Sexuality in the Defiles of the Signifier,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 154.

¹⁸⁵ The word “*méconnaissance*” is translated as misrecognition by Bruce Fink while Alan Sheridan maintains the French term to indicate how Lacan’s concept of ‘knowledge (*connaissance*) is inextricably bound up with *méconnaissance*’ and it ‘belongs to the imaginary register, while *savoir* belongs to the symbolic register’. See “Translator’s Note” in Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 281.

¹⁸⁶ Ettinger, “Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event (1999),” in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 218. Footnote 32.

how the psyche and the gaze carry these inscriptions towards sexually differentiated positions. Through Ettinger's analysis an alternative structuring of desire and sexuality is elaborated that moves beyond castration and lack by excavating the pre-imaginary and pre-symbolic potential of human existence. Based on this return, the concept of the matrixial gaze becomes 'a measure of difference in the field of affects, not in the field of perceptions' that takes into consideration how matrixial affects can be diffused from one or several 'partners' and can return to affect the participants of a specific encounter.¹⁸⁷ A further point of differentiation is that the partners during an encounter are rendered partial and yet singular and unique in their exchange. On this note, Griselda Pollock maintains that the process of *aesthetic wit(h)nessing* requires that we move beyond ideas of sympathy or empathy 'between fully formed human subjects' rather, that we approach subjectivity at the

level of the fragilization of parts of a partial self, opened by the aesthetic processes, to share in, to carry something of, to be a transsubjective partner in transformation, whatever the affective cost, for the trauma and jouissance of the Other. This possibility is founded in and re-solicits the recurrence of what Ettinger daringly conceives of as a primordial human capacity for co-affection and transsubjective sharing that she names *Matrixial*.¹⁸⁸

Ettinger's Matrixial theory relies on the proposition that subjectivity does not follow Lacan's well-known postulation of the barred subject (\$): the principle that subjectivity and desire are bound by a primordial loss. Due to this fundamental difference, the matrixial gaze does not correspond to an *objet a* as the unattainable object of phantasy. Rather, subjectivity for Ettinger is established through a shareable dimension, both on an affective and physical level, where instead of an *objet a* we are presented with a *link a*: a gaze that provides 'a link between trauma

¹⁸⁷ Ettinger, "Fascinace," 67.

¹⁸⁸ Pollock, *After-affects*, 14.

and the phantasy of *I* and *non-I*' and a form of desire that aims to retrace connections with the other.¹⁸⁹ The subject is then rendered partial and permeable *especially* when it encounters the other. In fact, it is necessary for the ego's drive for mastery to relinquish its barriers in order to experience this reawakening of 'an almost-missed relation (of borderlinking, encounter) with a *non-I*.'¹⁹⁰ Ettinger theorizes subjectivity through these vital and formative sexually differentiated aspects of our originary relating to one another, and how they inform us later in life, as follows:

A certain awareness of the *borderspace shared with an intimate stranger* and of the co-emergence in difference corresponds to a *feminine* dimension of subjectivity, since *joint recordings* of shared-but-singular and particular experiences revoke archaic phantasies of the link between the *female invisible bodily specificity* and the late prenatal subject-to-be. Traces of these contacts are at the basis of new joint and singular psychic alliances. The matrixial awareness of the co-emergence of the *I* with the *unknown non-I*, both with-in and with-out, alternates or co-exists with the phallic awareness of being one, either inside or outside. Thus, the matrixial awareness does not "belong" to women only. We all carry a unique set of matrixial traces at the level of the archaic Real, and inasmuch as the subsymbolic layer infiltrates and infuses the Symbolic, men and women are *not less* equal in the symbolic Matrix than in the symbolic Phallus – but they are not the *same*.¹⁹¹

In Ettinger's model of psychic development, the fundamental relation between primary carer and child draws from an "originary" and "archaic" dimension.¹⁹² This return to origins is comparable to Cavarero's theoretical advances through the category of "natality" which at their locus entail a recognition of

¹⁸⁹ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 124.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁹¹ Ettinger, "Matrixial Gaze," 70.

¹⁹² For an essay which best encapsulates Ettinger's stipulations for a primordial ethical model of subjectivity drawn from the prenatal relation see Bracha Ettinger, "(M)Other Re-spect: Maternal Subjectivity, the Ready-made mother-monster and The Ethics of Respecting," in *Studies in the Maternal 2*, no.1 (2010), 23. Ettinger argues that it is through respect for how our subjectivity has been shaped by the maternal, that we can 'reach the domain of Ethics. [...] It is this prolongation of life that in my view is concerned by the elaboration of the primary affect of awe into respect in the passage from the proto-ethical to the ethical. If human beings are to survive beyond the personal self, [...] the re-spect of the (m)Other [...] is required not in order to satisfy her or for getting something from her in return, but is inherent, like awe and compassion, to the futurity of life itself in its continual re-passage to the ethical.'

maternal agency and reciprocity. Furthermore, both authors stress the uniqueness of each individual whose identity is shaped by specific encounters with equally unique others. While Cavarero's philosophical strategy involves the direct action of transforming narratives through appropriation and symbolic "theft" – leading to new configurations of the feminine and the maternal – Ettinger refigures the (psychoanalytic account of the) symbolic through a more subtle approach provided by the 'knowledge of being-born-together.'¹⁹³

Lacan uses the term 'extimate' to signify an existence that is inscribed from without and which also shapes the self through ego formation processes. The 'knowledge of being-born-together' can be thought of as an archaic inscription both from within and without, or, more radically, an originary experience that carves an ethics of relating to the outside in a way that is not as alienating and foreign during ego processes of subjectivization, as Lacan would allow us to imagine. Rather, that the outside is on a continuum with the inside, and entails at least a faint degree of familiarity. Even though for Lacan the extimate is also intimate, it is this familiar or intimate aspect which must be foreclosed. In other words, Lacan proposes that because our originary experience of an external (traumatic) intimacy has had such an alienating impact on the ego, it must necessarily exist on the level of the Real – an ungraspable and overwhelming dimension of existence that can only be experienced as profoundly traumatic, anxiety inducing or jouissant.

Unlike Lacan's theorisation of the extimate which is later restricted to an elusive Real that responds to the regulations of the unknowable Other, Ettinger theorises 'subjectivity-as-encounter' as having both 'imaginary and symbolic impact.'¹⁹⁴ *Co-naissance* is the term used to describe and discern that a shared

¹⁹³ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 144.

¹⁹⁴ Ettinger, "Matrixial Gaze," 64.

commonality underlies both our experience and existence, simultaneously proposing that trauma, phantasy, desire and the unconscious are shareable dimensions of our multifaceted identities. This conceptual framework underpins the subject's relationship to both the self and to the other, the subject's interiority and exterior relationship to the world in one stroke. Griselda Pollock has elaborated on the profound significance of this psychoanalytic term as follows:

Co-naissance in French allows for two meanings of equal importance. The idea of *naissance* (birth) is joined with the sense of knowing (*connaissance*) from the verb *connaître* (to know), and linked to *reconnaissance* (recognition), which, in English, has both the sense of acknowledging an other, and of cognitive understanding at a second take (re-cognition). The prefix *co-* before *naissance* introduces the sense of a complementary process, a shared, doubled, subjective event associated with a prolonged period of co-emergence. At the same time, the process of human genesis is to be understood as generating a specific kind of knowledge, or rather a knowing, which will show itself as re-cognition or re-co-naissance only in retrospect, since for the becoming infant, the encounter happens too soon. It could be the condition for understanding premised upon a joint venture between co-affecting partners that occurs in what Lacan named the Real – the traumatic bodily events impacting on the psyche that come before a psychic apparatus is in place to fantasise and later think the event as memory, image, or idea. It also happens as this trauma of the archaic is retrospectively re-activated once a psychic apparatus of fantasy and thought develops and becomes the affective underside of certain aspects and dimensions of our relational modes with the world, our others, living and dead, alive and not-yet-alive, human and non-human, past and present.¹⁹⁵

In addition, I would like to draw attention to how the neologism co-naissance also forges a direct parallelism to Lacan's use of the word "méconnaissance." Recalling that Lacan's term is produced through the dual meaning of both knowledge and misrecognition, it is no surprise that Pollock is careful to note that "human genesis" produces a specific type of "knowing" rather than knowledge. Thus, co-naissance is marked by a distinct dual meaning: a sense of knowing (prior and later parallel to

¹⁹⁵ Griselda Pollock, "Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger's Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics/Aesthetics," in *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 7-8.

knowledge) which results in a recognition that the common thread that underlies human existence is our entry into the world as vulnerable, interdependent and relational creatures.¹⁹⁶

Ettinger's radical proposition of an alternative register for human becoming holds a number of repercussions for cultural analysis, ethics and intersubjective relations. Of relevance to this research is the field of aesthetics and how *co-naissance* informs the viewer's experience of the artist's work and the artist's relationship to their work. However, it is important to note that the experience of an encounter with art firstly impacts (and potentially transforms) the subject on a "nonconscious" level. I will clarify this term shortly. Ettinger terms the overall transformative occurrence *Metramorphosis*, which she describes as:

a process of intrapsychic and interpsychic, as well as transindividual and transsubjective, exchange; of transformation and affective "communication" between/with-in several matrixial entities. It is a passage-lane through which affected events, materials, and modes of becoming infiltrate and diversify onto the nonconscious margins of the Symbolic through/by subsymbolic webs.¹⁹⁷

An encounter with artwork is for Ettinger an event that entails the possibility of metramorphosis. However, this procedure highlights the potential of the imaginary

¹⁹⁶ Just to offer a point of clarification, "knowing" is not set in opposition to "knowledge," where preference is given to one form over another. Neither does this analogy propose that these two different forms of understanding are gendered. Rather, knowing provides an altogether different form of knowledge which stems from a psychic register than a strictly mental process. Calling for a theory of knowledge that 'includes the body in thought,' Toril Moi argues that Freud's theory of *epistemophilia* (a desire or drive for knowledge) allows for an understanding of knowledge with 'no firmly established binary opposites, it cannot be gendered as either masculine or feminine, thereby offering us a chance to escape the patriarchal tyranny of thought by sexual analogy.' See Toril Moi, "Patriarchal Thought and the Drive for Knowledge," in *Between Feminism & Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London: Routledge, 1989), 189-205. Moi's argument can also be traced in Brennan's work on femininity and affect. However, Brennan focuses on how drives require an active deployment of psychophysical energy to flourish and finds that Freud's *epistemophilia* forges a connection between scopophilia, the sexual drive and the drive for knowledge. With Freud's focus on the scopophilic drive, knowledge is bound to vision rather than affect, which renders Freud's propositions into 'a theory of how curiosity and knowledge are inhibited in women.' See Brennan, *Interpretation*, 140; and the section *Attentive Love in Utero* in this thesis that elaborates on Brennan's position as well as Melanie Klein's hypothesis that the drive for knowledge is bound to the death drive.

¹⁹⁷ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 143-144.

(internalized image-based or pre-linguistic process formative of the ego) rather than producing a direct interference into the existing and already phallically inscribed symbolic (language as a set of signifiers and associations that determine the unconscious/conscious mechanisms of the subject). That is, the subject of metramorphosis, has a different relationship to the symbolic, one that is activated on a nonconscious level. To recall Pollock's earlier point about knowledge, it is important to reinstate that "knowing", and its auxiliary nonconscious, is a sense which 'is not cognitive and does not enter direct representation,' yet it informs the subject's ethics, perception, mode of communication and relating by bearing a different potential and by remaining in a psychic tension with the phallic symbolic.¹⁹⁸ In other words, and to return to Cavarero, this account of the subject also holds 'birth, not death, as its standard and measure' for reasons that I will attempt to clarify in the section to follow.

The Matrixial Nonconscious: Affect as Non-verbal Intensity

And I want to suggest the possibility that a number of states of mind that are different from everyday conscious awareness may be in part an expression of the unconscious or half conscious need to give this creativeness [of something new] its freedom.

– Marion Milner¹⁹⁹

For Ettinger, feminine prenatal experience is distinct from genital-phallic and Oedipal logic.²⁰⁰ It is prior to, and later beside, Oedipal and phallic mechanisms such

¹⁹⁸ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 144.

¹⁹⁹ Milner, *Not Being Able*, 155.

²⁰⁰ It is important to note that Ettinger's use of the "feminine" is not specific to biological females. Rather, the feminine can be conceived of as a category of thought, as well as a psychic register

as castration, the mirror stage and intrauterine fantasies. Ettinger claims that in the matrixial sphere of subjectivity, feminine prenatal experience has a nonconscious register for both the mother and infant. In classic psychoanalytic accounts, the disavowal of prenatal experience returns in the form of intrauterine fantasies.²⁰¹ Whereas in Ettinger's conceptualisation of a matrixial subjectivity, prenatal experience does not undergo complete repression, it is not pushed into the unconscious and it is not perpetually disavowed.²⁰²

As a result, this experience bears psychic inscriptions that become part of the organisational structure of subjectivity on a nonconscious level. The nonconscious is here understood as a distinct system from the unconscious. Ettinger has proposed this succinct explanation in relation to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis:

Freud differentiates between two uses of the term unconscious: one to designate a particular system (which for Lacan corresponds to the treasure of repressed of signifiers), the other to designate a phenomenon. I use the term non-conscious to indicate this second possibility of unconscious phenomena outside the "unconscious" as a system [...].²⁰³

To offer a simplified parallelism, we can extrapolate that if Lacan's hypotheses are predicated on loss and its substitute language, Ettinger's theories consider the undetonated potential of memories or traumatic experiences of something or

inscribed in all genders. For an interpretation of how the 'feminine is to be understood, matrixially, as a differential potentiality before and beyond this [phallic] dichotomy,' see Ettinger, "Fascinace," 68.

²⁰¹ For instance, Sigmund Freud's claims that 'A large number of dreams, often accompanied by anxiety and having as their content such subjects as passing through narrow spaces or being in water, are based upon phantasies of intra-uterine life, of existence in the womb and of the act of birth.' See Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 1-24, ed. Ivan Smith (2010), 856.

²⁰² To facilitate an understanding of the fundamental difference between Ettinger's concepts and Freudian and Lacanian theories, I would like to reiterate the earlier analogy between the phallic gaze as desire produced through lack or loss, in contrast to the matrixial nonconscious which indicates that "something happened and the event has passed."

²⁰³ Bracha L. Ettinger, "Trans-Subjective Transferential Borderspace," in *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 24, no. 3 (1997): 625-47, quoted in Anna Louise Johnson, "Bracha Ettinger's Theory of the Matrix: Contexts and Commentary" PhD diss., (University of Leeds, 2006), 57. Note that in Ettinger's earlier work the nonconscious is written as non-conscious but has the same signification. I use the most recent non-hyphenated version throughout.

someone that has *happened* to us. In this sense, some memories do not exactly undergo repression, instead, they fade into oblivion or they can be (partially or completely) recuperated through nonconscious processes or through a “wit(h)ness” – a witness who not only witnesses, but who also shares *with* someone the affective impact of a traumatic event.²⁰⁴

Ettinger delineates how, for Lacan and Freud, the phallic symbolic associates all structures outside the symbolic with psychosis. She maintains that this is due to their inability to conceive of a primordial relationship as one where ‘all mothers are incestuous’ and therefore outside the realm of repressed desire:²⁰⁵

It is because of the highly psychotic potentiality of this [Matrixial] prebirth, nonprohibited incest for male subjects that it was deeply silenced. It was not excluded from the Symbolic (from which it could have returned as its repressed, to produce an-other desire) but rather marginalized as unthought or crazy, and foreclosed. The aspects of this matrixial twilight zone that did get elaborated in psychoanalysis were subjugated to its phallic order, by which they were regulated as a question of bringing children into the heterosexual framework, where objects-women are exchanged in “the Name of the Father” and the womb stands for fusional symbiosis and undifferentiation, which can emerge in culture only as psychosis. I suggest that evocations and irruptions of feminine/prenatal encounters, and emergences of matrixial cross-scribed imprints, are not psychotic. They only become psychosis-like when they have no symbolic access whatsoever in a culture that takes them for non-sense. Not only are such cross-scriptions not psychotic, they are a ground for thinking the enigma of the imprints of the world on the artist and of the inscriptions of the artist on the world’s hieroglyphs.²⁰⁶

In order to counteract theorizations of the subject that are underpinned by a heterosexist and phallogocentric logic, Ettinger proposes a relational ontology and ethics founded on the prenatal relation. In contrast to the aforementioned dominant

²⁰⁴ Ettinger stipulates that if an event is too traumatic for the subject to elaborate, it can become ‘inscribed in another so that the other crossed in/by me will mentally elaborate them for me.’ This someone that can be affected by an other’s traumatic experience is termed a wit(h)ness. Similarly, art also provides a space where traumatic events can potentially be communicated and processed. See Bracha L. Ettinger, “Art as the Transport-Station of Trauma,” in *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Artworking 1985-1999* (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 2000), 91-115.

²⁰⁵ Ettinger, “Wit(h)nessing Trauma,” 142.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

ideas where the prenatal relation evokes incest, symbiosis and psychosis, the concepts of “co-naissance” and the “nonconscious,” render gestation and birth as sites of potential – frameworks from which new psychic modalities can be elaborated. To propose that subjectivity is informed by the archaic and uncognized experience of having shared the physical and psychic space of the womb is simultaneously the most and least original of Ettinger’s innovations. Several psychoanalysts have attempted to theorize the effects of this experience, with often ill-conceived results.²⁰⁷ While Ettinger proposes a version which is no less traumatic than classic accounts of the intrauterine experience, her framework withstands the temptation to foreclose the experience into a terrifying fantasy. Instead, in thinking through the body, or the bodies of the female subject and the infant interrelated in physical space, Ettinger retrieves bodily experience from the abstracted notion of a universal agent without body and without origin.

‘All human life on the planet is born of woman’ – the poet and writer Adrienne Rich begins her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.²⁰⁸ This notable quote has been crucial to the persistent feminist effort to bring the category of birth centre stage since we all ‘carry the imprint of this experience for life.’²⁰⁹ In Ettinger’s theoretical elaborations, the imprints of this experience figure differently for each sex. Female subjects have the potential to be doubly inscribed in the Real through the experience of ‘the womb as an in-side and future-site as well – as an actual or virtual space and as a future and possible, or

²⁰⁷ For an excellent defence of thinking through the feminine and all the blasphemy it conjures see the work of Griselda Pollock generally, and on the topic of the womb specifically the essay “Mother Trouble: The Maternal-Feminine in Phallic and Feminist Theory in Relation to Bracha Ettinger’s Elaboration of Matrixial Ethics/Aesthetics,” *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1-31.

²⁰⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995. First published, 1976), 11.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

potential, posterior time,' offering females a 'privileged access.'²¹⁰ This privilege should not be understood in terms of socio-cultural or biological advantage, rather, it should be grasped in a psychic sense, one that creates a doubled entry point into a 'surplus-of-fragility.' The term 'surplus-of-fragility' can be perceived as a moment of psychic uncoiling, where physical affective exchange occurs and it is apprehended; where, precisely because of the affective exchange, individual psychic boundaries are transformed into thresholds of attunement with, and because of, the presence of someone.

These psychic dynamics are not restricted to females. In fact, the only differential is that women can experience a 'time where the future traumatically meets the past, and to this paradoxical site where outside meets inside.'²¹¹ In other words, through pregnancy women can have a retrospective recognition of the co-emergence that constitutes the prenatal phase: a *re-co-naissance*. On the other hand, the sexually differentiated trajectory for the male subject means that they too can access 'the matrixial time and site through transference relations and via art, when they are affected, like women, by joining-in-difference with others.'²¹² In this respect, the shareable dimension of the experience of co-emergence inscribes its psychic traces (of the incestuous rapport) in the infant (of any gender) in what Ettinger defines as a 'subknowledge' with its own sense-making system. This system does not eradicate the phallic symbolic, rather, it 'dwell[s] beside it' and has the potential to work in tandem with mechanisms of castration, oedipalisation, repression and objectification.²¹³ Griselda Pollock describes this originary phase as a site of potential that is 'brutally crushed after birth when conditions of survival necessitate

²¹⁰ Ettinger, "Weaving a Woman," 182.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid., 182-183.

²¹³ Ibid.

other relations to the world and the familiar elements of aggressivity, narcissism and object relations take over.²¹⁴

Even though “feminine/prenatal” psychic experience shapes subjectivity, on the level of culture and symbolisation it is foreclosed. It is this exclusion from symbolic representation that can lead to psychosis and not necessarily the lack or loss experienced in reality. Ettinger takes these originary cross-inscriptions and transposes them onto the activity of art making in order to reveal how artists are inscribed by the world and in turn inscribe their work and others with traces of meaning. As Pollock reminds us in her Matrixial analysis of artworking,

When aesthetic or literary activity creates its forms, these are not a repetition of that which already exists as a memory or a known event in the subject or in culture. They are occasions for potentially transformative encounter marked by the potentiality of the aesthetic to touch, identify with and formulate trauma as trace, as tracing.²¹⁵

In relation to this research, I draw from Ettinger an alternative postulation of the subject and the psyche – a subject co-affected since inception which is in stark contrast to the self-contained subject examined by Brennan. As Ettinger’s configuration of subjectivity proposes that humans have all experienced a degree of psychophysical connection, which is eclipsed later in life, I believe that this conceptual framework matches Brennan’s elaborations on how affect can be transmitted psychophysically from one person to another. Following an analysis of how Ettinger’s and Brennan’s concepts converge, an alternative formulation of the subject emerges, with which I examine in Chapter Three, *The Physicality of Ideas: Writing and Embodiment*, how the affect influences the psyche, and in turn, the effect that affect has on creative processes. In the next section, I elaborate on

²¹⁴ Pollock, *After-affects*, 18.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

Brennan's theorisations of co-affectivity and what they reveal in terms of the maternal thread that runs throughout Chapter Two.

Attentive Love in Utero: Beyond the Foundational Fantasy

To say that pregnancy reveals a state where there is no subject/object distinction is to point to a remarkable fact. But what do we do with this fact? How is the subject/object distinction abolished? I have argued that it is abolished by a rapidity of communication which is only possible where this rapidity is not impeded by the fixed points at base of subjectivity, which leads us into the various implications for nature and technology, as well as the psyche.

– Teresa Brennan²¹⁶

Ettinger's developments of an alternative psychic journey to the dominant Freudian and Lacanian models have several interconnecting points with Brennan's hypotheses. Specifically, in the way both thinkers return to the maternal and the prenatal dimension of subjectivity as the basis for thinking through broader questions about how we relate to each other. Brennan proposes that if physical exchanges of energies are to be taken seriously, then it is possible to understand how the subject is affected even before birth since 'attentive love or energy [begins] in utero.'²¹⁷ Brennan unravels how the eclipse of affective transmission between individuals originates and is inextricably linked to the denial of maternal transmission. For Brennan, this information is often eclipsed by psychoanalytic (and other) theories because it comes to contradict notions of subjectivity founded on self-containment. As Brennan

²¹⁶ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 72.

²¹⁷ Brennan, *Transmission*, 36.

argues, the self-contained subject may only persist by separating the body from the mind and by disavowing its history, ‘in so far as that history reveals its dependence on a maternal origin. There is no ‘before’ before this very present subject.’²¹⁸

Drawing from a number of psychoanalytic thinkers, Brennan synthesizes their propositions on the subject/object distinction to construct her claim that self-containment is the result of sustaining the illusion of the foundational fantasy. Scrutinizing Freud’s principle of “unlust” or “unpleasure”, she traces how psychical reality becomes distinct from material reality when the infant’s desire for instant gratification results in fantasizing about the object of its desire. In this equation, ‘the longed-for object,’ as Brennan calls it, is either the breast or mother.²¹⁹ When it is not present or available, it is hallucinated in order to bring about short-term satisfaction. This absence and auxiliary hallucination formulate the foundations of psychic reality. As the fantasy of the breast can never actually fulfil the need of hunger, a build-up of “unpleasure” ensues with no relief. The accumulation of unexpelled tension creates a surplus of energy which leads Brennan to investigate what happens to this energy. To do so, Brennan moves beyond the paradigm of needs, towards a more complicated (and potentially malicious) set of desires that are set in motion:

the desire to be waited upon; the desire to believe one is the source of agency who makes it happen; the desire to dominate and control the other who is active in providing, but whose activity is controlled by a relatively passive director, and the aggressive desire towards the other.²²⁰

Brennan borrows from Melanie Klein’s theorizations in order to substantiate Freud’s inquiry and to better elaborate how the unexpelled tension is resolved. Klein’s analysis of infant behavior is viewed through the death drive, which is tied to

²¹⁸ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 36.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

a drive for knowledge more than it is to pleasure.²²¹ According to Klein, the infant's aggressive desires to cut, devour, dismember (the mother and/or the breast) are tied up with the desire to understand 'what is hidden, and in the process destroy it.'²²² Brennan states that, along with the death drive, the forces of envy 'of the creativeness embodied in the mother and mother's breast' and greed, which creates the desire 'to devour the entire breast, and beyond that, the mother's body,' are interrelated.²²³ Klein proposes that these desires lead to the fear that the aggressed object will strike back, and it is this fear which founds a 'paranoid-schizoid' subjectivity. The fear of retaliation is what results in the paranoid aspect, while in order to reconcile this fear, the infant hallucinates a "good" or "bad" breast resulting in a schizoid subjectivity.

This observation – the separation between fantasy and reality as a form of resolution – will be crucial in understanding Brennan's hypothesis that details how the self-contained subject re-performs the "hallucination" in adult life. By separating the source of (hallucinated) anxiety into good or bad, the infant actually splits its own ego. In other words, the source of fear materially exists as a breast, which in *reality* the infant cannot separate into good or bad. Therefore, by forging this separation in fantasy, it must split the ego in order for the ego to act in a good or bad way towards the perceived (hallucinated) object of desire. What Brennan aims to elucidate is that the impulse to transform what we fear into an object in fantasy – even if what we fear happens to be another human, animal or object – gives way to justifying our unreasonable behavior towards it. Eventually, this pattern of behavior

²²¹ Brennan is here referring to a number of Klein's works, including Melanie Klein, "Early Stages of the Oedipus Complex," in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 11 (1928): 167–80 and Melanie Klein, "Envy and Gratitude," in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946–1963, Collected Writings, vol. 3* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1975), 176–235.

²²² Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 24.

²²³ *Ibid.*

is not only enacted in fantasy, it is permitted and endorsed in the social order.

Both Klein and Freud formulate distinct yet interrelated negotiations or resolutions of these destructive tendencies. For Klein, trying to repair the destruction created in fantasy can lead to reparation which is a way to recuperate ‘a psyche felt to be in pieces’ through creative labour.²²⁴ For Freud, the negotiation is best exemplified in the now over-examined case study of the “fort-da” game.²²⁵ In this scenario, the infant inverts its dependency on the mother by imagining that he controls her through a set of repetitive actions that call her into being on a *fantasmatic* level. Freud observed that when his grandson of a year and a half would toss small objects away from himself he seemed to have ‘an expression of interest and satisfaction.’²²⁶ Upon closer examination, Freud discerned that this repetition was not simply a game but a ‘great cultural achievement’!²²⁷ According to Freud, the greatness of this achievement resides in:

the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach.²²⁸

²²⁴ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 25. I will return to the resolution through creative labour in the section *Sublimation: A Matter of Life and Death*.

²²⁵ Written in 1920, the ‘fort-da’ game is found in Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 1-24, ed. Ivan Smith (2010), 3720-3722. Freud analyzes an infant’s gesture of repetitively throwing a reel and then drawing it back. When the infant throws the reel, he exclaims “fort” (translated from the German as “gone”) and upon retrieving it he says “da” (there). This case study has been the topic of much feminist discussion and critique. The sexual difference philosopher Luce Irigaray notes that the infant under analysis is a boy and that his gesture should not come to define the psychic development of both sexes. Irigaray then hypothesizes that a girl would ‘not play with a string and a reel that symbolize her mother, because her mother is of the same sex as she is and cannot have the object status of a reel.’ See Luce Irigaray, “Gesture in Psychoanalysis,” in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. First published 1987 by Les Editions de Minuit), 97. Similarly, Ettinger remarks that a series of psychoanalytic theories support notions of lack, loss, absence and presence, ‘mother as object,’ by drawing from this case study. Ettinger notes that in this way ‘phallic symbolic lack’ neutralizes sexed distinctions by being presented as a universal narrative accountable for the psychological development of both sexes. See Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Gaze* (Leeds: Feminist Arts & Histories Network, University of Leeds, 1995), 4-6.

²²⁶ Freud, “Pleasure Principle,” 3720.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3721. Elsewhere, Freud notes that ‘Civilization has been attained through the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction, and it demands the same renunciation from each newcomer in turn.’

It is through this necessary transformation of the passive and hurtful experience of the absent mother into a repetitive fantasy of control that the infant's achievement is made manifest. Furthermore, Freud suspects that throwing the objects away is also a way for the infant to 'satisfy an impulse [...] which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him.'²²⁹

These two similar narratives on the construction of subjectivity and the aggressive affects towards the primary caregiver are what Brennan seeks on the one hand to support (Brennan believes that these formulations correctly point to a self-contained subjectivity premised on what she terms the 'foundational fantasy'), and on the other, to expose their limits in thinking through non-visual and beyond subject-object constructions of subjectivity.²³⁰

What is noteworthy in Brennan's analysis, and of particular significance to this research, is that Brennan untangles the confusion between fantasy and reality (and therefore the mechanisms of desire) by re-inserting the role of physicality in the

Furthermore, in the case of art he asserts the following: 'An artist is originally a man who turns away from reality because he cannot come to terms with the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction which it at first demands, and who allows his erotic and ambitious wishes full play in the life of phantasy. He finds the way back to reality, however, from this world of phantasy by making use of special gifts to mould his phantasies into truths of a new kind, which are valued by men as precious reflections of reality. Thus in a certain fashion he actually becomes the hero, the king, the creator, or the favourite he desired to be, without following the one roundabout path of making real alterations in the external world. But he can only achieve this because other men feel the same dissatisfaction as he does with the renunciation demanded by reality, and because that dissatisfaction, which results from the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle, is itself a part of reality.' See Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two principles of Mental Functioning (1911)," in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 1-24, ed. Ivan Smith (2010), 2556.

²²⁹ Freud, "Pleasure Principle," 3721. The literary critic Elisabeth Bronfen reads this text through a Derridean analysis to locate the 'autobiographical and the rhetorical strategy of self-reflexivity.' Bronfen argues that Freud is here actually mourning the death of his daughter Sophie which was the mother of the infant under observation. In this way, Freud will transform 'maternal loss to paternal castration, from the position of mourning to that of rivalry and possession.' See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1992), 28.

²³⁰ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 36. Brennan sees a direct link between 'the desire for instant gratification' and 'the preference for visual and 'object'-oriented thinking this entails, the desire to be waited upon, the envious desire to imitate the original, the desire to control the mother, and to devour, poison and dismember her, and to obtain knowledge by this process, constitute a foundational psychological fantasy.'

construction of subjectivity. The idea of ‘energetics’ is Brennan’s concise term for ‘the study of the energetic and affective connections between an individual, other people and the surrounding environment.’²³¹ While this idea is further elaborated in her final book *The Transmission of Affect*, Brennan’s claims remain the same throughout all her work. Mainly, that the denial of ‘energetics’ or ‘transmission’ are founded on the foundational fantasy and that the illusion of self-containment is sustained because thinking in subject/object terms is naturalized in the social order. This tendency reveals that ‘a psyche that thinks in subject/object terms denies its connection with “objects”,’ and thus ‘the subject is precisely other than the object’ but also automatically separated from their environment.²³² By unravelling how the psyche has been psychoanalytically founded on this fantasy, Brennan elucidates why there is a propensity for the subject to detach from physical logic in order to authenticate one’s individuality.

This argument can be extended to how physicality and consequential affective transmission and impact are unconsciously omitted, or consciously rejected, from textual and oral narratives that respond to encounters with art. To this extent, texts can be re-read through a lens that locates these omissions by highlighting the disavowal of material (and maternal) affectivity and, on a deeper level, locating the core of such narratives in the foundational fantasy. In other respects, narratives that expose the psychophysical deployment of energetic connections, the interdependent aspects of subjectivity and affect, the interrelated material effects of writing and art encounters, can be read with a set of tools that posit subjectivity as energetically and relationally affected *in reality*.

²³¹ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 10.

²³² *Ibid.*

Brennan attempts to restore to reality what is eclipsed or purported in fantasy. For instance, anxiety is not always the hallucinatory fear of what exists on a fantasmatic level, such as the breast or mother, but it could be the effect of an anxiety that materially exists in the social order, internalized unconsciously from without, and legitimately re-enacted on the level of the social. In this sense, the process of self-containment begins with the question of identity. Identity requires separation between the self and others in order to create clear-cut psychic and physical distinctions. Facilitating factors in this procedure are a number of processes such as castration and Oedipalisation. However, these psychic processes are not self-generated – they also require external factors to ensure that they are secured into place, through a repetitive process of confirming one’s identity (first as separation from the mother, then as separation from the other) on a social and material level. According to Brennan, these gaps between the polarized sites of subject and object, fantasy and reality, culture and nature, self and other can all be bridged through the recognition of our energetic connections.

But what set of actions does such a recognition lead to? What does such recognition do to slow down the destructive speed of capitalism described in Brennan’s third book *Exhausting Modernity*? Brennan argues that it is because we do not recognise how interdependent we are with the environment that surrounds us that we continue to abuse and consume on a level where environmental resources cannot replenish themselves. This misrecognition arises because the environment/nature are experienced as external to the self, as objects that we can control and manipulate, but which will consequentially lead to our own extinction.

What can the recognition of how ‘emotions are exchangeable in a dynamic process’ do for subjectivity and creativity when Brennan “unriddles” the feminine

psyche in her first book *The Riddle of Femininity*? Brennan supports that unless we come to understand how external affects transform us on a biological level, we will not be able to make sense of our emotional responses, particularly when the dominant model of psychology expects the subject to source positivity from the self – a self which might be entirely depleted of energy and has been locked into a physical state of inertia (a condition that Freud claimed was part of the negative effects of femininity).²³³

While Brennan provides strategies relative to the affliction, all her work echoes the clear message that (the absence of) physicality is at the root of the problem, while it can also be conducive of a more holistic future once we recognise its multifaceted agency. This conviction resonates with Ettinger's theorisations that draw from an archaic, pre-natal relationality to structure an understanding of the ethico-aesthetic dimension of subjectivity. The relationship between self and other – configured from a model of pregnancy, the maternal relation and nonconscious transmissive affectivity – can offer an antidote to phallic desire with consequent ramifications for aesthetics. Of central significance to this research, is what an elaboration of subjectivity as relational and co-affected offer to our understanding of how (and why) we write about art as storytellers that seek to translate visceral, physical and psychic impact and response. Perhaps, by proposing that living attention is a resolution put into effect by creative labour, we might be able to understand the material effects and thus differences between a self-contained subject and a subjectivity aware of its energetic connections. The following chapter explores the intersections between words, affect and the life drive.

²³³ Brennan states that femininity for Freud is 'a specific psychical state that is always disabling' and can be experienced by anyone regardless of gender. See Brennan, *Interpretation*, x.

CHAPTER THREE

The Physicality of Ideas: Writing and Embodiment

In the long run, to emphasize the non-reductionist nature of certain physical effects, without raising old spectres, the term ‘physicality of ideas’ may be preferable to ‘materialism’. The physicality of ideas means no more than it says. Ideas are physical.

– Teresa Brennan²³⁴

Brennan’s curious brand of materialism attempts to avoid reductionist essentialist interpretations by highlighting the dynamic relationship between embodiment and subjectivity and by expanding notions of femininity and masculinity as intrinsic to both males and females. For Brennan, the polarised sites of mind and body, society and the individual, are engaging in a dynamic exchange of affects which transform both how we feel and think. In this respect, ideas are physical because what we think of requires a corresponding embodiment. Simultaneously, new feelings, the processing of affects and experiences, especially those that reach us on a nonconscious level, can come to transform even our most fixed ideas. But that is not to say that there are no instances where there is a prolonged delay, a gap, or a disjunction between a thought and an emotional or linguistic response. As many might know through trying to break a habit, a pattern of behaviour, or a reoccurring, stubborn mental image, the recognition of such a disjunction is in itself the first and hardest achievement towards any transformation. There are certain experiences, or encounters, that open up a more dynamic space for affective impact and which can, as a result of such impact, facilitate transformation.

²³⁴ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 4.

Taking into consideration Ettinger's postulations on aesthetic encounters, in the section *Sublimation: A Matter of Life and Death*, I propose that artworking and art-writing are sites that open unto psychic transformational potential. In the next section, I draw from Brennan's examination of the relationship between logic and language, an analysis that can facilitate an understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and art-writing and what questions this relationship raises regarding embodiment.

Fleshy Memories: The Physical Logic of Communication

Brennan argues that language is a mimesis of intra-uterine communication that functions differently for the masculine and the feminine subject (of any sex).²³⁵ By intra-uterine communication Brennan means that during the in-utero stage communication takes place between the mother and the child through both mental and physical forms. The idea that communication is both a mental and physical process might sound like an obvious statement.²³⁶ However, Brennan argues that physical logic is eclipsed by mental logic in a process to establish one's distinct identity.

While communication during the in-utero stage is not verbal, Brennan's analysis focuses on language in adult life as the vehicle that has the ability to express (project) affects in linguistic form. Simultaneously, language can interrupt or facilitate connections – whether these connections manifest in our mind as logical processes or with others in intersubjective ways. Even though the non-verbal initial form of communication must necessarily be eclipsed during adult life, it is this primary form of communication that Brennan draws from to formulate her hypothesis that co-affectivity can be energetically communicated:

Presumably facilitating connections are basic to the language of the flesh, which has to be logical, in the sense that one thing connects with another in a way that facilitates growth. This suggests that logical thought, the connections made through words, is a kind of mimesis of a hypothetical original form of communication which was both mental and physical.²³⁷

²³⁵ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 170-173, 223-227.

²³⁶ Elizabeth Wilson argues that biological data – anatomy, physiology, biochemistry – can offer feminist arguments on embodiment additional 'explanatory powers' and strengthen their 'conceptual and political efficacy.' It is very often the case that doing so is 'considered to be too reductive to be analytically interesting.' See Elizabeth Wilson, "Gut Feminism," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2004): 71.

²³⁷ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 223.

Brennan figures “logical thought” as ‘the ability to make consistent connections,’ which are however, prone to interruption when the repressed affect of anxiety triumphs over the subject.²³⁸ As discussed in Chapter Two, in order to overcome the hold of repressed affects, one has to externalize (expel) them through a psychological representation or action (as in the *fort-da* game). In this sense, while one can employ ‘a word or chain of words’ to express the affects, Brennan suggests that the affects can also be communicated through image-based representations or simply through energy projected outwards.²³⁹

Brennan’s argument here has two aims: firstly, to indicate that communication is also physical and secondly that, since it is physical, it is embodied differently by the masculine and feminine party. By clarifying these points, Brennan is then able to argue that the masculine party employs a form of reasoning that splits language from affects (words from their physical import) in a way that purports ‘a belief in the arbitrary nature of signification, a belief that denies any origin at all.’²⁴⁰

As Brennan argues:

If [...] the word can be turned in certain directions, a turning hinged on its connection with a visual image, affects, and motor activity, then this direction will affect the ease with which connections are made. This must be so, given that the image can lock a word inside in hysteria (femininity). In masculinity, the outward forceful projection of image and affects should allow those words to flow more freely, but at the price of a divorce from affective feeling. While this divorce cannot be understood unless the spatial underpinnings of language are taken into account, the physical, spatial projection of an image and affect help secure the grounding or anchor any subject needs to follow a chain of words. Moreover it is a divorce that suggests that affects, or emotions, are the confused residue of the original logic of the flesh, left over and muddled up once they have been subtracted from that original logic through speech, after the subject has been cut off from that fleshly logic, or

²³⁸ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 223.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

castrated.²⁴¹

For Brennan, recognizing that communication is actually taking place in utero ‘may point to the source of the “common substance” Freud presupposed lay at the origin of language and physical symptom alike.’²⁴² Brennan argues that if ‘the experience of call and answer exists in utero in bodily codes’ then we may conceptualize subjectivity as composed of a ‘fleshy memory’ which predisposes the subject to assess physical codes of communication (affects and emotions included) to inform their experience.²⁴³

The concept of a ‘fleshy memory’ holds important repercussions for discourses on affect and their attendant investigations of corporeality and aesthetics. If we take the “experience of call and answer” to be prior to language – *a priori* inscribed in the subject during the pre-natal stage – and firstly impacts the bodily (fleshy) aspect of our memory and experience, then the assumption is that such a form of communication can endure as a physical (fleshy) inscription that affects our conscious and nonconscious adult life. With this suggestion, terms such as “embodiment” and “language” become radically intensified.

Feminist theorist Samantha Frost notes that the vexed question of ‘the body as a living organism,’ has been a ‘sidelined, bracketed, or ignored’ debate for feminist philosophers and theorists.²⁴⁴ However, recent new materialist feminists (Brennan included) theorize embodiment through physical and biological sciences in ways that:

²⁴¹ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 223-224.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ Samantha Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology,” in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, ed. Heidi E. Grasswick (Springer, 2011): 69, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6835-5_4.

seek also to challenge the very notion that matter is passive and unthinking, to undo the opposition between reason and passions, and to question the distinction between self and world that positions individuals as separate from yet in relation to the contexts of their actions.²⁴⁵

While the new materialist agenda provides a way to situate Brennan's work within discourses of embodiment, the equally vexed question of the immaterial forces in her work should not be brushed aside either. On this point, theorist Lisa Blackman expresses reservations regarding Brennan's recourse to hormones as proof of affective transmission through the senses (smell and touch). Blackman instead advocates for an examination of immaterial affects and how they affect embodiment (for instance, hypnotic suggestion and voice hearing), contending that 'increasing evidence [...] suggests that bodies cannot be reduced to materiality and that the body's potential for psychic or psychological attunement [...] is one that the turn to affect must adequately theorize.'²⁴⁶ In my opinion, Brennan's proposition that the psychic cannot be severed from the physical, should not be interpreted as a reductive strategy. The term *psychophysical* proposes that sensorial, biological and organoleptic potential works with the psychic (and immaterial) and vice versa. In fact, it is the condition by which we come to life (in utero), a condition which is generally dismissed on the grounds of self-containment. Self-containment can be thought of precisely as a body whose "potential for psychic or psychological attunement" has been foreclosed. Blackman states that 'Brennan removes any trace of its [the affect's] spiritualist lineage, equating the concept of energetic exchange to an exchange or transfer of chemicals.'²⁴⁷ I would argue that Brennan's investigation into endocrinology is one way to ensure that the spiritual gains a physical dimension,

²⁴⁵ Frost, "New Materialisms," 72.

²⁴⁶ Lisa Blackman, *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (London: Sage, 2012), xxv

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

in a way that complements rather than negates its immaterial affectivity. In fact, it is very likely that the “spiritualist lineage” was the basis from which Brennan began to speculate about energetic transmission and its effect on the body:

Nothing is more material than mysticism. Through sustaining living attention by concentration, the mystic enters into a timeless state that eventually yields an experience that is evidently sensual and spiritual.²⁴⁸

Brennan’s use of physiological data, particularly neuroscience and endocrinology, is not only a way to materialize the immaterial force that is affect, but it is a stepping stone to explaining how this *energetic* matter alters both the material of the body and the (im)material aspects of the psyche.

If Brennan’s idea of embodiment and language could be deployed in assessing a form of embodied writing, then how would it figure? Embodied writing should not to be taken in its usual sense for writing that is produced by a (textually) linguistically intelligible body which is coded in biological categories or markers of identity such as male/female, able/disabled, and so forth.²⁴⁹ I would suggest that there is a physicality in writing or, that experiences can be so viscerally psychophysical in ways where the affect exceeds what the body can withstand in its embodiment and spills into writing. Psychophysical experiences then not only shape the writing, but reveal that writing can be a form of communication that arises from the very form of co-affectation it seeks to communicate: a co-affectation which was once experienced as pre-linguistic.

²⁴⁸ Brennan, *Transmission*, 159.

²⁴⁹ For one of the most influential edited volumes written by feminists concerned with female embodiment from an intersectional and interdisciplinary perspective see the collection of essays in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

For the purposes of this thesis, the psychophysical aspect of affect and experience can serve as a bridge between mind/body dichotomies by maintaining that each individual is *also* uniquely shaped and informed by their bodily specificity and experience. But how embodiment can become a very material or visible form of an experience, and the associated affects that come with experience, is a matter that has been theorised in psychoanalytic terms as sublimation. The next section examines the aspect of creativity, what Brennan defines as “resolution through creative labour,” its relationship to theories of the death drive, and how it concurs with Ettinger’s proposition of an ethico-aesthetic dimension to artworking.

Sublimation: A Matter of Life & Death

There is no energy outside the freely mobile energy of the life drive. The differentiation between the life and death drives lies not in the energy they in fact share, but in the pathways anchored in fixed points formed through repression. What makes the death drive deathly is the fact that the subject seeks to regain its prior state on the basis of the same pathways which fix its subjectivity in place. In other words, the only way it can regain the prior state is to do away with the pathways, but on these its subjectivity depends. In one sense, then, the idea that life tends towards death is based on a mistake about direction.

– Teresa Brennan²⁵⁰

For Ettinger, the process of artworking and an encounter with artwork can provide access to a psychic state of affective potentiality whereby the ‘aesthetical informs the

²⁵⁰ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 64.

ethical.²⁵¹ Ettinger argues that meaning is a co-generative process between the self and other, activated by the retrieval of memory, the analysis of trauma or during an aesthetic encounter.²⁵² However, such potentiality requires a reconfiguration of the subject's central belief system of which the imaginary – as conscious and unconscious structure of identification and the ego – has a substantial role. Ettinger argues that 'believing in the reality of imaginary mother-phantasies is a psychic dead-end,' which hinders the potential for psychic transformation.²⁵³

As noted in Chapter Two, the evacuation of maternal agency from psychoanalytic interpretations has largely contributed to presenting a limited scope of subject formation that relies on binary and antagonistic ideas. The 'dead-end' here alludes to both the death drive and to a psychic, ethical and creative blockage. This 'dead-end' is inevitably tied up to the primary relationship between infant and caregiver, or the foundational fantasy as Brennan demonstrates. By unveiling the illusions that support this fantasy, both Brennan and Ettinger provide a radically different analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and creativity. In this section I examine the key transformations in order to deepen insight into how aesthetics impact the organizing system of the life drive through nonconscious co-affective exchange.

While a number of psychoanalytic interpretations have relied on the role of the death drive as a productive agent in analyses of creativity, the life drive has remained under-examined in such a relationship.²⁵⁴ In relation to identity formation, the death drive has served as an analytic tool to describe, following Brennan, how

²⁵¹ Ettinger, "Proto-ethical Compassion," 120.

²⁵² Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 151-152.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (London: Duke University Press, 2004); Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993).

human perception is often liable to objectifying all others (humans, objects, artwork) in order to secure psychic individuality. As I have elaborated in Chapter One, Lacan's and Freud's concept of the death drive figures as a regulation of the desire to possess an unattainable lost object in fantasy. Based on their propositions, Brennan stipulates that the death drive figures prominently for masculine sexuality and subjectivity, where masculinity is the effect of keeping the *ego* at a distance from others. On the other hand, Brennan argues that in the case of femininity, 'it depends on a distance from the death drive that is guaranteed only by a living attention that protects her from the aggression turned towards or back against herself.'²⁵⁵

Brennan scrutinizes Freud's hypotheses on feminine masochism in order to disentangle how phantasy, the death drive and the sexual drive figure differently for feminine and masculine development. Freud had already proposed that both Eros (life drive) and Thanatos (death drive) are to 'some degree fused in the sexual drives,' but in the case of sublimation, when the sexual drive is 'redirected away from the libidinal object to a "higher aim", the possibility arises that the death drive will then become defused or detached from the libido.'²⁵⁶ This prompts Brennan to ask an obvious question: when the death drive detaches, where does it go?

I return to the epigraph of this section where Brennan notes that "the idea that life tends towards death is based on a mistake about direction." Brennan proposes that during sublimation, in the practice of creativity and "higher aims," the death drive is redirected and the life drive takes on a more forceful presence. She draws this conclusion from the idea that 'sublimation has an aim which is ongoing, an aim whose fulfilment rests in *movement* rather than the possession of a fixed object,

²⁵⁵ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 213.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

phantasmatic or real’ – the latter being the effect of the death drive.²⁵⁷ Movement is in fact the basis of Brennan’s hypothesis, which relies in large part on the hypothesis that such mobility is also present in the distribution of affects. By providing an analysis of how affects can be projected, as much as they can be contained, Brennan elucidates how it is their circulation that leads to specific psychological dispositions (whether debilitating or life-affirming) as much as they contribute to the construction of identity, gender and sexuality.

In the case of sublimation, this psychic activity which aims beyond the “love-object” figures differently for the feminine than the masculine subject. The feminine subject’s libido regulates the sexual drives, while the latter transposes the libido from the object (of its desire) onto a higher aim. Brennan notes that for Freud phallic castration creates the conditions for identity to locate its ‘final spatio-temporal bearings’ as a sexed individual.²⁵⁸ But the effects of phallic castration arrive in an intermittent process where external social and cultural forces participate in developing sexed individuation into a fixed identity. Instead, Brennan examines the process of individuation and how it is secured through the creation of psychic spatial distinctness by drawing from an eclipsed narrative on affects.

Brennan notes that in the case of masculine sexuality a transposition occurs from the sexual drive and the object it aims to possess (projective repression) into creative labour. In other words, if the external aim of sublimation is the sexual object then to sublimate means to replace the desire for the object with the desire for creative labour. Brennan combines two propositions on the affect of anxiety to formulate this hypothesis. Firstly, Klein’s idea that ‘anxiety derives from the death drive working within,’ with Freud’s question over why the affect of anxiety is

²⁵⁷ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 201 (italics mine).

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

reactive, productive and driven while other affects seem to ‘run counter to the movement of life.’²⁵⁹ As noted earlier, for Brennan the transposition of any (negative/positive) affect requires a certain movement. That is, it is not simply transposed; rather, it is ‘psychical energy *directed*’ outside the self in ‘an ongoing process.’²⁶⁰ Movement forges the distinction between repression (static energy) and sublimation (redirected energy) and how these figure differently in the case of sexual desire or “the higher aim.” Furthermore, for Brennan, repression does not interfere or obstruct the process of sublimation because while the fantasy of possessing the object is repressed, the concomitant affect that accompanies the fantasy is redirected. Simply said, to effectively repress a desire one must energetically project the anxiety that comes with it. Brennan’s term ‘projective repression’ to describe this movement provides some answers with regards ego formation, feminine/masculine development and the life and death drives.

For the life drive to effectively work, it requires a movement that can be directed outwards, one such example being through creative outlets. Brennan notes that because the material conditions of creative labour have been ‘circumscribed economically and culturally’ for female sexed individuals, it is no surprise that it is men that generally consolidate their identity through means that are socially enabling.²⁶¹ For this reason, Brennan argues that the psychic disposition of femininity, in both men and women, is more likely to concur with females. The disabling pathological aspects of femininity that Freud described in hysterical women (or feminine men) were specific to a class and social system that reinforced sociocultural conventions.²⁶² As creativity was not exactly encouraged in women,

²⁵⁹ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 201.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

they were then not able to redirect the affect of anxiety into creative practice and as a result it would produce physically and mentally disabling effects such as inertia, inhibition and a reduced inclination towards curiosity.²⁶³ Brennan's suggestion that Freud correctly assigned to femininity a pathological state (theorized as hysteria), inhabited by both women and men, can raise a number of issues with feminist psychoanalytic theorists that have made an alternative and more benign version of femininity, and its corollary hysteria, an intellectual pursuit.²⁶⁴

However, stressing how affects work in the case of femininity and masculinity prior to their sociocultural bond, should not be underemphasized. It is here that a theory of affective transmission is fortified, and once taken seriously, will clarify why femininity is simultaneously a problem and a necessary part of psychic development. And, once this problem is addressed, we can overcome the self-destructive states it accompanies.

According to Freud's revised theory of femininity, women also first desired their mother, but it is their transition to heterosexuality that produced the greatest psychical task. In a sense, repressing the desire for the (m)other requires an immense amount of energy, an energy which turns in on itself as it does not find any outlets. For Brennan, desire can be either an imprint (a synonym for an affect-laden symbolic image) or a phantasy. The first experience of desire (as phantasy) is unconscious (a repressed hallucination), and 'subsequent conscious and unconscious phantasies are

²⁶³ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 216.

²⁶⁴ See Elaine Showalter, "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender," in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, eds. Sander L. Gilman et al. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 286-344; Hélène Cixous & Catherine Clément, *Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996). Cixous sees in the uncontrollable disposition of the hysteric an embodiment that can serve as a resistance to patriarchal structures. Also, Diane Hunter, "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis and Feminism: The Case of Anna O," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Conboy et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 257-276. Most recently, Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria* (London: Basic Books, 2000).

the longing for an imprint.²⁶⁵ In this respect, desire always returns to that initial state of longing which was first experienced through the imprint (image) of the (m)other:

The desire of the other, in short, embodies an image [the longing for an imprint] and attention that can enhance or diminish one's capacities (thus the complaint from Freud's women's patients that their mothers did not give them enough 'milk').²⁶⁶

This notion feeds into Ettinger's elaborations of the maternal bond being an "incestuous rapport," which when foreclosed can lead to psychosis.²⁶⁷ The relationship between maternal foreclosure and sublimation, and how it relates to the feminine, has been developed by Ettinger into an alternative framework for feminine sublimation which she terms *Matrixial Eros*.²⁶⁸ And many of Brennan's observations resonate with Ettinger's endeavour to define processes of the life drive which are premised on a transsubjective²⁶⁹ (and intersubjective) mode of relating to aesthetics. In this way, *Matrixial Eros* can forge what Brennan defines as 'energetic and affective connections between an individual, other people and the surrounding environment.'²⁷⁰ For Ettinger, the aesthetic sphere provides a space of interaction for these connections to flourish:

Something – but not-all – of this act and its affects are transported into and conducted via the artwork, thus transforming the point of view of the viewer in difference from, yet in relation to, the nonconscious swerves and relations of the artist. The artist captures/produces/conducts ideas, traumas, and

²⁶⁵ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 227.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁶⁷ See the section *The Matrixial Nonconscious: Affect as Non-verbal Intensity* in this thesis.

²⁶⁸ I believe that the clearest conceptual framework of 'Matrixial Eros' which delineates a process of sublimation for the feminine (beyond the "death-anxiety" complex proposed by Freud where the death drive and sublimation merge) is found in Bracha L. Ettinger, "Diotima and the Matrixial Transference: Psychoanalytical Encounter-Event as Pregnancy in Beauty," in *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature*, ed. Chris N. Van der Merwe and Hein Viljoen (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 105-132.

²⁶⁹ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 149-150. To highlight the fundamentally relational nature of subjectivity, Ettinger employs the term transsubjective or transubjective to refer to her elaboration of a matrixial subject in the encounter with an other (subject, object, event). See also this thesis, Part Two, the section *Writing with Art: Subjectivity & Encounter*.

²⁷⁰ Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 10.

phantasies only inasmuch as s/he is affected by the trauma of the m/Other, of others, and of the world.²⁷¹

By reading these two thinkers side by side we can map out alternative (physical and co-affective) ways of responding to aesthetics and how these responses inform an ethics of creative practice and subjectivity in adult life. Furthermore, they provide insight as to the role, or the absence, of physicality in psychic development. In this juxtaposition, the life-drive is drastically re-framed from the neutral other of a potent death-driven desire, to an equally important psychic activity responsible for counter-balancing destructive tendencies and sustaining relationality.

By revisiting Freud's thesis in the essay *The Uncanny*, Ettinger tackles deeply entrenched psychoanalytic ideas of the role of the intrauterine phantasy in the relationship between the unconscious and the sublime. While Freud holds that intrauterine phantasies are in a sense "proof" of his theorizations of the castration complex and concomitant theorisations of repression, Ettinger insists that there are two distinct psychic stratifications that make their way to the Symbolic.

The first notion, developed by Freud, states that repression is the process by which affects that seem familiar but too overwhelming to endure are pushed into the unconscious (what Brennan calls the "longing for an imprint"). The second notion proposed by Ettinger, is a *matrixial repression*, which follows a *maternal womb/intrauterine complex* 'is charged with anxiety only once, when the traces of the original experience leave the transgressive, transsubjective space of borderlinks and are transformed in order to be transferred to the unconscious.'²⁷² Ettinger argues that while both complexes are linked to the affect of anxiety, what becomes repressed upon the return of the original phantasy is not exactly the phantasy, but the

²⁷¹ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 152.

²⁷² Ettinger, "Matrixial Gaze," 63.

affect. This hypothesis concurs with Brennan's stipulation. As does Ettinger's proposition that, prior to the affect of anxiety being repressed, the originary affect, the first affect that accompanied the experience of what was familiar in the unfamiliar (the *Unheimlich* in the *heimisch*) is the affect of pleasure or displeasure.²⁷³

From this originary experience Ettinger draws productive parallelisms between the two complexes. One finds its basis in castration and repression, whilst the other leads Ettinger to formulate an 'originary feminine difference.'²⁷⁴ To reiterate, the originary experience of the *matrixial phantasy* is 'not frightening at the point of its original emergence, but becomes frightening when the experience is repressed.'²⁷⁵ Freud also notes that the intrauterine phantasy 'had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness.'²⁷⁶

Paradoxically, Freud states that a number of terrifying phantasies, such as being buried alive or drowning, are simply a modification of the original intrauterine phantasy. Paradoxical are also Freud's analyses of a number of literary works that draw a direct correlation between an uncanny experience and the fear of castration. Dreams of dismemberment, having one's eyes gouged out, or returning to the womb are all simply replacement narratives whose essence lies in the primary fear and anxiety of being castrated.²⁷⁷ This circular hypothesis can explain how the affect of anxiety is accompanied by repression, but it cannot explain why the intrauterine experience is posited as just another example of the uncanny, when the uncanny is clearly tied up to the castration complex. To clarify, according to Freud, the anxiety-

²⁷³ Ettinger, "Matrixial Gaze," 47.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny' (1919)," in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 1-24, ed. Ivan Smith (2010), 3694.

²⁷⁷ Freud, "Uncanny," 3694.

inducing phantasy that has been repressed in the first instance will return as anxiety in the second instance. In contrast, through Ettinger's and Brennan's analyses, phantasies return accompanied by an anxiety produced by the act of *repressing* the first instance, an instance which was not necessarily associated with the affect of anxiety to begin with.

Ettinger formulates this distinct yet parallel psychic activity to the death drive (Thanatos) which she terms *compassionate Eros*: the Matrixial equivalent of the life drive that runs parallel to the death drive. As for Ettinger a relationship to art is figured as an affective encounter rather than an object of study, the resulting aesthetic engagement is defined as *co-poietic*:

Co-poietic transformational potentiality evolves along aesthetic and ethical unconscious paths: strings and threads, and produces a particular kind of knowledge. Unconscious transmission and reattunement as well as resonant copoietic knowledge don't depend on verbal communication, intentional organization or inter-subjective relationships. Aesthetical and ethical processes are impregnated by matrixial copoiesis.²⁷⁸

Thus, when compassionate Eros is effectuated, the drives, from a matrixial perspective, are no longer purely internal and autopoietic but they are activated through encounters that bring to the fore the interrelational and reciprocal dimension of the subject's desire for connectivity.²⁷⁹ Ettinger argues that the process of artworking, which activates the above-mentioned psychic movements, cannot always be defined by Freud's prototype of sublimation as 'Compassionate Eros and sexual libido are different psychic instances. They might intermix, but they nurture different kinds of love.'²⁸⁰ This is in fact an observation also made by Brennan, where she argues that Freud problematically 'assimilates the ego drives to the life drive even

²⁷⁸ Ettinger, "Copoiesis," in *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 5, no. 10 (2005), 703.

²⁷⁹ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 123.

²⁸⁰ Ettinger, "Copoiesis," 709.

when they are opposites.’²⁸¹ Brennan maintains that drives are crucial to an understanding of affects. In fact, she figures the drive as the mechanism that ‘propels the affect’ but also ‘in large part the stuff out of which the affect is made.’²⁸² Drives have the double function of seeking out an “object” while at the same time they are the ‘carriers of energy.’²⁸³ However, Brennan compartmentalizes the affect of love on the side of the life drive, while aggression and hate are on the side of the death drive. Each drive influences the way the seeking and the carrying are executed. In the case of how energies are carried Brennan notes that:

If I am depressed, it may be because I have turned the affect of anger back against myself rather than directing it toward another. And in turning it back against myself, I automatically become more inert: my energy is less. In other words, it is the energetic dimension of the affects that reveals their partial origin in the drives most directly. This energetic dimension is not only evident in the negative affects. Just as the negative affects may deplete energy, so can the positive affects enhance it. If I receive another’s love, I receive their living attention; and this attention, logically, is a biological force in itself [...].²⁸⁴

Receiving or responding with living attention is one way of saying that an activation happens in the drives that aims towards flourishing, making connections and perpetuating life itself. For Brennan, this leads to an understanding that the affect of love (and loving attention) is distinct from other affects in that it is inextricable from the life drive. In agreement with Freud’s hypothesis, Brennan states:

The aim of the life drive “is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus-in short, to bind together.” The death drive, on the contrary, aims “to undo connections and so to destroy things.” Freud allied the force of the death drive with the force of anxiety as the factor that undoes connections. It works against connective growth rather than for it. Demonstrably, anxiety,

²⁸¹ Brennan, *Transmission*, 116.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

envy, and aggression work against bodily well being through stress-related illness.²⁸⁵

By bringing Brennan's development of the life drive as directed living attention in dialogue with Ettinger's conceptualization of "compassionate eros," we can delineate a subjectivity that responds to aesthetic encounters through the mechanisms of the life drive. As Brennan argues, the inclination to,

bind and bring together, to make things cohere, follows the logic of the life drive. Without it, the psyche is in pieces. This erotic and cohering energy is absent especially in psychosis, whose schizophrenic versions are marked by the inability to make logical connections and by lack of sexual affect and/or loving ties to others.²⁸⁶

Bridging Brennan's idea of living attention with Ettinger's elaboration of the proto-ethical, non-sexual, yet libidinal dimension we can extrapolate how artwork carries the potential to transform 'the amnesia of lone traumatic events into a memory that can only emerge in sharing with an-other.'²⁸⁷ As aesthetic copoietic encounters bypass both the conscious and unconscious regulation of the ego, during an aesthetic encounter the defensive ego's ability to regulate and control is dismantled. This leaves the ego in a vulnerable state, nevertheless, a state which allows the conditions for connection to manifest and affects to be mobilized. In this way, Ettinger envisions a type of experience, described as a 'sharing-in-difference,' that maintains a 'transconnectedness' between self and other and which provides a link between trauma and phantasy.²⁸⁸ That is, either through the process of artworking, or, even more broadly, through an encounter with art, affective states such as awe, vulnerability, anxiety, whether on a conscious or nonconscious level,

²⁸⁵ Brennan, *Transmission*, 36.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁸⁷ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 151-152.

²⁸⁸ Ettinger, "Fragilization," 12.

can be understood through our co-affective origins. If artwork carries an ethical demand for living attention, we may begin to see how the desire for connection, compassion and co-affectivity are psychic dispositions stemming from the life drive and informed by an archaic recognition of our connective alterity. To this effect, this model of subjectivity can inform how auto/biographical narratives employ a ‘sharing with an-other’ to offer a personal and unique account of *who* one is becoming in relation to an encounter with a specific work. Or, as Ettinger proposes, a primordial ethics of the subject assumes relationality and transconnectedness as the foundations of subjectivity.²⁸⁹

However, my emphasis lies with how the subject’s desire manifests as the responsibility to narrate the other’s story. If Cavarero’s ethics of relationality figure the subject as oriented towards the disclosure of their life-story to a “worthy” narrator, it only follows that the storyteller should do a certain justice (even though violence may be produced instead) to the subject’s desire to hear *who* they are. As Cavarero often highlights, it is through an ethics of relating that ‘both the poet and the historian, [...] appeal to the unrepeatability of the unique, not to the universal and the general.’²⁹⁰ I have termed this specific approach that appeals to uniqueness rather than universality, to a life-driven, co-affective aesthetic encounter in a specific spatiotemporal moment, that takes the form of a response in auto/biographical art-writing: *erotic responsiveness*.

²⁸⁹ According to Ettinger, fragilization and resistance have a more acute hold during aesthetic encounters. In Ettinger’s words, ‘We can look and observe, but it takes en-duration in con-templation to see. Self-fragilizing is risky and also painful because you are reaching compassion-beyond-empathy and a com-passion that is often hard to tolerate on the level of an individual that seeks mental security and needs to withdraw inside its habits. In the matrixial transsubjective and transjective time-space-encounter there is no certainty of promise – yet this is a zone of occasion for seeing. The subject in self-identity is necessary for the ethical level, but it is pointless to evoke the whole subject in self-identity without considering its transconnectedness, or to evoke a definite blockage from encounter without considering another impossibility: the impossibility of not-sharing.’ See Ettinger, “Fragilization,” 9.

²⁹⁰ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 25.

Erotic Responsiveness

Contrary to the symptom, artworking cannot be replaced by the Symbolic. Contrary to *jouissance*, artwork does not exhaust its erotic potential.

– Bracha Ettinger²⁹¹

An erotic response is produced by an encounter with a work of art. Such ethico-aesthetic experience follows a different order from reason and knowledge even though it may employ these faculties. Erotic responsiveness is a framework for discerning a unique psychophysical experience parallel to the exercise of knowledge. It is informed by an affective impact prior to cognitive processes, but can effectuate an understanding of the self as inextricably connected and shaped through co-affective encounters with multiple others.

Through an attempt to conceptualise a theoretical framework for auto/biographical art-writing, I seek out narratives that employ a reflective practice of living attention and attunement that are not rooted in a dualistic view of reality where a subject reflects on an object. Rather, the practice of living attention, connectivity and reattunement is a process whereby the uniqueness between two or more entities during an encounter-event are maintained in their relation. Ettinger defines this process as ‘co-emergence in differentiation,’ which coheres with Teresa Brennan’s conceptualization of subjectivity as relationally informed through affective transmission and connective alterity.

I suggest that the practice of auto/biographical art-writing may offer the possibility to consciously process the impact of co-affective experience on our

²⁹¹ Ettinger, “With-In-Visible Screen,” 119.

‘fleshy memory.’²⁹² During an aesthetic encounter, the subject may also activate the mechanics of identity, politics and ethics. What matters in this account of subjectivity, is the unique story that unfolds in relation to a specific aesthetic encounter. I stress the importance of lived experience, personal history and bodily sensuality as methodological tools for discussing and investigating aesthetics and problematizing their accompanying discourses. As an encounter with artwork is firstly an impact on the nonconscious and co-affective registers of the subject, I figure a psychic impact that follows an ethics of relationality as an erotic response. I employ the term *erotic responsiveness* to mean that there is a non-sexual yet libidinal agitation of the subject’s psyche that generates an acknowledgement of the self and other through aesthetic encounters. Auto/biographical art-writing is one such instance of experiencing the self in its connective alterity. On the level of drives and libido, erotic responsiveness actualizes its potentiality through the life drive.

Brennan’s stipulation that affects are transmitted energies that can physically impact others can support an investigation of art-writing that branches out into two distinct ideas. Firstly, to reinforce how bodily experience can unravel accounts that attend to the psychic and physical dimension in the treatment of aesthetics. It is a framework that takes into consideration how the viewer, reader, recipient of affect is impressed and motivated by an external force which does not originate in the self even though the feelings felt during this experience are the subject’s own feelings. I maintain, following Brennan, that affects are *physical imprints of understanding*. I contend that they may provide analytic tools for discussing the relationship between aesthetics and subjectivity when they are given conscious attention through the

²⁹² The ‘fleshy memory’ and its relationship to Brennan’s logic of language is examined in the section *Fleshy Memories: The Physical Logic of Communication*.

practice of auto/biographical art-writing. In other words, that an *erotic response* to an affective encounter requires ‘an active deployment of *psychophysical energy*.’²⁹³

Secondly, in proposing a relational approach to storytelling, it is important to understand the relationship between self and other as conditioned by affective exchange. This is not to propose an egalitarian and harmonious exchange, or a protocol for morality. Rather, by formulating auto/biographical art-writing as a response to an ethical demand, I maintain that such a demand calls for the subject’s conscious living/loving attention. In this sense, certain forms of art-writing adopt an altogether different methodology and thus require another set of tools for interpretation.²⁹⁴ The demand in the case of erotic responsiveness is not an authoritative request that dictates what one should feel or do. Rather, it is the idea that someone or something *can* make you feel a certain way through sensorial impact and affective transmission. In other words, to propose that the subject is not physically self-contained is to support the idea that subjectivity is decentered by affective and energetic transmission.²⁹⁵

To this extent, auto/biography as critical methodology does not amplify or consolidate the writer’s ego. The auto/biographical narration of the erotically responsive art-writer holds the reflection of the other while it informs the self. This transaction is precisely the ethical demand of aesthetics prior to its relationship to broader socio-cultural discourses. It informs *who* one is becoming through the unfolding of an ontological relation to the specific encounter. Furthermore, and

²⁹³ Brennan, *Interpretation*, 96 (italics mine).

²⁹⁴ A good example of such forms of art-writing can be found in the work of H el ene Cixous’ where editors Marta Segarra and Joana Mas o state that her work ‘cannot, however, be described as art criticism, nor simply regarded as critical essays, because Cixous responds to the artworks as a poet, reading them as if they were poems.’ See H el ene Cixous, *Poetry in Painting: Writings on Contemporary Arts and Aesthetics*, eds. Marta Segarra and Joana Mas o (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 2.

²⁹⁵ Brennan, *Interpretation*, x & 34.

following Brennan, it figures the idea of repression, ‘the attempt to expel what is painful while enhancing what is pleasurable,’ as a psychic phenomenon that may be processed and relinquished through the organizing activity of the life drive.²⁹⁶ The life drive strives for coherence, connection, organization and unification provided by the living attention it receives or directs outwards.²⁹⁷ I propose auto/biographical art-writing as one such practice of an ‘embodied logic of the flesh’ expressed through the storyteller’s living attention towards the artwork.²⁹⁸ This process involves an active thinking and disclosure of the senses in visual and/or linguistic terms to free the drives from the symptoms of repression in order to formulate coherence and harmony through the unification of mind and body. As Brennan points out, ‘if the erotic energy, or the life drive, is composed of fleshly codes that parallel those of language, this could explain why it is that the body seems to do its own thinking.’²⁹⁹ For this reason, erotic responsiveness will be partial to sensorial and corporeal experience and how it is communicated in language.

Autobiographical and biographical narratives usually describe a life story where to some extent the author knows the beginning and conclusion of their text.

Antithetically, auto/biographical art-writing is determined by a specific sense-making process of a particular encounter without a pre-determined conclusion. Such methodology resembles diary writing, which Philip Lejeune describes as confessional, processual and a technique of self-care and self-reflection where ‘before becoming a text, the private diary is a practice. The text itself is a mere by-

²⁹⁶ Brennan, *Transmission*, 106.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36, 40, 58 & 151.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

product, a residue.³⁰⁰ However, Lejeune's definition of diary writing also states that the writing is addressed to a future self, which can therefore become a way of displaying an identity in process. Auto/biographical art-writing does not follow this protocol as it is a practice that aims to display the *exchange* in process, or a process of temporary individuation by a *specific* relational experience effectuated by someone (human/animal/object/text). It is firstly a response to an external demand that does not incorporate or reject the other in order to individuate the self. It is an ethics of responding to the affective impact of an encounter external to the self which in turn may offer an account of oneself.

Post-structuralist critiques of the author have shifted the focus from the writer to the reader as the generator of literary interpretation.³⁰¹ This critique encompasses general ideas of authorship including the centrality of the viewer in contemporary art theory and the audience as indispensable part and participator in the experience of aesthetics.³⁰² Erotic responsiveness places emphasis on the viewer's experience but not at the sacrifice of the artwork's authorship or at the necessity of the audience's participation to create the work. Generated meaning is conditioned by the subject's perception yet the encounter with artwork can co-affectively transform the subject and their conditioned perception. Therefore, artworks hold affective agency prior to cognitive auto/biographical assessments. Meaning is a co-generative process between the work and the viewer, folded within an extended network of memory, collectivity, geo-political situatedness and also discourse. Meaning may relate to a collective sphere yet it is singular in its receptivity and re-transmission in the form of

³⁰⁰ Philip Lejeune, *On Diary*, eds. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, trans. Katherine Durnin (University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 31.

³⁰¹ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142-148.

³⁰² Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Paris: Les Presses du Reel, 2002).

auto/biographical art-writing. Hence, multiple meanings can be generated from a single artwork based on each individual encounter.

Some of the challenges of working with auto/biographical art-writing involve the lack of theoretical work available on writing processes that involve corporeality and affect (notwithstanding the energetic transmission that they accompany) in narratives that unfold lived experience, personal history and how these relate to aesthetics. Furthermore, existing theoretical investigations on the methodology of autobiography and self-disclosure mainly support the idea that the practice or use of autobiography can inform the viewer/reader through representation and concomitant identification.³⁰³ This thesis does not follow such paradigms. Auto/biographical art-writing is not offered as a narrative for identification even though it may generate such relating in the reader. The erotic response in the form of auto/biographical art-writing is a singular, subjective instance of an encounter between the artwork and the writer. An instance that arouses the living attention of the writer towards the work, where living attention, following Brennan, ‘is the condition of reasoning and the embodiment of its connective ability.’³⁰⁴

Writing *about* art is mainly oriented towards the formal, socio-political and theoretical framing and interpretation of work. If we are to follow through Brennan’s suggestion that at its most unified state the subject brings together mind and body by ‘attending to and learning to work with sensation, learning how to realign word and

³⁰³ On the point of identification, Ettinger notes that an event which holds subjectivizing potential should not be confused with the process of identification because ‘the unconscious move here operates on a level of partial subjectivity that transgresses the individual boundaries and where activity and passivity, subject and object, and psychic past and future are transgressed and re-transgressed.’ See Ettinger, “Fascinace,” 69.

³⁰⁴ Brennan, *Transmission*, 41.

affect in the process,' then most writing about art seems to work in the reverse order.³⁰⁵

Affective impact from aesthetic analysis is generally omitted either due to a commitment to theoretical exemplification, aesthetic tradition or, if we take Brennan's argument into consideration, the omission of affect is a result of psychological repression. In its most extreme version, we could say that to frame art as socio-political and theoretical illustration is to annihilate its aesthetic value, subjectivizing potential and affective ability, in favor of exercising reason without a corresponding embodiment.³⁰⁶ Following Ettinger's elaborations of how aesthetic encounters can transform subjectivity and Brennan's elaborations of how such transformation requires a deployment of psychophysical energy, we can deduce that encounters with aesthetics require an alternative interpretation of both the art-writing and the psychic mechanisms that are put into play during that process.

Such an engagement can be made possible if Brennan's proposition is taken into account, that in order to understand 'the influences to which we are subject in terms of passions and emotions, as well as living attention, means lifting off the burden of the ego's belief that it is self-contained in terms of the affects it experiences.'³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ Brennan, *Transmission*, 159.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 41 & 158.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

PART TWO

Writing *with Art*

Writing *with* Art: Subjectivity & Encounter

Writing met art to write back to life those lives that had hitherto been without either art or writing, hence unknown, unscribed, unvoiced.

– Griselda Pollock³⁰⁸

In being disturbed, we ask questions. In being moved, we seek answers.

– Kathy O’Dell³⁰⁹

Why do people write about art? The first idea I would like to divert from this examination is the idea that writing about art is a practice that can be studied, taught and exercised as a profession. It can also be that. But answering the question of why one becomes an art historian, critic, theorist or journalist is too subjective, particular and of no significant value to the central question. Another way to ask the central question would be: What is it about art that *moves* people to writing?

Instead of seeking examples in the writing of art historians and critics, I turn to the less “professionalized” writers of art. By doing so, I aim to move away from the idea that writing about art is a practice, profession or vocation. Instead, I look to writers and poets, some of which have also made a profession out of their writing, or others who have written with no regard for where their writing might end up or fit into. Such forms of art-writing (forms that I have argued should be figured as writing *with* art) can only be viewed through an “alchemy” of theories to provide insight into specific psychic movements that have led to a writer’s response to an artwork.

³⁰⁸ Griselda Pollock, “Writing from the Heart,” in *Writing Otherwise*, eds. Jackie Stacey & Janet Wolff (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 31.

³⁰⁹ Kathy O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xiv.

While there is no single way to look at an artwork, some artworks can be considered “magnetic” – they attract certain frameworks of interpretation more than others. The force of the pull lies in the artwork’s magnetic flux. That is, by calculating how many points in space and time an artwork represents historically (time) and figures symbolically (space), it becomes easier to determine the type of writing that will produce the greatest appeal or magnetic force.

Of course, there are also ways to “demagnetize” a magnet. One way to do this is by “heating” it beyond its intrinsic temperature. Heating can be imagined as a transfer of energy to a specific point. We can make an artwork “hot” (popular, valuable, auratic) by transferring energy towards it. Simultaneously, if we transfer too much energy, that is, if we layer the work with too much meaning beyond its required temperature, we can “demagnetise” it. Such layering of meaning has had a long history of debate in questions of interpretation and criticism. For instance, in the context of American modernism and its turn towards Marxist and psychoanalytic theories of aesthetic analysis, the influential art critic Susan Sontag writes in the essay “On Style”:

A work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world.³¹⁰

For the purpose of creating a productive analogy between magnets, questions and artworks, we will think of art as an experience; a meeting point of reflection. A hybrid combination of “thing” and question that we come across not just in museums but also in our everyday experience. As art has moved outside the confines of

³¹⁰ Susan Sontag, “On Style,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 19.

institutional walls and towards non-commercial venues such as occupied spaces, public parks and “underground” activity, we need a language of reflection that can capture the ephemeral quality of artistic acts and processes such as street interventions, community engaged practices and live art performance.

The applicability of the word “encounter” to the way we think about art is hardly an original designation.³¹¹ Artist and theorist Simon O’Sullivan departs from the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari who described an encounter as ‘something in the world [that] forces us to think,’ in order to draw a distinction between art as representation and art as a ‘genuine encounter’ – an event that motivates us to ‘think otherwise,’ beyond representational habits and repetitions.³¹² Cultural critic and historian Griselda Pollock contends that ‘art practices generate *encounters* rather than (Kantian) objects.’³¹³ Since the mid-1990s, psychoanalyst, theorist and artist Bracha L. Ettinger has been developing a definition of art as encounter that stresses its affective quality and the impact that it may have on subjectivity – a ‘subjectivity-as-encounter’ between a specific *I* and a *non-I*.³¹⁴

³¹¹ John Dewey’s major writing on aesthetics, *Art as Experience* (1934), details the significance of how art provides us with *an* experience. Although he does not use the word encounter, there are interesting similarities between his framing of *an* experience (distinct from the general flow of experience) and a number of thinkers who employ the word encounter to describe an experience of aesthetics. Furthermore, his ideas seem to define subjectivity in a manner that resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming as transformation (and differentiation) through contact with an other in an assemblage: ‘In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogenous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors. Because of continuous merging, there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers when we have an experience. There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement.’ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980. First Published 1934), 36.

³¹² Simon O’Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 1.

³¹³ Pollock, *After-affects*, 154.

³¹⁴ Instead of adopting the language of “self and other,” Ettinger provides a definition of relations between subjects and subjects, or subjects and objects as “*I* and *non-I*”. This linguistic reconfiguration resituates the (universal) “other,” and discourses of otherness, in proximity to the self through connective alterity. Simply said, the other is no longer conceived of as a fundamental opposite to the

For Ettinger, a “genuine” relationship to art occurs when a ‘transjective encounter-event’ is effectuated in the Matrixial transsubjective dimension.³¹⁵ Whether the ‘transjective’ takes the form of a painting, sculpture, photography, or any other artistic medium, the representational aspects of the artwork do not only produce a “force” that compels us to think as O’Sullivan notes, rather, they ‘inspire feel-knowledge’: a capacity to transform how we *act* in the world on an ethical and political level.³¹⁶ Ettinger proposes that we consider art as ‘an aesthetics-in-action that produces protoethical moments as well as theory, by which the ethical sphere can, but not of necessity, be changed.’³¹⁷ Similarly, Griselda Pollock notes that because artwork is in itself ‘a prolonged encounter with trauma, [it] can foster subjective openness that may become ethical and then, through conscious decision and commitment, can also be moved from this sphere into that of the [sic] political action.’³¹⁸ It is by figuring the practice of art as an ‘aesthetics-in-action,’ that Ettinger calls attention to the processual nature of art-making which entails a number of productive ‘moments’ rather than a single product whose end-point is an object in the world. Yet, art-making involves producing objects of art. How we relate to these objects, or in Ettinger’s terms ‘transjects,’ can entail a similar mode of ‘action’ if we begin to figure art as an encounter.

self, but is rather textually, metaphorically or relationally to some degree psychically embedded in the “I” as a “non-I”. In this sense, objects encountered during an aesthetic experience are redefined as “transjects” to indicate their ability to resonate *within* the subject and effectuate a psychic transformation that derives from a specific encounter.

³¹⁵ Ettinger draws a distinction between the intersubjective and transsubjective in order to propose that subjectivity is structured through specific encounters with others. The prefix inter- succinctly describes the dimension *between* relations of subject to subject (self and other), while for Ettinger the prefix trans- presupposes that a relational model of subjectivity relates to an other ‘*before and beyond* any possible economy of inter-subjective exchange’ (italics mine). See Bracha Ettinger, “From Proto-ethical Compassion to Responsibility: Besidedness, and the three Primal Mother-Phantasies of Not-enoughness, Devouring and Abandonment,” in *Athena: Philosophical Studies* 2 (2006): 124-125.

³¹⁶ Ettinger describes ‘feel-knowing’ as a transgression of individual boundaries where we come to recognize ‘the other in the other with-in and with-out the self.’ See Ettinger, “Fragilization,” 4.

³¹⁷ Ettinger, “Fragilization,” 5-6.

³¹⁸ Pollock, *After-affects*, 19.

An encounter is a relationship, a reciprocal engagement, an exchange, a movement between two or more. Writing *with* art is the result of such an encounter. We usually say that we are *moved* when an artwork pushes our emotions to expression, stirs our experience past and present into a future utterance, or hooks an unflagging, taut string on a retired memory. Yet, such a movement is not always possible, as Ettinger reminds us. That is, not every artwork will evoke memories or urge us towards writing. As Pollock notes, such an encounter may not always take place since,

it is contingent on the viewer's openness to resonance with the artwork. Aesthetics are thus not therapeutic; they do not aim at a cure and are not about expression. But they can contribute to change by poignancy as opposed to puncture, and one that is not only intersubjective but is *transsubjective* across time and space, across differences of real incomprehensibility.³¹⁹

But if it does arise, that is, if one experiences a 'transjective encounter-event,' that experience is singular and unique in its manifestation. Stressing the affective impact of aesthetic encounters, O'Sullivan states that an exploration into how to make sense of this "incomprehensibility" can 'only be written about [...] from personal experience.'³²⁰ And it is through framing art as an encounter that we can understand the relationship between subjectivity and aesthetics as potentially transformative. A transformative encounter which, in O'Sullivan's sense, can provide a meeting point for a subjective, personal and unrepeatable narrative to emerge *with* an other. A narrative that arises from a 'genuine encounter' or, a 'transjective encounter-event,' is a story that reveals how encountering art requires a relational model of subjectivity. To return to Kate Love's assertion from Part One of this thesis, in order to articulate an experience with art, we will need to think through

³¹⁹ Pollock, *After-affects*, 16.

³²⁰ O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters*, 2.

a model of subjectivity that recognizes itself ‘as entirely dependent on the “other” for any estimation of the “self”’.³²¹

While the relational dimension of subjectivity has found a stronger place in feminist philosophy, theories of sexual difference, psychoanalysis and autobiography, it has rarely fared as well in discussions about art and especially in how we write *with* art.³²² Simultaneously, the conceptualisation of relationality (in its numerous variations) has often served as the backbone of community building, activism, the potential for social change and ‘feminist crimes against patriarchy’ as art historian Griselda Pollock is fond of labelling the subversive act of rewriting history to include marginalised voices.³²³

There is an obvious difficulty, if not an evident contradiction, in thinking the relationship between art and writing through a relational model of subjectivity. Stressing the relationality of the writing process as an action produced by a subject interconnected and interdependent *with* the world can expose the subject’s vulnerability and their susceptibility to such events. Writer Yve Lomax’s book *Sounding the Event: Escapades in Dialogue and Matters of Art, Nature and Time* departs from ‘the question of what constitutes an event,’ to produce a response in cross-genre narrative that fuses different modes of speech, dialogue and writing with

³²¹ Love, “Experience of Art,” 172.

³²² For intersubjective-relational psychoanalysis and motherhood see Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); intersubjectivity and mutual recognition see Jessica Benjamin, “Beyond Doer and Done To: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 73, no.1 (January 2004): 5-46; community and mestiza identity see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1986); Autonomy and relational sociality see Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Interpersonal relations and ethics see Marilyn A. Friedman, *What are Friends For?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Black feminism and intersectionality see Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (California: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984).

³²³ During Griselda Pollock’s introduction to the symposium “Celebrating Rozsika Parker, 1945-2010. A Day Symposium on Art, Feminism and Psychoanalysis” Birkbeck, University of London, December 10, 2011.

the voices of a number of thinkers.³²⁴ Lomax proposes that ‘meaning,’ ‘knowledge’ and ‘thought’ are not self-contained products of the subject, rather, that they are the processes of our engagement with the world. In Lomax’s words:

I do not produce my life alone. It is always *with*. So often, however, this *with* becomes forgotten. Indeed, so often, far too often, this *with* becomes annihilated as the power of hatred pits us against the world. Yet it is *with* that furthers my becoming.³²⁵

The difficulty in such relational approaches to the bond between ‘writing *with*’ and subjectivity is that they expose the illusion that the subject is energetically self-contained. In relation to writing about art, the subjectivity under siege is that of the critic. Viewed through a relational lens, it can be said that the critic or writer of aesthetics, is no longer the champion of knowledge responsible for bestowing linguistic sense to an otherwise mute artistic object under scrutiny. Instead, the object, or in Ettinger’s terms again ‘the transject,’ clearly has an affective agency which can potentially transform the subjectivity of its interlocutor.

This psychic potentiality in Ettinger’s Matrixial theory reformulates the relationship between the subject and the other (subject/animal/object) as a non-antagonistic encounter between two or more partners in a state of becoming. It is important to note that a Matrixial approach counters universal narratives and discourses on the construction of subjectivity by thinking about an encounter as a singular event with specific participants. Ettinger states that, ‘each actual transsubjective and transjective web is not infinite but is limited, each time, to the few who are affectively inspired now.’³²⁶ Ettinger employs the term transsubject here to

³²⁴ Yve Lomax, *Sounding the Event: Escapades in Dialogue and Matters of Art, Nature and Time* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), ix.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

³²⁶ Ettinger, “Fragilization,” 15-16

indicate a subject in the midst of a specific temporality and event that holds a potentiality for transformation. Secondly, transsubjective encounters highlight the subject's inherent co-affective ability. Thirdly, the relationship between self and other is reconfigured in a way that invokes an ethics of alterity, as proposed by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.³²⁷ And lastly, it proposes that subjectivity is relationally informed rather than self-contained. In fact, the relational aspect of a subject precedes their social formation which Ettinger describes as a proto-ethical potential. While Ettinger seems to merge the concepts of alterity and encounter to construct a discourse on subjectivity, it radically departs both from Levinas and Deleuze, especially when it meets the aesthetic sphere. I will briefly present some similarities and essential differences, with the prospect of laying out the ground for the relationship between subjectivity and encounter and how it relates to auto/biographical art-writing.

Radically Other but Ontologically the Same?

Levinas's philosophy is especially relevant and in a sense representative of theories of intersubjective relations and their ethics. His work is characterized by an articulation of subjectivity as 'responsibility for the other' which finds an unparalleled expression when 'face-to-face with the Other.'³²⁸ For Levinas alterity is absolute, at the origin of our existence, and informs ethical life through a primordial sense of responsibility. Levinas proposes two instances of human experience that

³²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1999).

³²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Time and the Other," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford & Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 45.

absolutely defy our ability to inhabit them, thus, remaining radically other and beyond our understanding or control. The first of those is death. An experience that we can never come to fully comprehend and that we can only bear witness to in the death of other people. The second instance is the limit of our human ability to ever inhabit or experience an other person in their totality. This formulation might sound reminiscent of Lacan's theory of "méconnaissance,"³²⁹ described in Part One of this thesis, where intersubjectivity is in a sense the impossibility of relating to one another. On the contrary, Levinas proposes that it is this radical alterity that is in a sense our common denominator, and from which our ethical responsibility to the other arises. We are all radically other to each other.

However, there is an impression in Levinasian ethics that the responsibility assumed by the subject is founded through a 'relationship with mystery' rather than also taking into account the shared attributes with the other.³³⁰ For Ettinger, this relationship is less mysterious, and draws from the idea that all humans come into the world through birth, having shared a physical space and having experienced a primordial understanding of interdependency, sharing and difference. In this sense, alterity for Ettinger is not absolute neither does it lead to a transcendental space defined by a sacrificial feminine as it does in Levinas' work.³³¹ Furthermore, the other and death are not conflated in Ettinger's psychoanalytic concepts.³³² Unlike our

³²⁹ See this thesis, pp. 82-88.

³³⁰ Levinas, "Time and the Other," 40.

³³¹ Levinas problematically conflates the feminine with woman while claiming that 'woman is the category of future, the ecstasy of future.' This quote is found in a dialogue between Levinas and Ettinger on the alterity of the feminine. See Bracha Ettinger, "What would Eurydice say? Emmanuel Levinas in conversation with Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger," *Athena: Philosophical Studies 2* (2006): 137-145. For a more thorough discussion on how Levinas employs the feminine as a metaphor to define a transcendental structure see Claire Elise Katz, "Reinhabiting the House of Ruth," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, Beyond Levinas: Volume IV, edited by Claire Elise Katz with Lara Trout (Oxon: Routledge, 2005): 259-282.

³³² Ettinger notes that the association between death and the feminine 'underlies Freudian psychoanalysis in general and Lacanian theory in particular. Thus, the foreclosure of the feminine is vital for the phallic subject: it does indeed stand for the split from the death drive.' Ettinger, "'Weaving a Woman,'" 177.

experience of the other, Ettinger makes strikingly clear that death is indeed radically other, an experience for which we have no reference point. For this reason, death has absolutely no psychic inscription and as such, cannot be theorized as an embodied experience that contributes to subject formation.

On the other hand, and despite being beyond our conscious experience, birth does provide shared psychic inscriptions. The vulnerability of our human condition, of our primordial coming into the world as interdependent beings, lies at the core of an ethics of responsibility for the other, which is theorized through this commonality. Ettinger notes that this shared primordial psychic inscription informs our relationships to all others, while it opens up a space for trauma to be shared. However, to inhabit the space of sharing, the subject undergoes a process of self-fragilisation, where one's boundaries turn into thresholds of attunement, and from which an ethical engagement can come into being.

This allusion to fragility and vulnerability is not to be confused with an ethics founded on a sacrifice of the self for the sake of the other (as for Levinas), rather, it is 'a partial disappearing to allow jointness.'³³³ In other words, ethics may only be effectuated when the subject's ego, and hence defence mechanisms, are resisted in order to facilitate the relational aspects of subjectivity.

Reflecting on Ettinger's notion of *aesthetic wit(h)nessing* as the modality by which we are affected by an encounter with a work of art, Griselda Pollock describes this ethicoaesthetic exchange as an 'orientation towards the other' which might not be driven by 'conscious intention' or 'obligatory mourning and loss.'³³⁴ Rather, that the aesthetic encounter bears transformative potential which may be apprehended when it comes into contact with others; that it is the actual negotiation between the

³³³ Ettinger, "Wit(h)nessing Trauma," 145.

³³⁴ Pollock, *After-affects*, 13.

self and other which creates the conditions for ethicality. In other words, while the other is indeed beyond my remit or control, the ethical responsibility towards an other arises during an encounter when radical differences and shared commonalities are in tension. This ethical sphere is not restricted to an interaction between humans, rather, it informs our relationship to all others: human, non-human and aesthetics.

With particular attention to this ethical question, the philosopher Rosi Braidotti proposes that it is only through moving beyond the fantasy that ‘mutual recognition’ is possible that we can imagine a ‘mutual specification and mutual co-dependence’ which can disrupt ‘Levinas’s tradition of making the anthropocentric Other into the privileged site and inescapable horizon of otherness.’³³⁵ Braidotti proposes an ethics ‘within a monistic ontology that sees subjects as modes of individuation within a common flow of *zoe*’ where ‘there is no self-other distinction in the traditional mode, but variations of intensities, assemblages set by affinities and complex synchronizations.’³³⁶

In this sense, Ettinger’s theories provide a mutuality that can be traced back to our origins and which serves as the basis of thinking through a notion of the subject as interrelational and connected, yet not bound to a universal morality or ethically compelled by the demand for compulsory reciprocity. We can envision subjectivity in the matrixial sphere as relying on a state of becoming where differentiation between self and other does not rely on complete fusion or absolute rejection in order to consolidate the self.³³⁷ This different perspective of a relational

³³⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 158. See in particular pp. 155-158 for Braidotti’s closer examination of the question of ‘containment of the other’ found in the work of key thinkers including Jessica Benjamin, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Judith Butler. Braidotti notes that making interdependency and interrelationality the locus of moral reasoning can run the risk of creating a moral category of an ‘embodied and connecting containment.’

³³⁶ Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 158.

³³⁷ Discussing similar ideas of fusion and symbiosis that arise in the work of Lacan, Ettinger notes that there is a transgression taking place between the mother-child instead of a fusion, a relation instead of

ethics provided by Ettinger can inform our relationship to aesthetics (and to all others) and explain why encounters with art occur in a parallel sphere where the functions of ‘aestheticizing ethics or ethicizing aesthetics’ are rendered obsolete.³³⁸

What is the Ontology of Becoming?

Becoming is not the journey towards a state of being [...] Being isn’t the state that one arrives at after the becoming, rather becoming is the movement of being. As for this movement, let me say that it is the movement that comes with time.

– Yve Lomax³³⁹

Is there a contradiction between self-resistance and becoming or does becoming necessitate a process of fragilising the self? In Ettinger’s matrixial theory self-resistance is framed as the possibility of both becoming and differentiation.

However, it is not a perpetual or endless state that borders on a complete dispersal of self, or an endless multiplicity as might be suggested by Deleuze and Guattari in their opus *A Thousand Plateaus*.³⁴⁰ Matrixial theory offers an examination of a relational ontology, where subjectivity is produced through a number of woven negotiations and encounters that can lead to an ethics of responsibility between the self and other. Such an ontological basis of becoming is echoed in Lomax’s

a union, ‘a plaiting in a field of partial and differential trans-subjectivity and crossed subjectivity.’ See, Ettinger, “Fascinace,” 78.

³³⁸ Ettinger, “Fragilization,” 5.

³³⁹ Lomax, *Sounding the Event*, 6-7.

³⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari clearly state that ‘multiplicities, continually transform themselves into each other, cross over into each other [...] This is not surprising, since becoming and multiplicity are the same thing.’ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 249.

investigation when she states that it would be a ‘mistake’ to think ‘that becoming has no being. Let’s not repeat the formula that prescribes: process is the course of becoming as opposed to being.’³⁴¹

In the conceptual and philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari, the notion of becoming can afford a certain flexibility from models of analysis that frame the subject (and their desire) as a fixed category of socially-constructed existence which is produced, or locked into, systems of power relations. The lure of becoming in the practice of art-writing, is that it can unhinge thinking from the imperative to speak for an other or oneself as subjects with fixed identities or universal viewpoints. Subjectivity as becoming might also provide a way to avoid the trap of psychoanalytic cultural interpretations that can become prescriptions for how we are supposed to view a certain work of art.³⁴² Moreover, as conventional psychoanalytic models can also define how we come to view the artist or their work through interpretations based on the self-directing or self-contained ego propounded by western individualism, the becoming subject resists the fixity presumed by self-containment. However, there is also the fear that a continual process of becoming ‘does away with the subject’ as theorist Claire Colebrook notes on the anxiety surrounding the use of Deleuze’s work by feminists.³⁴³

In *Deleuze and Guattari’s Immanent Ethics: Theory, Subjectivity and Duration*, Tamsin Lorraine offers a productive antidote to the idea that Deleuze and Guattari’s post-identitarian politics are in conflict with a relational approach to subjectivity. Lorraine does not exactly use the term relationality as the conceptual

³⁴¹ Lomax, *Sounding the Event*, 34.

³⁴² This point is addressed in Part Three, *Whose Truth? Autobiographical Uses and Abuses in Writing about Louise Bourgeois’ Art*.

³⁴³ Claire Colebrook, introduction to *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, eds. Claire Colebrook and Ian Buchanan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 10.

basis of her work, but she does reframe Deleuze and Guattari's questions around identity as characterized by 'a subject who emerges from collective physiological and social processes,' by reading through a number of feminist works that focus on the relational aspects of identity.³⁴⁴ Lorraine's study highlights how 'nomadic subjectivity as an alternative to oedipal subjectivity invites us to engage in a dynamic process of self-naming rather than reduce ourselves to static self-representations.'³⁴⁵

Ettinger's distinct notion of a becoming subject also provides an alternative to oedipal subjectivity, however, as far as human psychic development is concerned, both the matrixial and oedipal structures co-exist and work side by side. For the purposes of this thesis, it is the ethical dimension of the matrixial framework of analysis that is acutely relevant for examining how the subject is affected and compelled to respond to an aesthetic encounter. Ettinger's matrixial subject enters a space of becoming through specific encounters that provide the affective force necessary for a psychic transformation to occur. In this way, these encounters are not exactly the habitual and banal processes we inhabit in the daily repetition we call life. Rather, they are unique encounters with equally unique and necessary others. Ettinger's matrixial notion of 'subjectivity-as-encounter' can offer a lens for examining selfhood from the perspective of relationality, without foreclosing the necessary others that inform our multiple becomings. Rather, becoming is informed by a multiplicity of interactions and hence voices that feed into, influence and transform both the self and the auto/biographical art-writing. The matrixial framework configures subjectivity as porous, permeable and therefore prone to absorb and diffuse a multiplicity of interactions.

³⁴⁴ Tamsin E. Lorraine, *Deleuze and Guattari's Immanent Ethics: Theory, Subjectivity, and Duration* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 75.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

In the next sections, I look to the practices of feminist movements that were the ground for working with and through questions of identity and self-determination in ways that hold difference at the basis of collectivity and political mobilization. These feminist encounters and models of interaction have provided the terrain from which much theoretical ground around relationality has been explored, with radical consequences for criticism, writing and the auto/biographical. For now, I turn to the struggle between criticism and theory to lay out the ground for a discussion on the materiality and politics of (art-)writing.

“The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon”: Writing *for* the Other

Now I am being told that philosophers are the ones who write literature, that authors are dead, irrelevant, mere vessels through which their narratives ooze, that they do not work nor have they the faintest idea what they are doing; rather they produce texts as disembodied as the angels.

– Barbara Christian³⁴⁶

In post-structuralist terms a relational ontology and the notion of becoming, can be thought of as ways to “de-center” the subject, and consequently, the authority and power constitutional to those who are either contingently or single-mindedly at the centre. The ongoing work of feminist and post-colonial writers has legitimated the militant practice of “de-centralization” and its direct link to power particularly through an examination of the relationship between the universal and the personal. Flourishing across work in epistemology, intersectionality and standpoint theory lies

³⁴⁶ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique* 6, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse (Spring, 1987): 56. <https://www.doi.org/10.2307/1354255>.

the demand to consider how each individual's experience and perspective is distinct and given shape through a multifaceted yet geopolitically situated specificity.³⁴⁷ To this extent, the personal narratives that ensue from an individual are unique, unrepeatable and carry inscriptions of an embodied textuality. In the field of literary studies, a number of pioneering feminist scholars and critics have taken the personal, the auto/biographical and the confessional as categories of thought and as genres in their own right.³⁴⁸ The US has yielded much of the output in this field, supported by the proliferation of women's studies and departments institutionalising literary and cultural production across universities and within research departments focusing on the lives of women, the narratives of Black, Asian and Latina individuals, and the cultural production of LGBTQI communities, to name just a few. While this has been a significant shift from the invisibility of these contexts to a popular reclamation of histories and archives, what is of relevance to this research is how the auto/biographical has served as a strategy that moves beyond notions of equality, identification and self-representation in order to produce the theoretical context and concepts for more complex thinking around relationality to emerge.

My framing of auto/biographical art-writing is informed by these collective efforts to re-orientate issues around identity and self-determination through tools that critically examine the politics of equality and a collective identity for woman by moving towards a politics of differentiation and uniqueness. For example, by examining how identity is created in relation and differentiation to other women in

³⁴⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (London & New York: Routledge, 1988). Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1986). bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York & London: Routledge, 2015. First edition published by South End Press, 1989).

³⁴⁸ Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991). Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-representation* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

feminist movements, I am in a better position to understand how writing *with* art entails a specific relation which must of necessity be differentiated from universal viewpoints and all-encompassing categories of belonging, understanding and knowledge production. This line of thought feeds into how individual responses to affective encounters with art are produced through kindred tools, albeit in very different forms and contexts, but that resonate with a similar sense of urgency to ethically respond to an other while attempting to evaluate the position of a self in relation. Similarly, relational approaches necessitate a certain exposure and vulnerability of the self in order to encourage a dialogical engagement and make manifest an ethics of art-writing. In this sense, a relational subjectivity does not depart from the centre, nor does it find itself attracted or necessarily opposed to the “other” in order to constitute the self. As much as notions such as ‘becoming’ or relational ontologies can afford a certain “decentering,” it is not for the purpose of bringing the margins, peripheries and everyone else into the same melting-pot. There would be obvious problems of assimilation as well as a pattern of reproducing the same grand narratives or hegemonic structures that relationality and becoming seek to undo.

The literary critic Barbara Christian notes in the often quoted polemical essay “The Race for Theory” that as critics our desire should be driven by the urgency to transform the ‘whole model’ of literary criticism rather than to canonize it.³⁴⁹ Christian’s resistance to theory is an exemplary study because it clearly delineates two parallel trajectories for writing. In doing so, she provides distinct stylistic forms, as well as political purposes and epistemological reasons, to critically engage and reflect with an other’s creative expression.

³⁴⁹ Christian, “Race for Theory,” 61.

Written in 1987, Christian is caught in the midst of a take-over by the field of theory, and its ally post-structuralism, as the dominant methodological forms to analyze literary texts.³⁵⁰ A form that she finds ‘repulsive,’ ‘pallid,’ ‘laden with despair’ and ‘self-indulgent,’ particularly because of its alignment with phallogentric metaphysics. Such a language can only perpetuate prescriptive hegemonic discourses that create a split between the ‘abstract and emotional.’³⁵¹ Christian’s contemptuous tone for theory and Western ideology has fuelled a number of critical responses that often reduce her arguments to a plea for anti-intellectualism. In an essay responding to Christian, literary critic Michael Awkward highlights what he feels is the most significant thread in her argument which is the urgency ‘to save the emerging, under-appreciated Afro-American woman’s text from the types of critical marginality and canonical oblivion that had previously been the fate of early-and-mid-twentieth century products of black female imaginations.’³⁵² However, for Awkward, it is through theoretical inflection that literary work ‘gain[s] the respect it doubtlessly deserves’ and in order to do so it is the duty of critics to ‘move beyond description and master the discourse of contemporary literary theory.’³⁵³ While this is certainly the case for most academic and institutional protocols, Awkward’s response attends to his own concerns without really responding to a number of questions raised in Christian’s manifesto. Notwithstanding that Awkward’s choice of language, with words such as “respect,” “master” and “discourse,” completely exemplifies the hegemonic form of patriarchal argumentation that Christian criticizes. Furthermore,

³⁵⁰ For a description (and defence) of the influence of theory in academic departments in the US see Lisa Duggan, “The Theory Wars, or, Who’s Afraid of Judith Butler?,” in *Journal of Women’s History* 10, no 1 (Spring 1998): 9-19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2010.0547>.

³⁵¹ Christian, “Race for Theory,” 61.

³⁵² Michael Awkward, “Appropriative Gestures. Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism,” in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York & London: New York University Press, 2000), 332.

³⁵³ Awkward, “Appropriative Gestures,” 335.

Awkward's argument is centred on an antagonism between what he simplistically frames as "description" versus "theory," where the latter is the preferred strategy to salvage the work of black female writers.

Christian's essay is far more complex and bears a number of intersecting arguments. For instance, how does one write in a way that is not burdened by whichever language the "canon" (the master's discourse) has rooted at its centre? If literature offers 'the possibility of the integration of feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional in which Western philosophy inevitably indulged,' then what are the dangers of framing black women's writing in the very discourses that they seek to challenge?³⁵⁴ Furthermore, what form of language and methodology can respond to black female writers in a way that conserves the level of complexity and sensuality that their literary texts demand? By reflecting on the materiality of language and how knowledge is produced and disseminated, Christian's pressing concern then becomes not only how we theorize or respond to literary works, but most significantly, *who* we do it for.

The audience of theory is clearly not the same as the reader of literature, which means that Awkward's claim that theory can distribute literature to a broader audience might not necessarily hold any ground, even if it can legitimize the reading of literary texts within the academic sphere. While visibility and reclamation are of utmost importance, Christian is not exactly denouncing the role of theory in literary criticism, rather, she is cautious that theory can overshadow the significance of 'activities such as teaching or writing one's response to specific works of literature.'³⁵⁵ In this sense, what critical engagement means, or what a response to literature would entail, is not merely a matter of "description" as Awkward would

³⁵⁴ Christian, "Race for Theory," 56.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

attest. A closer examination of Christian's text reveals that there is no fixed methodology that would simply replace one set of prescriptive tools to write about literary works with another. The point is to permit alternative forms to those that are hegemonic. If, for Christian, theory is the act of 'fixing a constellation of ideas' then is there an alternative process – one that would allow thoughts and emotions to flow with an openness to interpretation and that arises from how the reader has been affected on a psychophysical level?

At this point I would like to return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: What is it about art that moves people to writing? On a political level, the histories of feminist art criticism and queer theory have sought to resuscitate the practices of female and LGBTQI artists by critically engaging with their work in order to give them value by rendering them visible.³⁵⁶ The methodology and history of these struggles intersects with most, if not all, of the reasons that Christian highlights. However, my recourse to Christian over a number of feminist art critics that have so vigorously historicized and theorized for over half a century, is that while the courageous commitment of feminist critics and theorists successfully continues to resuscitate or sustain the work of female artists, I am more interested in feminist theorists that have questioned the very methods that such a rescue mission would entail.

Feminist theory quickly and easily adopted the discourses of Western modes of theory and raced through a number of post-structuralist, psychoanalytic and philosophical questions that seemed unrelated to women's lives or unable to account

³⁵⁶ The literature produced at these intersections is now vast. For an example at the intersections of feminism and art see Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, eds., *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); At the intersections of queer subjects, performance and race see José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

for their concerns. These discourses rarely questioned the role of theory as the tool *par excellence* for writing about literature, art or lives trapped in a web of ideological and sociocultural dominance and oppression. In this sense, vast research has been affixed to questioning existing (phallogentric) theories rather than proposing to “transform the whole model,” as Christian demands, in a way that can conceptually and stylistically resonate with the audiences and artists embedded in the materiality and context of their practices and modes of viewing. By focusing on the incompetency of certain frameworks of analysis, feminist criticism has often been too pre-occupied with transforming the roots of phallogentric discourse, with little acknowledgment of the creative and socio-political obstacles that artists and activists face and occasionally overcome.³⁵⁷ Which runs the danger that Christian rightly highlights: ‘when Theory is not rooted in practice, it becomes prescriptive, exclusive, elitist.’³⁵⁸

I would like to turn to the historical practices that have provided a platform for alternative narrative practices to materialize. While the difficulty of transforming the entire model of criticism remains, there continue to be textual effects and strategies that rupture the status quo of both criticism and theory. These occasions have created possibilities for new methodologies to emerge that can respond to the contexts that they emerge from. In turn, the processes of textual production move

³⁵⁷ Unsurprisingly the critique, and the desire for an alternative methodology, finds its strongest proponents from the side of black feminist critics who argue that it is practice that leads to literary and theoretical scholarship: Joy James, “Experience, Reflection, Judgement and Action: Teaching Theory, Talking Community,” in *Radically Speaking Feminism Reclaimed*, eds. Diane Bell and Renate Klein (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1996. E-pub edition), 170-192; Audre Lorde, “The Master's Tools will never dismantle the Master's House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (California: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984), 110-113; Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Difference: ‘A Special Third World Women Issue’,” in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989), 79-116. For white writers see, Catharine A. MacKinnon, “From Practice to Theory, or What is a White Woman Anyway?” in *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 4, no. 1, Article 3 (1991): 13-22.

³⁵⁸ Christian, “Race for Theory,” 59. The disparity between feminist theory and practice is echoed also in Heidi Hartmann et al, “Bringing Together Feminist Theory and Practice: A Collective Interview,” *Signs* 21, no. 4 (Summer, 1996): 917-951. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175029>.

beyond their designated area of interaction and into the political sphere. To partially answer the question of why art moves us to writing, it seems that the primary reasons thus far are political. However, the political impetus is the after-effect, the result and not the process, the finger but not the moon.

Life's Work: An Ethics of Storytelling

Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods.

– Simone De Beauvoir³⁵⁹

Christian asserts that people of color have developed distinct ways of critically and analytically reflecting on the world. She describes this as an activity that seeks to illuminate, speculate about and express lived experience through ‘narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language’ which is closer to the verb “theorizing” than the concept “theory.”³⁶⁰ For Christian this is a significant distinction because it frames analysis as a shared activity rather than a product. In doing so, she claims that for people outside the western and academic canon ‘literature is not an occasion for discourse among critics but is necessary nourishment for their people and one way by which they come to understand their lives better.’³⁶¹ To this end, forms of “theorizing” should draw from everyday life if they are to be heard by the community that they seek to respond to.

³⁵⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Carol Communications, 1984. First published 1949 by Citadel Press), 134.

³⁶⁰ Christian, “Race for Theory,” 52.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 53. A few years later, lawyer and feminist scholar Catherine MacKinnon remarks that ‘The postmodern version of the relation between theory and practice is discourse unto death. Theory begets

The influence of feminist practices and how they have shaped discourses, Christian's included, on the relationship between storytelling and politics cannot be overemphasized. Across continents, the women's movements during the 1970s and 1980s were mobilized by consciousness-raising groups whose central practice consisted of giving voice to women's concerns through an exchange of personal stories. In *To the Narrative Turn and Back: The Political Impact of Storytelling in Feminism*, Olivia Guaraldo examines the historical importance of narrative practices for second-wave feminism in Italy by tracing how explorations of identity through self-narration became a political tool.³⁶² Drawing from the work of political theorist Hannah Arendt and already informed by her longstanding relationship with the Italian philosopher and feminist thinker Adriana Cavarero, Guaraldo exposes how the practice of self-narration has served as the backbone to political agency. Arendt's commitment to the idea that a subject's freedom is conditional on their active participation in public life, provides the basis to think through a crucial question: if public, and hence political, life manifests through a patriarchal order where one's appearance is conditional on one's sex, how can women exhibit their uniqueness if such a space is foreclosed to them?

Guaraldo notes that Arendt's under-examined stress on storytelling can provide a way to think of freedom as the action of revealing one's individuality, a praxis where 'disclosure is at the heart [...] of politics, [...] shaped by the ancient model of the Greek polis as a space of appearance and freedom.'³⁶³ That is, through the act of storytelling one can actively represent their experience of, and in, public

no practice, only more text. It proceeds as if you can deconstruct power relations by shifting their markers around in your head.' See MacKinnon, "From Practice to Theory," 14.

³⁶² Olivia Guaraldo, "To the Narrative Turn and Back: The Political Impact of Storytelling in Feminism," in *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative*, eds. Matti Hyvärinen, Mari Hatavara, and Lars-Christer Hydén (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013), 63-81.

³⁶³ Guaraldo, "Narrative Turn," 64.

life. As I have already examined in the section *Auto/biography* in Part One of this thesis, a large part of Arendt's political thesis proposes that each life is a singular and unrepeatable existence which manifests itself through the narration of 'who' one is rather than a set of labels that define 'what' one is.

Taking this proposition a step further, Cavarero examines the mechanisms of desire in this longing to tell one's story. Drawing from popular ancient Greek and more contemporary literary narratives, Cavarero advances Arendt's thesis to suggest that not only does the narration of one's life reveal its uniqueness, but the desire to hear one's story told by *an other in life*, epitomizes the human need to have one's existence acknowledged as meaningful. In this sense Cavarero comes to equate the auto/biographical act with political manifestation by stating the following:

It is as if, contrary to Arendt's theory, the narrated story that produces the reality of the self then regards, first of all, the revealing quality of political action, or regards the process of narrating this life-story as if it were already a political action.

Surprisingly, it is.³⁶⁴

With such a move, Cavarero radically reconfigures the idea of both the public realm and the manner of manifesting political agency for, as we will see, narrative practices can be politically mobilizing even when they do not make their appearance on what has always been a patriarchal public space. Guaraldo relates this political praxis of storytelling to the second-wave feminist movements in Italy where, prior to becoming an academic discipline, narrative practice 'gave voice to new political subjects and their awareness, but also contributed to renewed notions of subjectivity, embodied self, the relations between self and other.'³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 59.

³⁶⁵ Guaraldo, "Narrative Turn," 63.

There were two significant and parallel practices that came to define the second-wave feminist movement in Italy. Firstly, a refusal to participate and become co-opted into the emancipatory grand narratives of the Left, and secondly, a separation from the dominant women's groups that held public protests for equality. Separatist feminist groups were critical of the equality agenda that often advanced the cause of amending legislation but usually at the sacrifice of an overall liberation.³⁶⁶

Secondly, the practice of *autocoscienza* became the preferred modality to carve out a political sphere within a private and separatist space. *Autocoscienza* has been compared to 'consciousness-raising groups' in the US but is more accurately translated as 'self-consciousness.'³⁶⁷ This focus on the 'self' rather than a collective identity puts a double stress on the idea that political engagement and collective liberation from patriarchal oppression must necessarily have at its root a self-

³⁶⁶ The main tenet of this activity being the pro-abortion campaign with two separate positions calling for on the one hand "legalisation" and on the other "decriminalisation". A mass movement led by "Unione Donne Italiane" was originally part of the Communist Italian Party (PCI). But it only effectively resulted in legalising abortion when it disassociated itself from the PCI which at the time refused to allow them a public protest. Separatist feminist groups such as Female Revolt (Rivolta Femminile) and Wages for Housework (Lotta Femminista) were in favour of "decriminalising" abortion and working autonomously from the Leftist agenda. The main difference being that while legalisation would allow women access to abortion it would also create restrictions such as the timeframe (within the first 90 days), age (women should be over 18) and so on. Instead, the discourse on decriminalisation was considered a revolutionary attempt that moved beyond the reform of existing legal limitations and towards a politics of liberation. For the English translation of Rivolta Femminile's defining manifesto *Don't Think You Have Any Rights* (Non Credere di Avere dei Diritti) see Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice. The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). An overview of the movements and their political differences can be found in the extensive work of Paola Bono & Sandra Kemp, eds., *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). I owe much of this part of my research to conversations with Sara Paiola whose own work examines Italian feminisms.

³⁶⁷ The Italian feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti notes that 'The English translation of *autocoscienza*, for example, can only be 'consciousness-raising' but the history behind those two terms is so different as to make them almost incomparable. Thus, in Italy throughout the 1970s the practice of *autocoscienza* did not aim at greater self-awareness or the awakening of a new consciousness; it rather involved a move beyond the individual into a larger process of analysis of a collective "female" self.' See Rosi Braidotti and Marjolein Verboom, "Book Reviews: Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (eds) *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*," review of *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, by Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, May 1994 Vol.1: 126-128, doi:10.1177/135050689400100118.

definition examined through sexual difference. The separatist tactics of *autocoscienza* groups have been critiqued for purporting an essentialist stance. However, in comparison to the dominant women's groups, separatist groups that practiced *autocoscienza* were far more cautious of identity politics and universal terms and instead sought to understand their sexed difference from men, but most significantly their differences as women relating to each other.

This original mode of relating and narrative expression consolidated a number of political concerns that were then strategically aimed at the public through the production of texts published by the *Rivolta Femminile Group*.³⁶⁸ Most importantly, on a micro-level, it leaked desires and subjectivities into symbolic existence. The practice of sexual difference continues to be a strategy that distinguishes the concerns of women, collectively and individually, from the general struggle of dominant political movements. Furthermore, it proclaims the differentiation between women and the uniqueness of their lives as (her)stories worth repeating. Guaraldo captures this strategy succinctly as 'rather than being *freed from* oppression, Italian feminists aimed at being *free to practice* sexual difference.'³⁶⁹ *Autocoscienza* inaugurated the possibility of turning the everyday practice of storytelling into a political tool with which women could carve out their symbolic existence 'outside the gaze of the other,' simultaneously leading to an awareness of how identity is interpellated by social roles and imperatives.³⁷⁰

This practice is captured in Cavarero's project *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* in the chapter 'On the Outskirts of Milan.'³⁷¹ Cavarero

³⁶⁸ See for instance the essays in Marta Lonzi et al. *È Già Politica* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1977); Carla Lonzi et al. *La Presenza Dell'Uomo nel Femminismo* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978).

³⁶⁹ Guaraldo, "Narrative Turn," 72. (italics original)

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁷¹ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 55-66.

revisits the encounter between two women, Emilia and Amalia, reported in what is considered a foundational book of Italian Feminism, *Don't Think You Have Any Rights (Non credere di avere dei diritti)*, assembled by the Milan Women's Bookstore.³⁷² Amalia, being more adept at writing, and having heard Emilia narrate her story numerous times, decides to write Emilia's story. In her selfless act, the gift of a story becomes a gesture which simultaneously serves as a recognition of the 'ontological roots of this [Emilia's] desire,' and makes manifest in narrative form the unity of Emilia's identity, the unrepeatable quality of 'who' she is.³⁷³ Amalia tells Emilia's story *to* her, thus fulfilling Emilia's desire to hear her story narrated back to her in life. Amalia also tells Emilia's story *for* her, thus vigorously engaging in an act of loving attention, towards her precious and unique existence.

By telling Emilia's story *to* her and *for* her, Amalia transforms the banality of living – what Cavarero calls following Arendt 'an intolerable sequence of events' – into a life worthy of narration.³⁷⁴ But unity and identity are not to be conflated here. The unity provided by the story of one's self is a temporary relief from a sequence of identities that one inhabits – the 'what' one is – whether self-defined or socially inscribed. That is, Cavarero makes no claim towards authenticity or the idea of a "true" self, where through the narration of one's story, the self is unified and thus transcended. The quest for one's story is not a quest for a fixed identity. Rather, the motivation for one's story stems from a desire to appear to others, to be seen for 'who' one is in their uniqueness, and in order to do so one 'needs first of all a plural – and therefore political – space of interaction.'³⁷⁵

³⁷² For the English translation see Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice. The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

³⁷³ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 56.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

It is in this sense that subjectivity can be thought of as more closely aligned to the concept of becoming as a post-identitarian method for thinking through the subject. In a similar vein to Cavarero's storytelling between women, Bracha L. Ettinger reflects on psychic processes of differentiation and how they can be activated through the aesthetic sphere:

Femininity, in Freud's conception, is femininity *in* or *for* men – men who project what the feminine should be for women. When the artist, for example James Joyce (for Lacan) or Leonardo da Vinci (for Freud), materializes/realizes "woman," his creation is a poetic writing or a painting. He exposes/creates a symbolic relation the likes of which was hitherto unknown. What if a woman artist orients *questions on/of/from the feminine* toward an Other-woman and realizes/incarnates "woman" in writing or in painting?³⁷⁶

Such a process of subjectivisation is produced through contact with someone – unique and unrepeatable – whereby the contact itself generates a transformed unity. It is also where the practice of *autocoscienza* and Cavarero's notion of a narratable self become politically and ethically aligned. The radical feminist thinker Carla Lonzi has come to define the practice of *autocoscienza* and, in a sense, undo its affinities with identification in a series of texts published by the *Rivolta Femminile* group, including the following concise definition:

this is what I call *autocoscienza*: a mode of action where the speaker becomes conscious of both finding and recognising the self through their expression. That no truth exists outside this adherence or in the use of interpretative tools. Of course it is not easy – often it seems hopeless – but who said that it would be easy and not hopeless?³⁷⁷

(E questo chiamo autocoscienza: fare in modo che chi parla prenda coscienza che trovare se stesso è riconoscersi nell'espressione di sé, che non esiste verità al di fuori nell'adesione o nell'uso di chiavi interpretative. Certo

³⁷⁶ Ettinger, "With-In-Visible Screen," 119-120.

³⁷⁷ Carla Lonzi, "Mito Della Proposta Culturale," in *La Presenza Dell'Uomo nel Femminismo* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978), 147. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Carla Lonzi's work are mine in collaboration with Giulia Casalini.

non è facile, spesso è disperante, ma chi ha detto che sarebbe stato facile e non disperante?)

The concept of the narratable self reveals how identity does not follow identification. That is, our relationship with others is not based on a need to find commonalities and therefore mirror our selves on others. Rather, relation is the condition by which we come to experience our lives as valuable, unique, different from and transformed by others. This idea foregrounds our understanding of the self as first and foremost a relational entity. Cavarero compactly remarks that:

The self – to the extent to which a who is not reducible to a *what* – has a totally external and relational reality. Both the exhibitive, acting self and the narratable self are utterly given over [*consegnati*] to others. In this total giving over, there is therefore no identity that reserves for itself protected spaces or a private room of impenetrable refuge for self-contemplation. There is no *interiority* that can imagine itself [*autofabularsi*] to be an inexpressible value. What is more, since the scene of action is contextual and mutable, the reality of the self is necessarily intermittent and fragmentary. The story that results therefore does not have at its center a compact and coherent identity. Rather, it has at its center an unstable and insubstantial unity, longed for by a desire that evokes the figure – or rather, the unmasterable design – of a life whose story only others can recount.³⁷⁸

In relation to auto/biographical art-writing, another way to envision the intersection between relationality and the auto/biographical would be through its practice. That is, to think of the narrative form as an act that unfolds from a space of relationality. In this sense, narrative practices are not simply occasions for self-reflection, identification or validation by an other. They *necessitate* the unique other in order to materialize the relational and reciprocal mode – a modality that can challenge aspects of one's identity. As Guaraldo notes, the practice of sharing stories

³⁷⁸ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 63.

becomes an occasion for differentiation which reveals that ‘identity is not trapped in empathic or mirroring [but is] instead located in a relational practice.’³⁷⁹

It is such an activity that came to define the practice of *Autocoscienza* and the self-actualization it offered to the numerous women that participated in the *Rivolta Femminile* group and the ongoing work of the *Milan Bookstore*. But while this practice cemented ideas of how the self is relational and in opposition to the myth of the universal (self-contained) subject, it also reconfigured the idea of political agency as having to exist in a predefined public and patriarchal space. Taken to its extreme form, the private, the personal and the relational created what may be considered as one of the most radical manifestations of art criticism produced by the writer and feminist Carla Lonzi.

From the Politics of Self-determination to the Politics of “Deculturalization”³⁸⁰

P. – You won’t even accept that an artwork should be exhibited in a gallery.

C. – It’s different in the case of art. An artwork does not come into contradiction with itself.

P. – However there is the gallerist who is in contradiction and the visitor who is in contradiction.

C. – From your point of view, no. Because they are all in the service of art which is...

P. – But you, when you write a book, do you not want that service for your book? Do you not want someone to read a page?...

³⁷⁹ Guaraldo, “Narrative Turn,” 78.

³⁸⁰ See Carla Lonzi, “Let’s Spit on Hegel,” in *Sputiamo su Hegel. La Donna Clitoridea e la Donna Vaginale* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1974), 47. In this provocative manifesto Lonzi coins the word *deculturazione*, translated here as “deculturalization”, to describe the process and necessity to exit the cultural sphere as it is created for and produced by patriarchal ideology. Lonzi claims that this process does not bring about ‘a cultural revolution which follows and integrates a structural revolution, nor is it based on the validation on the levels of an ideology; rather, it affirms the absence of any need for ideology at all.’

C. – I want someone to read this page, but I do not want that they place themselves in a servile condition in light of my page. Furthermore, this type of page does not evoke one's servility because it would make them feel stupid in front of me. Once they have read who I am, do you really imagine that they will want to create a ceremony to celebrate me? They would not even consider it.

– Carla Lonzi in dialogue with her lover and artist Pietro Consagra³⁸¹

Carla Lonzi could have not been more mistaken about the numerous celebrations that have taken place in memory of her life and work following her passing away in 1982. While the majority of her work has yet to be officially and comprehensively published in English, there have been a number of conferences, events and gatherings both in Italy and abroad that have taken the legacy of her thought as a departure point.³⁸² Yet, there is still much work to be done in order to reactivate and recognize her revolutionary contributions to both criticism and feminism with ideas that are as pertinent as ever in contemporary discussions of culture and ideology.

Lonzi's exasperation with the cultural system started to take shape through her own practice as a critic and intensified beyond reconciliation during her long-term relationship with the artist Pietro Consagra. Unable to overcome the contradictions posed by the art realm's inauthenticity and ideological frameworks,

³⁸¹ Carla Lonzi, *Vai Pure: Dialogo con Pietro Consagra*, (Milano: et al. S.r.l., 2011. First published 1980 by Scritti di Rivolta Femminile), 52.

³⁸² The most recent and larger scale events include the public programme *Now You Can Go*, London (The Showroom, the ICA, Space Studios and Raven Row), 1-13 December 2015 (<http://nowyoucango.tumblr.com/>); the conference *Carla Lonzi: Art Critic and Feminist*, organised by the Travelling Feminism research group (<http://travellingfeministe.org/blog>) at Maison Rouge, Paris, 11 January 2013, with contributions by Lucia Aspesi, Chiara Fumai, Elisabeth Lebovici, Griselda Pollock, Dora Stiefelmeier, Francesco Ventrella and Giovanna Zapperi; In Italy the conference *Shut up, actually speak: Carla Lonzi and the art of feminism* at Casa Internazionale delle Donne, Rome, 5-7 March 2010. In 1993, Anne-Marie Sauzeau honored Lonzi's contribution to art criticism during the Venice Biennale of the same year. Noted in the preface by Giovanna Zapperi of the French translation of *Autoritratto: Carla Lonzi, Autoportrait*, translated by Marie-Ange Maire-Vigueur, edited and prefaced by Giovanna Zapperi, (Paris-Zurich, JRP Ringier, 2012), 7-35.

Lonzi declared that the art system was simply reproducing the same patriarchal injustices found in relations between men and women, artists and lovers, genius and muse, public and private. Despaired by this restrictive and partisan function, and also finding herself complicit in it as a critic, Lonzi's mission to extrapolate herself from this apparatus started with the provocative publication of *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait).

The book includes art, artists, their conversations, Lonzi's poetry and her photographs, folded into a fragmented and non-linear assemblage of a story, as well as becoming an exemplification of her ideas on the intimate relations between the critic and the artists. Yet, her radical departure from art criticism which started with *Autoritratto* had such an enduring course that she found herself, almost a decade later, trying to repetitively explain her dilemma to Pietro Consagra in a four-day dialogue which she recorded. The opening epigraph is a snippet of their conversation which, following their break up, Lonzi transcribed and published under the caustic title *Now You Can Go: Dialogue with Pietro Consagra (Vai Pure: Dialogo con Pietro Consagra)*. In their conversation, Lonzi explains that her mission is to produce and inhabit an alternative reality to the culture that causes her such despair.

An alternative art world and sociality described as one which is:

based on human relations, on reciprocal communication, on the proper demolition of the cultural myth of the protagonist. It is based on making visible how things happen always through dialogue, that truths are always in a condition of relation.³⁸³

(si basa sul rapporto umano, sulla conoscenza reciproca, sulla demolizione proprio del mito culturale del protagonista. Si basa sul far vedere che le cose si svolgono sempre attraverso un dialogo, che le verità sono sempre in un rapporto.)

³⁸³ Lonzi, *Vai Pure*, 40.

Artists, we discover in her dialogue with Pietro Consagra, are also acquiescent pawns within the system of criticism and its attendant functions of value or exclusion. Their conversation reveals how art mainly functions as the object of criticism, but should instead be considered as a process-based activity that extends beyond the packaged myth of the “artist-hero-genius” and the auxiliary critic. In this way, Lonzi attempts to expose the necessarily interrelational dimension of both art and subjectivity. However, it might be best to use the word creativity when referring to Lonzi’s use of the positive aspects of art.³⁸⁴ With a series of actions, including her theoretical and political work that was starting to take shape with the feminist group *Rivolta Femminile*, it was nevertheless *Autoritratto* that initiated a defining process and resulting embodiment of her thoughts on art criticism.

Lonzi’s ultimate aim was to dismantle the role of the critic and in that move she inevitably dismantles the critic within herself. But, the book itself, calculated in its methodology, spills unto uncharted narrative territory and soaks the landscape of art criticism with a move that resembles Cavarero’s philosophical strategy of a “reciprocal communication of voices.”³⁸⁵ Arguing against the foundations of metaphysical claims, Cavarero’s main critique falls on the Aristotelian distinction between the political animal (*zoon politikon*) and the rational animal (*zoon logon echon*). The political animal is a creature which congregates and flourishes in the polis or community of other political animals, while the rational animal is that which possesses reason through recourse to speech [*logos*]. Cavarero’s critique is rather

³⁸⁴ The art historian Francesco Ventrella also highlights this distinction and notes that Lonzi continued to refer to ‘creativity as a mode of self-emancipation’, but by replacing the use of the word “art” or “aesthetics” with ‘creativity and making (il fare).’ See Francesco Ventrella, “Carla Lonzi’s Artwriting and the Resonance of Separatism,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 21, no. 3 (2014): 282–287, accessed March 18, 2015.

³⁸⁵ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 197.

simple, and far from unique in this respect, as it exposes the logocentric focus that underlies discourses on political agency and subjectivity.³⁸⁶

The rational animal requires language rather than simply a voice to make itself audible and hence to inhabit a political space. In this sense, Aristotle's distinction relegates "the voice" and all non-human animals to an inferior position by advancing a logocentric notion of both reason and politics. To the contrary, Cavarero foregrounds the voice in an attempt to understand how the act of simply 'speaking to one another, rather than language' moves beyond signification and towards a communication of each being's uniqueness.³⁸⁷ Whether polyvocal or a dialogue between two individuals, what comes to the fore of a voiced exchange is the embodied singularity of each participant regardless of what they are saying. A scene of spoken interaction then creates a space for politics, in the sense that the reciprocal communication (linguistic or otherwise) is in itself the political sphere where one appears to the other. By stressing the singularity of the speaker's voice as that which is made possible through their unique appearance in the world, language and semantics take on a secondary role to the material effect of an embodied voice.

This strategy must be kept in mind when thinking through the polyvocal textual collage of Lonzi's *Autoritratto*. In this work, we are not only presented with a representation of polyvocality or a dialogue between artists, friends and critics.

³⁸⁶ In the appendix of *For More than One Voice*, Cavarero offers a lengthy critique of philosopher Jacques Derrida's thesis on the metaphysics of phonocentrism while acknowledging that his 'speculation on the *phone*, not to mention on *écriture*, has oriented, unsettled, and challenged the entire course of my research.' On the contradictions found in both Cavarero's and Derrida's arguments, independent scholar Jane Jones argues that Derrida and Cavarero are actually 'in accord that ideality is principally produced by the hypostasising and delineating action of the eye, or by philosophy thought as contemplative *theory*.' However, Cavarero's critique leads Jones to agree that certain ambiguous passages by Derrida could be read as reproducing 'the metaphysical determination of speech as diaphanous immateriality, and hence repeat[ing] the tradition's tendency [...] to reduce the meaning of voice to its semantic, ideal element, while flaying and discarding its sonorous excess as literal insignificance.' See Jane Jones, "On the Subject of the Voice: Reading Cavarero, Reading Derrida," unpublished paper delivered at the conference *Giving Life to Politics: The Work of Adriana Cavarero*. University of Brighton, 19-21 Jun 2017.

³⁸⁷ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 197.

Lonzi's action is not a benign new form of art criticism, but it can instead be thought of as a political manifestation of Cavarero's point that:

even those philosophies that value "dialogue" and "communication" remain imprisoned in a linguistic register that ignores the relationality already put in action by the simple reciprocal communication of voices.³⁸⁸

As powerful as the book may be as an artifact or statement of Lonzi's critical and political persuasions, the underlying rupture of any sense of "proper" communication, performed within the sphere of art criticism, makes *Autoritratto* irreducible to a book that can be read as a truly dialogical text. In her introduction to *Autoritratto*, Laura Iamurri optimistically remarks that Lonzi was trying to 'make room for the authentic voice of the artist' (*lasciare spazio alla voce autentica dell'artista*).³⁸⁹ However, the telling title of the book is 'Self-Portrait' (*Autoritratto*) and not 'Self-Portraits' (*Autoritratti*) which further consolidates ideas of singular authorship. Similarly, Giovanna Zapperi notes in her introduction to the French publication of Lonzi's work:

Following its title, *Autoritratto* places the 'I' of the author at its centre, but it does so through a horizontal and non-hierarchical relation which is woven with other voices – those of the artists – enmeshed in the book.³⁹⁰

(*Autoritratto met au centre, dès son titre, le moi de l'auteur, mais le fait à partir de la relation horizontale et non-hiérarchique qui se noue avec les autres voix – celles des artistes – impliquées dans le livre.*)

³⁸⁸ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 16.

³⁸⁹ Laura Iamurri, introduction to *Autoritratto*, by Carla Lonzi (Milano: et al. S.r.l., 2010. First published 1969 by De Donato), x.

³⁹⁰ Giovanna Zapperi, 'L'autoportrait d'une femme', preface to *Autoportrait*, by Carla Lonzi, trans. Marie-Ange Maire-Vigueur (Paris-Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2012), 7-35. Translation to English mine in collaboration with Giulia Casalini. While Zapperi is right to note the centrality of the author, it is arguable whether Lonzi's gesture was truly horizontal and non-hierarchical. I elaborate on this aspect shortly.

While Lonzi returns to ideas of truth and authenticity for women and artists, we should be careful to note that it is those that have no symbolic reference within patriarchal culture that are caught in a struggle to carve out an authentic symbolic space beyond or beside the existing patriarchal cultural landscape. *Within* is not an option for Lonzi, which also foretells her future political strategies.

Shortly after *Autoritratto*, Lonzi departs from the sphere of art criticism and fully embraces *autocoscienza* and diary-writing as the proper means of discovering and disclosing one's authenticity. In this sense, Lonzi's defiant collage of recorded voices in *Autoritratto* is more of a testament to how a scene of reciprocal communication is played out, and here performed in textual form. Reminiscent of Cavarero's strategy, *Autoritratto* urges us to examine how it is only through a 'corporeal communication of uniqueness'³⁹¹ that we come to truly exercise our "voice" on a political level.

The stylistic execution of this work also relies on having put in place a calculated action, a very serious joke and a creative exercise of a *single author* drilling into a space, to make space, for a particular politics to be enacted. To reiterate, for Lonzi it was necessary to create a space that could render "visible" how artists produce work through their engagement with the world and that all subjects exist, create and are transformed through "a condition of relation." The space that Lonzi aims to discover is one that, unlike her personal sphere of art criticism, is at once impartial yet intimate. The artistic realm has long been hijacked by what Lonzi describes as the 'false dichotomy: creativity-criticism' (*falsa dissociazione: creazione-critica*) which can only survive within a particular ideological system.³⁹² A system that she compares to the Ecclesiastical apparatus that produces a utilitarian,

³⁹¹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 199.

³⁹² Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, 5.

value-based rationale for consumption and identification to be transacted

*(Consumare l'arte [...] identificarsi come pubblico).*³⁹³

The operation here will again remind us of another of Cavarero's strategies, namely, that of theft and betrayal. Cavarero steals female figures from the narratives of ancient Greek texts and re-writes them in a way that betrays their original purpose.³⁹⁴ Lonzi steals the narratives out of their primary function – as recordings between artist and critic that were initially for the sake of art criticism – and animates them as non-linear fractured dialogues (monologues, vocal pauses and interjections, images, poems) in a manner that puts the very methods of art criticism at stake. Through this *modus operandi*, Lonzi performs a textual strategy that ruptures both identification and consumption. The narratives and the voices are not in this case the object of analysis. Contrary to Zapperi's assertion of a 'horizontal and non-hierarchical relation,' I would argue that it does not matter what the artists have to say about art in *Autoritratto*. As Lonzi clearly states, 'the dialogues were not generated as material for a book' (*I discorsi non sono nati come materiali di un libro*).³⁹⁵ Nor is her tactic a way to really expose the authenticity or truth of the artist – this would simply fall into the trap of fetishizing the artist. Her strategy exemplifies how the book becomes a scene where Lonzi "performs" an operation of displacing both the critic and the artist by:

resituating him in another relationship within society, one that negates the role, and therefore the power, of his repressive control over art and artists, especially since the ideology of art and of the artist, is well underway in our society.

(richiamarlo in un altro rapporto con la società, negando il ruolo, e perciò il potere, del critico in quanto controllo repressivo sull'arte e gli artisti, e

³⁹³ Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, 5.

³⁹⁴ See Cavarero, *Plato*. See also, Chapter One of this thesis for an elaboration of Cavarero's strategy.

³⁹⁵ Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, 3.

soprattutto in quanto ideologia dell'arte e degli artisti in corso nella nostra società).³⁹⁶

In this sense, Lonzi reclaims what truly matters to her, to the extent that she renders her political ideas into a complete representation, both in textual form as a book as well as an embodiment with her departure from the sphere of criticism. What truly matters in *Autoritratto* is then Carla Lonzi's own *Autoritratto*: the "self-portrait" of a critic who has rejected her privileged role and auxiliary power by re-situating herself within the fabric of artistic and other social and political relations.

Lonzi's radical move can place her readers in an ethical dilemma: how do we, as critics, theorists or readers, approach *Autoritratto*? How do we "read" it? Are we reading "it" or are we reading "Carla"? Are we supposed to conduct any critical reading at all when in doing so we can run the risk of rendering "it" into a "text," a fetishized object and not a 'relationship with society' (*rapporto con la società*)? It is this contradiction that I imagine Lonzi found herself lodged into when listening back to the voices of lovers, friends, allies, their breath, giggles and sighs; signs of the inextricable connection between creativity and life. And it is this predicament that glaringly revealed that the identity Carla "the critic" is irreconcilable with Carla the lover, friend, ally.

As we have come to understand, Lonzi's project does not aim to transform the forms of criticism by way of introducing the auto/biographical and cross-genre format into criticism, which she, nevertheless, executes with calculated finesse. It is not the book's form or textual interplay that is of any political significance. It is what happens in our everyday communication with artists, their work, our lived and shared experiences and how they make their way into creative processes such as Carla's

³⁹⁶ Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, 4.

book, Carla's *Self-Portrait* and hence Carla's life. *Autoritratto* seems to be Lonzi's definitive shift towards feminist activism. However, I would like to suggest that it was also an occasion that unfolded a form of writing that replaces the methodology of art criticism with what would soon become for Lonzi the most profound relation to both politics and creativity: the diary.

Writing the Self: A Creative and Political Act

It is a tenet of feminist rhetoric that the personal is political, but who in the academy acts on this where language is concerned? We all speak the father tongue, which is impersonal, while decrying the fathers' ideas.

– Jane Tompkins³⁹⁷

Lonzi argued that, conventionally, a book of criticism has the aim of exalting the artist, their work and the critic to the level of authoritative voice. With the publication of *Autoritratto*, Lonzi moved away from art criticism, towards a form of writing that simultaneously unfolded a political space parallel to, and not within, phallogocentric culture. A recollection and collection of stories and herstories, poems and photographs, personal and professional, interwoven into textual form outside their original space and time. This form most closely resembles Lonzi's diary, written between the years 1972-1977 and published in 1978.³⁹⁸ Both books are in a sense an ongoing attempt to reveal the uniqueness, embodiment and interrelation of an individual to equally unique others, while simultaneously forming the basis of a

³⁹⁷ Jane Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (London & New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 2135.

³⁹⁸ Lonzi, *Taci, Anzi Parla. Diario di una Femminista* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978).

new politics. In her discussion with Consagra, Lonzi explicates the function of her diary:

[it] makes visible all these moments in which a click of consciousness corresponds to a process that is not as prestigious as a conscious click. This non-prestigious moment is always hidden, and it is there that woman is present. The conscious leap is assumed by man who then leaps into a cultural shift, and so forth.

*(il mio diario fa vedere tutti questi momenti in cui a uno scatto di coscienza corrisponde un processo che non è prestigioso come lo scatto di coscienza. Questo momento non prestigioso viene sempre nascosto, ed è quello in cui la donna è presente. Il salto di coscienza viene assunto dall'uomo che ne fa poi un salto di cultura, e così via.)*³⁹⁹

Lonzi's quest for authenticity, through the practice of diary writing, in the same stroke reveals that identity (and creativity) is not a given but an ongoing and transformative dialogical process in a condition of relation. *Autoritratto* is Lonzi's artistic gesture and in its production replaces Carla the critic with Carla the writer. As she notes, 'if art is not amongst my resources as creation, it certainly is as creativity, as a consciousness of art for the disposition of the good.' (*Se l'arte non è nelle mie risorse come creazione, lo è come creatività, come coscienza dell'arte nella disposizione al bene*).⁴⁰⁰

What can this relationship between creativity and a "click of consciousness" tell us about the practice of writing and how it informs subjectivity? As we have seen, for Lonzi, the role of the critic, or writing in the form of art criticism, poses a contradiction to how we should encounter a work of art and write about it. Therefore, how else could one respond to a work of art, or even Lonzi's writing? Could it be perhaps that Lonzi would expect a response in the form of a creative gesture, one that defies systems of value, validation and consumption; one that does not seek to

³⁹⁹ Lonzi, *Vai Pure*, 41.

⁴⁰⁰ Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, 5.

venerate the author even if, in our case, it happens to be Carla Lonzi. Perhaps in its most radical version we would also do away with the critic, the critic in ourselves, and relate to Lonzi's creative act on an affective level, beyond the Ecclesiastics of theory and criticism. What would such an engagement look like?

By turning our attention to the first person perspective of the diary form we can trace the ways in which writing informs both the self and in turn the political sphere. Lonzi's diary writing does not come with sociocultural or professional pressures, and it is the lack of this pressure that makes writing for Lonzi a liberating and creative activity.⁴⁰¹

In the very short essay, *The Myth of the Cultural Offer* where Lonzi takes issue with how patriarchal ideology bolsters cultural capital, she states:

To write is a public act. One writes in order to express and resonate with oneself, because an other could also express herself and offer resonance. Every other form of writing is a manifestation of cultural insertion. If a woman does not recognize herself in an other woman, then it is man who is acknowledged. This is how his culture becomes validated.⁴⁰²

[Scrivere è un atto pubblico. Si scrive per esprimersi e dare risonanza, perché un'altra possa esprimersi e dare risonanza. Ogni altro modo di scrivere è una manifestazione di inserimento culturale. Se non ci si riconosce l'una con l'altra chi è riconosciuto è l'uomo: viene coi avvalorata la sua cultura.]

The art historian Francesco Ventrella elaborates on how the tactic of “resonance” [*risonanza*] offered the separatist feminist groups the possibility to employ creative means to explore forms of dialogue and selfhood that were in

⁴⁰¹ Queer and feminist theorist Ann Cvetkovich provides a contemporary response to how external social forces (in this case neoliberal capitalism) exert pressure on the writer to produce conventional forms of writing. Noting the anxiety and resulting depression that academia produces for the writer, Cvetkovich argues that the polemical and memoir, as modes of writing and thinking, can produce new forms of theory, as well as adequately capture the ‘intersections of mind and body’ and ‘the embodied senses.’ See Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012), 24.

⁴⁰² Carla Lonzi, “Mito Della Proposta Culturale,” in *La Presenza Dell’Uomo nel Femminismo* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978), 137.

contrast to the methodologies offered by patriarchal culture.⁴⁰³ As Lonzi's ideas of writing are inextricably linked to the practices of feminism, it is no surprise that the act of writing, her personal form of creativity, became a political tool. Or, to phrase it another way, the act of writing the self is in itself a political act.

⁴⁰³ Ventrella, "Lonzi's Artwriting," 284.

PART THREE

Reading Auto/biographical Art-writing

By returning to some of the arguments provided by feminist theoretical investigations in narrative practice, my aim was to critically reflect on what it means to write *with* art in a political sense. What can Lonzi's radical departure from criticism mean for auto/biographical art-writing? What can be gleaned from Christian's demand for a mode of writing that can capture the sensuality of language? Who is the writing *for*? What relationship to thinking does such writing have? What can it inadvertently promote in a capitalist context? How might the personal be implicated in the neoliberal climate? Can writing *with* offer a critique of hegemonic discourses?

Art-writing might be the only documentation that survives an actual event, for instance, in the engagement with ephemeral practices such as live art performance, street interventions and work that insists on being not only undocumentable but also unrepresentable. Can and should auto/biographical art-writing participate in such a rescue mission? Is the purpose of such writing to canonize the artwork and the textual method? Or, is it a process that can remain private, just like the diary form and still retain its political and psychic force? Furthermore, can it provide an alternative methodology for reading as well as writing *with* art? These are some of the questions that I confronted throughout the course of this thesis. Some of these questions will, at least temporarily, remain unanswered. If the previous literature has provided any sort of insight, it should be that such answers must come from practice and they should be context-specific.

Part Three can then be considered the "practical" part of the thesis. In Chapter One, *Whose Truth? Autobiographical Uses and Abuses in Writing about Art*, I examine how autobiographical narratives have been employed to interpret Louise Bourgeois' artwork in order to expose some of the problems that arise with this

methodology and to distinguish it from auto/biographical art-writing. With Chapter Two, “*How to get inside a Star?*” *Death through Life Writing in the poetry of Anne Sexton*, I make a tentative attempt at synthesizing the theoretical concepts that have been presented thus far in order to provide a reading of auto/biographical art-writing in the work of poet Anne Sexton. In Chapter Three, *Love Is What You Fear: Reading Tracey Emin with Hélène Cixous*, I present my own provisional (yet experienced as intensely psychophysical) erotic response to Emin’s artwork *Why Be Afraid* in auto/biographical art-writing format.

CHAPTER ONE

Whose Truth? Autobiographical Uses and Abuses in Writing *about* Art



Fig. 5 Louise Bourgeois, *Janus Fleuri*, 1968.

As soon as the immortal works of the past became the object of social and individual refinement and the status accorded to it, they lost their most important and elemental quality, which is to grasp and move the reader or the spectator over the centuries.

– Hannah Arendt⁴⁰⁴

Gigantic and fragmented, enigmatic and suggestive, this sculpture or installation solicits, yet resists, a narrative approach.

– Mieke Bal⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁴ Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture,” in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), 203.

⁴⁰⁵ Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5.

The discovery of Louise Bourgeois' diaries and notebooks following her death in 2010, contained psychoanalytical writings which had fueled a new frenzy of interest in the relationship between Bourgeois' psychic and creative world.⁴⁰⁶ The fact that Bourgeois had a profound theoretical engagement with psychoanalysis, and also a therapeutic engagement with the analyst Dr. Henry Lowenfeld for over 30 years, seemed to provide further proof of how her work was a conveyor of childhood traumas. Bourgeois herself has been considered one of the first "confessional" artists, often relaying stories of her work and its relationship to her childhood, mother, father and father's mistress. These confessions would take the shape of very intimate statements about her life, experiences and emotional states.⁴⁰⁷ Drawing similarities between her autobiography and her work, Bourgeois states in an interview from 1971: 'My sculpting world and my living world are one.'⁴⁰⁸ Renowned curator Hans Ulrich Obrist notes in the preface to Bourgeois' writing and interviews, that her words 'are less about the meaning of her art than about the emotional forces behind it: namely, her autobiography, past and present experience.'⁴⁰⁹ The relationship between an artwork's meaning and an artist's biography might seem indivisible, nevertheless, there are *at least* two distinct partners in that relationship. Often, Bourgeois described her practice as a different emotional *process* from the resulting artwork. However, as she did not shy away from layering her own work with

⁴⁰⁶ See the exhibition *The Return of the Repressed* held at the Freud Museum in London during May 2012 (<http://www.freud.org.uk/exhibitions/74492/louise-bourgeois-the-return-of-the-repressed>). On the publication of Bourgeois' diaries, Pollock notes that 'not only does Bourgeois reveal more about her own shifting psychic life, anguish and struggle to master depression, food-loathing and anxieties about abandonment, but also she disallows projective speculation about her psychic life derived from biographically reductive reading of her sculptures as forms of psychic notation.' See, Pollock, *After-affects*, 89.

⁴⁰⁷ Robert Pincus-Witten, *Bourgeois Truth*, Exhibition Catalogue (New York: Robert Miller, 1982)

⁴⁰⁸ Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, eds. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (London: Violette Editions, 1998), 96.

⁴⁰⁹ Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 15.

psychological interpretations, her work is for the most part referred to as autobiographical or confessional.

In an earlier interview from 1969 she is asked to talk about the reputable work *Janus Fleuri* (1968) [fig. 7]. Her lengthy response offers a rigorous description of the contrast in the formal characteristics of the work as well as a vocabulary that alludes to contradicting psychological states. Bourgeois notes the ‘permanence of bronze, although it was conceived in plaster,’ the way the sculpture hangs and how it is ‘simple in outline but elusive and ambivalent in its references.’⁴¹⁰ She draws analogies between the symmetrical nature of the sculpture and the symmetry of the human body, saying that its physical form reveals ‘a double facial mask, two breasts, two knees.’⁴¹¹ She concludes her description by remarking that the sculpture is hung in a way that ‘indicates passivity, but its low slung mass expresses resistance and duration. It is perhaps a self-portrait – one of many.’⁴¹²

Bourgeois explicitly likens this specific sculpture to her self, a “self-portrait” that “expresses resistance and duration.” It is precisely these biographical statements that can be subsumed into narratives where object and subject (artwork as self-portrait) are all too readily interpreted as one and the same. The danger of Bourgeois’ “confessions” are that they seem to provide aesthetic analysis with the license to collapse the artist and their biography unto the level of objecthood, creating an enduring story of a specific person that matches the work.

The use of autobiographical material in art writing follows one of two routine operations. First, biographical or autobiographical material, related to the artist’s life, is used to support or create a theoretical framework that their artwork can fit into.

⁴¹⁰ Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 90.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.



Fig. 6 Louise Bourgeois, *Maman* (1999). Sculpture installation on the north landscape of Tate Modern in 2007.

Secondly, the material may offer a way to contextualise the work as a response to a series of geopolitical and historical events that occurred during the artist's lifetime. The first routine is far more typical of scholarship in the field of traditional art theory and the second in the training of art history. Of course, there is ample overlap between these two forms of writing about art. However, in both instances, biography and autobiography are excavated as sources of "truth" about the artist's emotional or mental state reflected in the artwork they produce. In this manner, the artist's work is often considered as a representation of their "inner" state, or a response to an "outer" problem, event or situation.

To avoid abstraction, I will follow with an example taken from Tate Modern Museum's website that provides a description of the artist Louise Bourgeois' sculpture *Maman* (1999) [fig. 6]:

For Bourgeois making art is a way of fighting specific fears (Bernadac and Obrist, p.267), one of which is the ‘trauma of abandonment’ that she suffered not only through her untimely birth on Christmas Day (Bernadac and Obrist, p.246) but also on her mother’s death in 1932, when Louise was only twenty-one [...] *Maman* may be read as referring to more than one possible maternal figure: the artist, her mother, a mythological or archetypal mother and a symbol of motherhood. In a diary entry in March 1975, Bourgeois wrote: ‘You need a mother. I understand but I refuse to be your mother because I need a mother myself.’ (Quoted in Bernadac and Obrist, p.72.) Encountering *Maman* always from the perspective of the child looking up from below, the viewer may experience the sculpture as an expression of anxiety about a mother who is universal – powerful and terrifying, beautiful and, without eyes to look or a head to think, curiously indifferent.⁴¹³

In the above narrative, the author uses Bourgeois’ diary entries and interviews, and the theorists’ interpretations, to argue that the artwork *Maman* is the result of Bourgeois’ “trauma of abandonment.” The author also predetermines that the encounter between audience and the work may entail “anxiety about a mother who is universal,” loosely and ambiguously drawn from Bourgeois’ account that she refuses to be anyone’s mother as she needs a mother herself. The leap from Bourgeois losing her mother to the idea that *Maman*, the sculpture, is a representation of a ‘universal mother’ – imbued with fantasies of power, terror, beauty and indifference – is a recurring theme of Western art historical and theoretical interpretation of symbolisations associated with the maternal.⁴¹⁴ The author’s personal experience of the artwork is completely omitted from the narrative in order to reinforce the idea that the experience, reading or viewing of the work can, in fact, also be a universally experienced response.⁴¹⁵ The author provides certain

⁴¹³ Elizabeth Manchester, “Maman, Louise Bourgeois: Summary.” Tate, December 2009, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625/text-summary>.

⁴¹⁴ For a recent examination of the relationship between matricide and subjectivity see Alison Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2012) and on the foreclosure of the maternal see Amber Jacobs, *On Matricide: Myth, Psychoanalysis and the Law of The Mother* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁴¹⁵ For a critique of universalism under the spell of Kantian aesthetic judgment see Amelia Jones’ exposition of how art criticism and history rely on a ‘powerful apparatus of repression’ which enforces the omission of ‘the desiring, sensate body (of both artist and interpreter)’ from aesthetic

visual descriptions (and theoretical claims) that this terrifying figure of a spider/mother/female is “without eyes to look or a head to think,” to further reinforce the fear-inducing aspect of the work. We, the reader/viewer, are told that there is a ‘universal’ story behind the work and that this is how we should perceive, look at and experience the work because of that story.

Almost two years prior to this description, whilst the artist was still alive, a very different idea about the artwork was being put forward. During the acquisition of Bourgeois’ *Maman* in 2008 by the Tate Modern, the museum’s press release used the artist’s personal voice to describe the work as follows:

The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.”⁴¹⁶

The press release in fact concurs that ‘this spectacular arachnid alludes to the strength of the mother with metaphors of spinning, weaving, nurture and protection.’⁴¹⁷ This conclusion remains in stark contrast to the summary of the work that followed two years later. Bourgeois herself has made many references to the spider and its symbolic associations to the maternal, yet throughout most of her personal remarks, the spider is mainly figured as a symbol of reparation. She states that there is a sort of myth, ‘a bad reputation,’ that especially presents the female of this species as ‘a stinger’ or ‘a killer’ – a myth that she seeks to rehabilitate.⁴¹⁸ The

interpretation. See Amelia Jones, “Art History/Art Criticism: Performing Meaning,” in *Performing the Body, Performing the Text*, eds. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 37-51.

⁴¹⁶ “Tate Acquires Louise Bourgeois’s Giant Spider, Maman,” Tate, 11 January 2008, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/tate-acquires-louise-bourgeois-giant-spider-maman>.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 217.

desire to repair and rehabilitate is a recurring expression in Bourgeois' writings and interviews. There are parallelisms between her own process of artworking and in the symbolic figure of the mother-spider, where she identifies with and acknowledges all three figures (the spider, the artist and the mother) as a repairer. Repairing and reparation has been a quality and activity cultivated in her family's business of tapestry repairing. In an interview from 1997, Bourgeois admits to having spent a considerable amount of time repairing things, and she confesses that 'by extension I treated my mother and tried to repair her.'⁴¹⁹ Yet, the popular idea of the spider and its symbolic association woman/mother as an internal fantasy of aggression, sadism, fear, repulsion externalized by Bourgeois in the form of sculpture has had numerous critics and theorists supporting it.⁴²⁰

As much as Bourgeois' diary entries and interviews have been dissected to provide new angles of looking, appreciating and understanding her work, her autobiographical writings and confessions have often fallen prey to both overuse and misuse.⁴²¹ For instance, on a number of occasions Bourgeois would be questioned

⁴¹⁹ "Louise Bourgeois Interview by Ingrid Sischy," Proconiar Workshop, October 1997, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.proconiarworkshop.com/art-reference/ingrid-sischy-interview-with-artist-louise-bourgeois.html>.

⁴²⁰ Robert Pincus-Witten, *Bourgeois Truth*, Exhibition Catalogue (New York: Robert Miller, 1982). Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005). Jerry Gorovoy et al, *Louise Bourgeois: Blue Days and Pink Days*, Exhibition Catalogue (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 1997). In contrast, in the essay *Seduction, mourning and invocation: The geometry of absence in work by Louise Bourgeois*, Griselda Pollock interprets Bourgeois' work through the prism of Matrixial theory, where maternal absence is figured as both a loss and a yearning for reconnection.

⁴²¹ Griselda Pollock has noted that 'the reception of Louise Bourgeois's work has been disfigured, however, by the ease with which the hungry interpreters consumed the life story that the artist had apparently flaunted in front of them, as if autobiographical memories provided the key to the interpretation of her work.' See Griselda Pollock, "What if Art Desires to be Interpreted? Remodelling Interpretation after the 'Encounter-Event'," *Tate Papers*, Issue 15, 1 April 2011, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/what-if-art-desires-be-interpreted-remodelling-interpretation>. Similarly, Mieke Bal remarks that 'art criticism wrongly props itself up against the artist's statements and stories, producing biographical narratives that sidestep or even ignore what is most characteristic of the artist's work: its visual nature.' See Mieke Bal, 'Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder' in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (University of Michigan Press, 2002), 163.

over the eroticism of her work. One example relates specifically to the sculpture

Sleep II (1967) [fig. 7] where she responds:

I am not particularly aware or interested in the erotic of my work, in spite of its supposed presence. Since I am exclusively concerned, at least consciously, with the formal perfection. I allow myself to follow blindly the images that suggest themselves to me. There is no conflict whatsoever between these two levels.⁴²²

This is one example amongst many of Bourgeois' reports where she is thought to deny the erotic evocations of her work. Not being aware or interested in the eroticism that an artwork may eventually evoke is not the same as alleging that Bourgeois, the individual, is frigid or uninterested in sex. Yet, such a contention seems to be a recurring assertion of distinguished art critic and professor Donald Kuspit's presentation of Bourgeois the person, conflated with Bourgeois the artwork. His talk in 2008 at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, encapsulates a controversial interpretation of her work that preys on her autobiography as 'proof' of certain psychoanalytic paradigms:

Kuspit will illustrate the tensions presented between the phallic and the womanly and how this suggests Bourgeois' uncertainty about the nature of the female body and the character of female selfhood. An uncertainty that Kuspit will trace to animosity towards men, rooted in childhood traumas, making her a feminist by default, even when she explicitly denies that she is one.⁴²³

Such uses of autobiography are problematic as forms of art criticism for a number of reasons. Firstly, they invent theoretical frames that are supported by the artist's life rather than the artist's work. This tendency misconstrues the practice of

⁴²² Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 86.

⁴²³ Online announcement of Donald Kuspit's lecture "The Phallic Woman: Conflict and Fragmentation in Bourgeois' Conception of the Female Body," accessed April 8, 2015, <http://www.wdw.nl/event/donald-kuspit-on-louise-bourgeois/>. Partial video recording of the lecture, accessed April 8, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozewms_glfu.

artworking as an effect of catharsis or cathexis at the expense of the work's technique, form and conceptualization. Secondly, it hinders the possibility of multiple interpretations that can stem from each individual's encounter with the work by indirectly framing art as independent from the context of its audience/reader. Thirdly, such autobiographical interpretations set up an ongoing (and usually unresolved) contest between the artist's truth and the critic's assumptions about the artist's truth. For these reasons, the plurality of possible interpretations are relegated to an unproductive, antagonistic and confined debate.



Fig. 7 Louise Bourgeois, *Sleep II*, 1967.

For example, Kuspit's assertions can easily be contested by employing the same system of inquiry: using excerpts from Bourgeois' autobiographical narratives.

In an interview of 1971, Bourgeois does not sound as naïve or uncertain about female selfhood, men or other "feminist traumas" as Kuspit would suggest:

- Do you consider art a man's world?

Yes. It is a world where both men and women are trying to please men in power.

- How do you feel about other women artists?

I react to their work, more than to them as women.

- Do you think there is a specific style or aspect of a style which women artists share?

Not yet. Before this takes place women will have to forget their desire to please the male power structure.

- Is your painting world separated from your living world?

My sculpting world and my living world are one.

-Do you feel sexual satisfaction through your work?

*Yes.*⁴²⁴

By outlining the ambivalences in the deployment of Bourgeois' autobiographical and biographical narratives in contemporary art criticism my aim is not to offer a corrective to the consumption of her life or art. To paraphrase Bourgeois from an interview regarding the erotic interpretation of her work: 'who am I to tell you it was not so?'⁴²⁵ In a parallel move, my aim is to reconsider the relationship between the auto/biographical and art-writing in order to explore what other possibilities this relationship can unfold. I drew on the previous examples as starting points to reflect on how writing about art employs the autobiography of artists to make claims about an artist's life, to imbue the work with value, or validate theoretical paradigms. With these examples it is my aim to reveal some of the contradictions in the use of autobiographical narratives for the purposes of art criticism.

⁴²⁴ Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 96

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

Amongst the most popular critiques of contemporary art criticism has been that of writer, critic and political activist Susan Sontag. In the essay “Against Interpretation” (1966), Sontag observes that the critic imbues meaning (and in a sense value) to the author’s intent, by altering and layering surplus signification onto the work.⁴²⁶ Sontag argues for a new approach to art criticism as a way to ‘recover our senses. So that we [...] learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.’⁴²⁷ Sontag is not arguing *against* interpretation. On the contrary, she presents us with the possibility of expanding the field of interpretation with an ‘erotics of art.’⁴²⁸ That is, to engage our physical senses in the encounter and to evaluate the work based on its material relation to our senses. To this end, the function of art would reside in its affective capacity prior to its intellectual investment.

But that does not mean that there is nothing to be gleaned from artists’ autobiographical statements about their work. As the makers of their own work, their narratives offer an insightful description of the sensuality and physicality that arises from the experience of artworking. For the artist, the practice of artworking is an entirely different encounter from the relationship of viewing their resulting artwork. It is worth quoting Bourgeois’ commentary as a way to think about artwork as a relationship that involves multiple moments, durations, encounters and sensations.

Every time I am asked to talk about my work I desiccate. The only way which I can manage it is to go into my studio and walk back and forth and around a piece. Then the relations between the work and me snap alive again. At this point the how it was made is obviously of no importance or relevance. I made it the best I could, considering that the object became what it is, and this becoming was not completely under the control of conscious desire or premeditation. The fluctuation of possibilities can be minute, slow, rough, sudden, re-examinable or definite. Any way you slice it, there is always a

⁴²⁶ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 6.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

battle to the finish between the artist and his material: sometimes with visible result, more often with experience gained but no result.⁴²⁹

I am keen to point out that there are several and obvious distinctions between making art and viewing art, even for the maker. Nonetheless, I want to highlight the *processual* nature of this activity. While the resulting artwork remains an object, the process of experiencing the work takes on different meanings and responses with each encounter. As Mieke Bal notes, ‘viewing is by definition a process,’ and in Bourgeois’ case specifically, the work ‘enforce[s] a viewing that *takes time*, imposing an awareness of that temporality.’⁴³⁰ The temporality of experience is acutely significant here because it offers an alternative to methods of interpretation that rely on binary subject/object schemes.

Artwork (the thing/object) is commonly framed as the invariable factor in the encounter with the viewer. This “fixity” of the work provides the interpreter with the frame to perform their analysis. The interpreter often fails to disclose the contingency of emotional states and the physical sensations or affective experience provided by the encounter. If we presume that subjectivity is generally in a state of flux and affected from without, then for interpretation to ensue we would have to conceive of subjectivity as, at least momentarily, suspended from the factors that unsettle it, namely: emotion and movement. Such a hypothesis might sound unrealistic as emotion is indispensable to the experience of art. Yet, through such forms of writing about art, it might just be the case that the writing follows from a subject that presumes that they are self-contained in the affects that they experience.⁴³¹ By overlaying an artist’s autobiography over their art, the critic

⁴²⁹ Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 90.

⁴³⁰ Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider*, 27.

⁴³¹ Art critic James Elkins contacted a number of art historians to ask them whether they had wept upon encountering a painting. The majority of them responded not only negatively, but declared

interprets the life story and not the work, thus excluding from the equation the unique and affective encounter with the work. Perhaps, as can also be the case, an encounter between the work and the narrator never physically took place and what we are left with is indeed a text with no affective trace.

When Bourgeois highlights her relationship to her work from the position of artist, she simultaneously highlights that each encounter carries a different experience in her relationship to the work. In the same vein, each singular and unique viewer's interaction (with every different encounter, installation, location) would bear a different or slightly nuanced exposure to the work. As Cavarero reminds us, it is through our mutual exposure in the public space of appearance that our uniqueness is revealed to one another. The uniqueness of an aesthetic experience can shift interpretation into the variable component to permits multiple interactions and interpretations between the viewer and the work. Simultaneously, it highlights the necessity to restore to aesthetics its affective (and also erotic) potential.

I would like to suggest that the deployment of autobiography also reveals the very tension or even (im)possibility of truth. In the sense that fictions, mythobiographies and fantasies are essential to the process of creating artwork. This is especially relevant to artists that are concerned with imaginaries and processes that are yet to come or that defy realization in the traditional object-form sense.⁴³² In the

Elkins' research superfluous and the topic of crying 'old-fashioned, romantic, and unfitted to twentieth-century art.' See especially the chapter "The Ivory Tower of Tearlessness" in James Elkins, *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 73.

⁴³² Testing the limits of personal testimony and art, the work of artist Aliza Shvarts is an excellent example of how an artist's claim to authenticity and/or truth rarely guarantees that it will alter our perception of the work. Rather, that it is precisely the tension between fiction and reality that can open debate and challenge our idea of what counts as art and how we are affected by it. For her final degree project, Shvarts wanted to use abortifacient drugs to induce an abortion on a monthly basis for a duration of nine months. The project exists only through press reports as it is still open to question as to whether Shvarts performed it or even really meant to perform it. See, Diana Georgiou and Giulia Casalini, "Notes on Queer Feminist Aesthetics," in *Re-Materialising Feminism*, eds. Rozsa Farkas, Giulia Smith and Alice Brooke (London: Arcadia Missa Publications, 2014), 89.

attempt to expose the “real meaning” or intention of the artist, autobiographical uses may supplant another universal interpretation for the viewer. Recourse to such uses of autobiography for writing about art can nevertheless provide useful and insightful information about the artist and the work. However, as we shall see, they are not the only modes or methods for writing, historically or currently. The work that I draw from contains alternative configurations of auto/biographical art writing. The most concise description I can offer to conjure this practice is a form of “writing *with* art.” And this *with* is precisely what makes all the difference to both the writing – a visibly and audibly different form or writing – and to, I will try to argue, the storyteller producing the writing.

CHAPTER TWO

“How to get Inside a Star?”

Death Through Life Writing in the poetry of Anne Sexton

How to get inside a star, Van Gogh wondered? The fastest method of transportation is not the train, it's death.

– Hélène Cixous⁴³³

In 1974, the poet Anne Sexton committed suicide at the age of 46. She locked herself in her garage, sat in her car and left the engine running until carbon monoxide filled her lungs and poisoned her to death.⁴³⁴ Between the 1950's and 1970's suicide became for a number of poets, including Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman and Randall Jarrell, the subject matter of their writing or even the sensationalised ending to their life.

It is no exaggeration to say that Sexton's writing career began and ended with suicide. In 1955, following an overdose of barbiturates, she was admitted to a psychiatric unit where she met Dr. Martin Orne who was to become her long-term therapist. During one of their sessions, Sexton remarked that suicide for her was an addiction and she described most of her days entailed 'thinking about killing myself – or killing myself.'⁴³⁵

A year later, following her psychologist's advice, Sexton put fingers to typewriter and began tapping out her emotional states. She joined a writing group in Boston led by John Holmes with writing workshops that proved not only constructive but also life affirming. Her talent and remarkable progress as a student

⁴³³ Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London: Routledge, 1998 / Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 5.

⁴³⁴ “Anne Sexton Ruled Suicide,” *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 1974.

⁴³⁵ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (London: Virago Press, 1992), 200.

led her to the University of Boston to study with Robert Lowell alongside distinguished poets Sylvia Plath and George Starbuck. Soon enough literary circles became close friends, which also included life-long friend and fellow poet Maxine Kumin and W.D. Snodgrass, who Sexton claimed were the most influential figures in her life.⁴³⁶ Since then she spent the rest of her living days flirting with death, negotiating suicidal impulses and writing poetry about it that won her numerous awards including a Pulitzer prize. While Sexton wrote passionately about suicide and death she was also not shy of exposing even the most taboo and brutal aspects of life. Fifty years later, topics such as menstruation, abortion, mental health, sexuality, masturbation, addiction and incest are still approached with some caution.

This style of writing that relied on autobiographical material, self-disclosure, emotions and difficult subject matter was soon termed “confessional.” Attributed to W.D. Snodgrass, the genre was a radical contrast to the anti-expressionistic, depersonalised principles that were common in the U.S. and propounded by the likes of literary critics and poets John Crowe Ransom and T.S. Eliott.⁴³⁷ In an interview from 1965, Sexton notes that coming across Snodgrass’ autobiographical work *Heart’s Needle* enabled her to gain confidence in her half-finished book *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) despite discouraging remarks.⁴³⁸ With material drawn from her own life, Sexton found a positive and liberating method to draw up her poems. In the foreword to the collected poems following her death, friend and poet Maxine Kumin observes that Sexton had a ‘deeply rooted conviction that poems

⁴³⁶ Patricia Marx and Anne Sexton, “Interview with Anne Sexton,” *The Hudson Review* 18, no. 4 (Winter, 1965-1966): 567. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3849705>.

⁴³⁷ For a brief overview of the role of *New Criticism* in relegating autobiography to an ‘inferior literary mode’ see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 113-119.

⁴³⁸ Marx & Sexton, “Interview,” 567.

not only could, but had to be, made out of the detritus of her life.⁴³⁹ Poetry became the alchemy of Sexton's emotions, memories and obsessions that found a creative match in words.

The use of autobiographical subject matter ignited fervent criticism with comments that attacked the style for its blatant rawness and direct mode of address. Seen as a shock tactic for emotional effect one critic described it as 'excessive self-dramatization, even spilling into undertones of self-pity.'⁴⁴⁰ In defence of confessional style, proponents tried to almost justify or fortify the genre, and especially Sexton's work, through its ability to help people suffering from similar conditions. Paula M. Salvio notes that Sexton expressed her desire to 'offer comfort and insight' through her poetry.⁴⁴¹ Even her therapist had initially proposed that she write poetry for the very reason that it would 'help others.'⁴⁴² Diane Middlebrook, speaking on behalf of Sexton, claims that 'if suffering [...] had any use, [...] it was not to the sufferer. The only way that an individual's pain gained meaning was through its communication to others.'⁴⁴³

It was perhaps this form of communication that attracted such a large and diverse audience to her crowded public readings.⁴⁴⁴ She certainly moved audiences that shared the torment of addiction, people afflicted by depression, lovers that have had their share of heartache and loss, and women who confronted female experiences that were similar to "Her Kind," as the eponymous poem goes. The widespread impact of confessional poetry, beyond the life narrative of the poet, is especially

⁴³⁹ Maxine Kumin, foreword to *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems by Anne Sexton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), xxx.

⁴⁴⁰ Robert Boyers quoted in Paula M. Salvio, *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance*, (Albany, State University Of New York Press, 2007), 17.

⁴⁴¹ Paula M. Salvio, *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance* (Albany, State University Of New York Press, 2007), 17.

⁴⁴² Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 42-43.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, xxiii

⁴⁴⁴ Kumin, foreword, xxii

influential when thinking of the specific conditions of its production. What it meant to speak about female experience during the 1960s, before the feminist movements of the 1970s, is very different from how experience is framed within post-millennial neoliberal societies and discourses. Poet Anne Stevenson remarks how she also ‘suffered a good deal from the same syndrome of acute misery, unhappy in [...] roles of daughter, wife, lover and mother,’ during a period when women poets were ‘driven crazy’ by these prescribed roles.⁴⁴⁵

Sexton gave voice to many aspects of women’s experiences and the accompanied struggles that came with domesticity, motherhood, femininity and sexuality. While Sexton was creating the conditions of her own reality and success as renowned poet, she simultaneously provided the tools for other women to either write out their own lives and the challenges they were facing, or to hear their own concerns lyrically framed in an other’s poetry. The poem “Her Kind” is emblematic of verse that conveys how women, incapable of aligning their lives to the roles that Stevenson mentioned, became ‘misunderstood,’ not ‘quite’ women and associated with the personification of a ‘witch.’⁴⁴⁶ The figure of the witch in the poem “Her Kind” becomes a metaphor for identification, a role that Sexton often returns to almost in redemptive and celebratory style. She concludes the third and last stanza by demonstrating how she “rides” social contradictions irreverently, waving her ‘nude arms at villages going by / learning the last bright routes, survivor.’ She resists and survives social afflictions despite the fact that they are ubiquitous like ‘flames’ that ‘still bite’, while her ‘ribs crack where [...] wheels wind.’⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁵ Charlotte Austin and Anne Stevenson, “Anne Sexton Forty Years Later,” *Poetry Review* 99:4, Winter 2009 (London: The Poetry Society).

⁴⁴⁶ Sexton, *Complete Poems*, 15-16.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

The radical and martyr-like quality of Sexton achieving success with her poetry, despite society's gender biases and an unexceptional educational background, was definitely serving as a powerful and affecting role model for women who were bound by the confines of postwar domesticity. This is especially relevant in light of Dr. Orne's observation that Sexton's first sessions were marked by a 'profound lack of self-worth' to the extent that she was completely incapable of uttering 'any positive abilities or qualities within herself.'⁴⁴⁸ Sexton gained a stronger sense of self through the ownership of an activity that she crafted and polished to glowing proportions. An activity that she owned entirely, where through its repetition she managed to bring to surface an identity that was dormant.⁴⁴⁹ Writing became an occasion for contemplation and, specifically for Sexton's poor memory and regular patterns of disassociation, it offered her a method of self-care, a sense of well-being, self-worth and an exploration of her traumas and fantasies through a structured yet often "unconscious" process. Diane Middlebrook's biography of Sexton highlights how poetic images would be transferred onto paper so spontaneously that Sexton would not even remember that she had written a certain poem.⁴⁵⁰ Furthermore, Middlebrook notes that this writing process was not only partially conscious but it also 'took Sexton out of herself, into what she felt was another identity.'⁴⁵¹

Just a few months after Sexton's suicide, writer and friend Erica Jong describes this curious way of connecting and disconnecting from the process of writing and the self as follows:

⁴⁴⁸ Martin T. Orne, foreword to *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, by Diane Wood Middlebrook (London: Virago Press, 1992), xiii.

⁴⁴⁹ Contrary to most claims, Sexton did not begin writing at the time of therapy as is most notably mentioned. Middlebrook's biography indicates that she had already written poetry during school and that her mother was also engaging in the medium.

⁴⁵⁰ Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, xxi.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

With the process of writing the poem, there is a kind of connection which sustains one. Then the poem is done and one is alone again. Other people may enjoy the poem later, but the poet can hardly relate to it. The poet is happy only while writing the poem.⁴⁵²

However, following her suicide and the vast biographical material left behind, her work remains favourably explored through the lens of two main themes. Firstly, a focus on the relationship between creativity and mental health is framed as a form of “art therapy” where the poems are explored for the way they forge connections to other fellow “sufferers.” This is mainly due to the biographical fact that Sexton’s relationship to poetry began with her therapist’s suggestion to write with the aim of “helping others.”

Secondly, and following from the first point, Sexton’s repetitive suicide attempts invite interpretations that dissect every verse for traces of a reaffirmed drive towards death. Such uncomplicated readings are supported by Sexton’s explicit use of the dilemma that granted her the Pulitzer Prize for her book: *Live or Die*. The tension between living or dying seems to overshadow the literary value of Sexton’s work when it is framed as an activity that ‘kept Anne alive for the eighteen years of her creative endeavors.’⁴⁵³

Writing in her memoirs following the suicide of Sylvia Plath, Sexton points out that ‘Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem.’⁴⁵⁴ However, the simplicity of most interpretations render Sexton’s poetry, the activity that keeps her alive, into the oppositional “other” to what would have otherwise been a “normal” life. In this way, Sexton’s poetry is reduced to an anomaly, a form of writing that simply subdues her “Awful Rowing Towards God,” or a style that revels in the personal battle between

⁴⁵² Erica Jong, “Remembering Anne Sexton,” *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 1974.

⁴⁵³ Kumin, foreword, xxiii.

⁴⁵⁴ Anne Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, eds. Linda Gray Sexton & Lois Ames (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 273.

living or dying, accelerated by Sexton's addiction to the fantasy that suicide can guarantee relief.

To write about fantasies of suicide, the envy of an other's suicide and living with the closeness of death in everyday life, is certainly difficult subject matter. Nevertheless, it is still just subject matter – just as religion was to T. S. Eliot and nature to Ted Hughes – it is only one aspect of a poem. The process of crafting such matter into a form that the artist can respond to, be affected by, be taken into and come out of transformed is far more significant to the connection between autobiography and writing. By focusing on Sexton's biographical facts, the material and stylistic qualities of her work, and often the very processes of production remain underexplored. Furthermore, the poems are read in a way that relegates them to a sociopolitical end (women's issues, post-war generations, depression), omitting any purposeful materiality and textual specificity of the very process of writing. To repeat the previous point made, the claim by many authors that poetry kept Anne alive becomes an end point for literary discussion.

“We are magic talking to itself, noisy and alone.”

Does poetry, writing or any artistic process keep one alive? What pleasure, affirmation or affective quality does writing entail to sustain the well-being of an individual? Is the process of writing always “therapeutic”? That is, if creativity, as a processual return to a life-affirming activity, has the capacity to strike a certain balance in the lives of excessively emotional and sensitive beings, then how does it enhance that same ability in those that are otherwise a little more “thick-skinned”?

Furthermore, is it *during* the process of writing that a life-driven activity kicks in, or is it *after* the process, during reading and reflection that the writer recognizes a transformation? Considering that many creatives support that during times of acute stress, depression or anxiety, writing – or any creative process – comes to a halt or lacks the ‘control and perspective’ necessary for its production.⁴⁵⁵

Instead of drawing conclusions based on analogies between the text and the author’s biography, what can Sexton’s poetry reveal about this psychic transformation that occurs in the many artists’ lives that employ autobiographical material in their work? Most significantly, what do these transformations have to say about subjectivity and authorship when both are in a sense transfigured (or put under question) by the process of writing? Finally, what can Sexton’s oeuvre, both as work and method, tell us about our relationship to art? By examining alternative forms of writing *with* art that employ personal narratives to inform both aesthetic analysis and the subjectivity of the writer, I explore how such forms of art-writing invite alternative ways of reading.

Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux has conducted a similar investigation with specific attention to the relationship between poetry and aesthetics. Loizeaux’s focus on *ekphrasis* (a response to a work of art in the written form of poetry) aims to unfold the social dynamics of the practice and its impact and connection to ‘social engagements within and across the boundaries of the poem.’⁴⁵⁶ Loizeaux’s thesis stresses the ‘inherently dialogic’ relationship between three participants in what she

⁴⁵⁵ Daphne Gottlieb, “Lady Lazarus: Uncoupling Suicide and Poetry,” in *Live through This: On Creativity and Self-destruction*, ed. Sabrina Chap (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2012. 2nd edition), 40. See this book for a unique collection of autobiographical writing and artwork that responds to the relationship between mental health, self-destruction and art making.

⁴⁵⁶ Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.

terms the “ekphrastic situation”: the artist, the work of art and the audience.⁴⁵⁷ By highlighting this dynamic exchange, Loizeaux simultaneously exposes the polyvocality of ekphrasis as well as the genre’s use of prosopopeia as devices that lead to ‘the collapse of subject and object.’⁴⁵⁸ Prosopopeia is understood as the rhetorical technique whereby a writer conveys meaning, emotion, perspective or argumentation by speaking in an other’s voice. In the case of visual art and poetry, Loizeaux notes that ekphrastic prosopopeia creates a ‘double anchor’ for the poet where their ‘speaking voice is not only objectified, but also embodied (in the image).’⁴⁵⁹ For Loizeaux, this technique reveals an important ethical dilemma: ‘Whether and how one can speak for others.’⁴⁶⁰

While aspects of writing poetry might be keeping a reader and an “other” in mind, Sexton’s work was more closely related to a process that created a space for self-discovery and a particular stylistic mode of address when it referred to someone else. ‘You don’t write for an *audience*,’ Sexton said on a radio show in 1962, rather ‘you write for some *one* who’ll understand.’⁴⁶¹ However, Sexton’s poetry did speak to others in a manner that would bring her audience, but most importantly “the one”, closer to her own life. The “one” that Sexton seeks out is often easily identified in the work. In “Sylvia’s Death”, the poem is clearly addressed to the poet Sylvia Plath who had recently committed suicide. In poems with a more communal tone such as “Her Kind”, it is clear that “the one” is given shape through the figure of Sexton herself. Even though she addresses a judgemental society in the allegorical use of a “driver” (“I have ridden in your cart, driver”) and calls out to any “woman like that”

⁴⁵⁷ Loizeaux, *Poetry and Visual Arts*, 5.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶¹ Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 187.

who has had similar experiences, she remains the protagonist of the poem. Through a self-reflective process she gives form to a rebellious self by placing her condition *as* “woman” in dialogue with other women and society.

In work such as “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator” the poem makes clear references to masturbation, yet it is also about unrequited love, where masturbation is Sexton’s only relief after ‘the end of the affair’ by some *one* who used to call her ‘my little plum.’ This “one” that Sexton returns to reveals that her technique often entails a mode of address that speaks *to* and *with* someone. Yet, many authors claim that Sexton’s poetry was a self-indulgent, self-referential, narcissistic exercise. Stevenson, despite her appreciation of some of Sexton’s earlier work, draws the following psychological assessment of Sexton the individual and the poet:

That for eight years she chiefly corresponded with herself through thrice-weekly visits to her psychotherapist means that she was miserably aware of her extreme self-centeredness and hated herself bitterly because of it. That polarized self-love and self-hatred, I suppose, was the sickness snarled at the centre of her.⁴⁶²

Sexton’s approach to writing was indeed subjective, personal and autobiographical and while these were narrative and poetic tools, their association to self-centeredness and narcissism consigned the work to lower ranks of literary value. But her working methodology (personal, autobiographical or completely fictional) entailed an astute and professional work ethic that had little room for “polarized” sentiments. Her skills were hardly ever sharpened in isolation and she knew well the value of her verses when they were either worked out, heavily edited, rejected or

⁴⁶² Charlotte Austin and Anne Stevenson, “Anne Sexton Forty Years Later,” *Poetry Review* 99, no. 4, Winter 2009 (London: The Poetry Society).

completely transformed following the critical assistance of other poets, including Kumin and Snodgrass.

No matter how personal or centered on her life, the work was hardly ever developed as a way to communicate factual experience or as a way to convey Sexton's morality. Another way to think of this method is in its reverse equation. It was the experience or the moral dilemma that permitted Sexton to look for a way to express the emotional and affective impact that accompanied lived experience, or to imagine new scenarios for events she struggled to understand and come to terms with. The poems would hardly ever provide a resolution or a moral, philosophical or political claim. Yet, the presence of Sexton's personal experiences in the verses, loudly voice epistemic authority and delineate experience specific to an embodied standpoint. For this reason, they inevitably invite readings that examine the corporeal materiality of sexed difference in literary form.

The poem "The Abortion" stands out as a good example of difficult subject matter, directly related to women's experience, which examines the ambivalence of emotions and psychological states through rich imagery and a careful sensitivity in describing distressing circumstances. Sexton's work comprises an extraordinary use of vivid imagery and metaphor, mathematically measured evocative repetitions, powerful rhythm and an innovative use of voice to communicate a range of tones from 'pregnant pauses, husky whispers, pseudoshouts to calculated effect.'⁴⁶³ Conflicting emotions are here presented in premeditated rhyme in an effort to represent and almost control emotional conflict through vividly pictorial and structured tercets.

⁴⁶³ Kumin, foreword, xxi.

Building on her personal experience, Sexton creates an emotional journey that escalates in tension. The morning starts with a hopeful description, ‘the earth puckered its mouth, each bud puffing out from its knot’ which simultaneously alludes to fecundity. The next tercet suggests sexual connotations, ‘Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,’ and almost as a recall of what created the current situation that Sexton finds herself in. The imagery transforms from sexual (humps) to a sinister tone ‘where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly.’ The sensation of “cracks” in the earth conjures a tremor, an aftershock following the “truth,” the realization of what is to follow, evoked in the line ‘a dark socket from which the coal has poured.’ The dark socket connotes a gashing from a wound and a dark womb in one stroke.

Between three sets of tercets, the phrase ‘Somebody who should have been born / is gone’ is intercalated almost as a way for Sexton to expose the obsessive lamenting of an inner voice. For Sexton, the world of anxiety and anticipation is ridden with angular and sharp sensations. The roads are represented as ‘gray washboards’ and the surrounding nature is rendered with an edginess that expresses ‘the grass as bristly and stout as chives.’ It is at this moment that Sexton wonders ‘how anything fragile survives,’ which leads to the tension followed in the next tercet. Arriving at her destination, Sexton sets up a meeting with the allegorical figure of ‘Rumplestiltskin’ who stands in for the doctor that is about to commit the act of what is perhaps the most delicately phrased sentence in the poem. The abortionist is described as the one who “took the fullness that love began.”

While Sexton incorporated these highly sensitive topics into her poetry, a large amount of Sexton’s work was about or in praise of other people (lovers, friends, family, therapists, fellow poets). Therefore, it was not so much the subjective viewpoint that called for negative criticism, it was mainly the content of personal

dilemmas, mourning the death of others and suicidal impulses, that was a little too exhibitionistic, a little too “real” especially, I imagine, when Sexton would perform a public reading.

Contrary to Sexton’s method, Stevenson’s personal relationship to poetry defines an approach that was commonly expected of writers at the time and can be said to represent much of what is traditionally accepted as good practice in any form of writing, even nowadays. Stevenson notes that her working method entails ‘deflect[ing] the stream of my own troubles and write from an historical perspective.’⁴⁶⁴ For Stevenson, poetry, as an art form, had a main priority and that was to transform the personal into ‘memorably impersonal works.’⁴⁶⁵

It is then no surprise that Sexton’s personal style glaringly stood out like a thorn in poetic tradition. On the other hand, the poet Allen Grossman remarked that he considered Sexton to be ‘the first major writer who was able to be heard as a voice not concerned with itself.’⁴⁶⁶ In a comparable remark, Paula M. Salvio notes that on numerous accounts, including her teaching documents, Sexton drew a distinction between the autobiographical “I” and the persona she employed to recreate a biographical ‘mask’ and ‘fiction.’⁴⁶⁷ With this technique, she would deliver personal statements that seemed to make the boundaries between personal reality and social fiction completely unified. Simultaneously, by giving an account of herself, Sexton reveals how a sense of self is inextricably linked to others. It was by adopting a mask or fiction that Sexton was able to indirectly address both personal

⁴⁶⁴ Austin and Stevenson, “Forty Years”.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Allen Grossman, quoted in Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (London: Virago Press, 1992), 126.

⁴⁶⁷ Salvio, *Teacher*, 3.

and communal issues such as female sexuality, gender stereotypes or cultural phenomena.

Sexton's use of women's issues pre-dated the feminist slogan 'the personal is political,' yet her writing can be considered in line with much of the political debates that were taking place during the practice of consciousness-raising in the US women's movements. Nancy Miller notes that feminist theory, 'built out from the personal: the witnessing "I" of subjective experience,' was key to critiquing the very way that dominant critical theory is conducted.⁴⁶⁸ In a sense, Sexton's work can also be said to take 'the personal as a category of thought,'⁴⁶⁹ in which we find 'that language is a medium through which the self is at once composed and decentered.'⁴⁷⁰

Returning to Loizeaux's thesis, Sexton's writing, and her identity, can be seen to reveal her interdependence on a plurality of authors and connections. Furthermore, she lends her voice to others through the act of writing from a subjective and specific geopolitical context that others can relate to. Yet Sexton's work does not exactly fit neatly into narratives of identification and identity politics. There are conscious political overtones in poems such as "Her Kind" yet the same set of tools have little to say regarding a poem that reflects a painting.

The praxis of self-disclosure and its route to self-realisation are put into play specifically for this narrator as a way to structure a sense of self. That is, the auto/biographical becomes a tool by which we may begin to think about subjectivity not only linked to others, but also capable of transforming, actualizing the self's

⁴⁶⁸ Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 14.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁰ See Salvio, *Teacher*, 88. Salvio also notes that 'While the I in Sexton's poetry appears boldly personal, she in fact considered the autobiographical I as a literary rather than a literal identity. "I am often being personal," she explained to her students at Colgate University, "but I'm not being personal about myself." Here Sexton suggests that the personal is already a plural condition.'

potential despite the rigid parameters of sociocultural imperatives and hindrances. The personal is here another creative form of self-styling, often intersubjective, inscribed by sociocultural specificity and made to “work” in textual form. If we are to take the methods of self-disclosure, the personal and auto/biographical as categories of thought, then how do these methods make their way into auto/biographical art-writing?

Metaphors and Aesthetic Encounters: Materialising the Nonconscious through Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*.



Fig. 8 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889

*That does not keep me from having a terrible
need of—shall I say the word—religion. Then I go
out at night to paint the stars.
VINCENT VAN GOGH in a letter to his brother*

*The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die.*

*It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:*

*into that rushing beast of the night,
sucked up by that great dragon, to split
from my life with no flag,
no belly,
no cry.*

– Anne Sexton, *The Starry Night* (1962)⁴⁷¹

“The Starry Night” serves as an original example where Sexton’s skills appear in the form of auto/biographical art-writing. A poem that employs personal subject matter to respond to a work of art is an unorthodox way to write about art. Yet, both the personal and the auto/biographical respond to Van Gogh’s painting in poetic form. For the analysis of “The Starry Night,” it is useful to examine Sexton’s oeuvre for how it works against and beyond the expected narrative that was carved out for her life. Or, to think of how this practice maintains what Skorczewski claims was Sexton’s method ‘toward and away from self-disclosure.’⁴⁷² Furthermore, how this practice reveals a politics of location, epistemology and embodiment over a language of abstraction – facilitated by the use of metaphors, emotions and auto/biographical material.

This particular poem has been examined from the perspective of Sexton’s identification with the painter Vincent Van Gogh. Interpretations often figure the poem as an expression of Sexton’s affinity with Van Gogh’s personal battle with depression, melancholia, marginalisation and suicide. Both Sexton and Van Gogh

⁴⁷¹ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 53-54.

⁴⁷² Dawn M. Skorczewski, *An Accident of Hope: The Therapy Tapes of Anne Sexton* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xxii.

turned towards religion during the later part of their life and both committed suicide.

Sexton's poem opens up with an epigraph by Van Gogh addressed to his brother:

That does not keep me from having a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars.

This epigraph prompts Loizeaux to interpret the poem as an instance of ekphrastic prosopopoeia where Sexton speaks through and for Van Gogh, suggesting that Sexton's poem becomes a description of Van Gogh's tension with the stillness of the town and his desire to transcend into a whirling starry sky. Exploring the ekphrastic aspects of the poem, Loizeaux states that it is the specific detail of the night sky that provides Sexton with 'an image of death as she wants it, sensuous and glorious.'⁴⁷³ We see, once again, that death is framed as the measure and idealization within Sexton's poetic and life-sustaining activity. Sexton's "obsessive desire" returns to reconstruct her suicidal impulses in Van Gogh's painting. Loizeaux argues that such an impulse is reported to be a common practice of 'many of her nineteenth-century predecessors in ekphrasis' who 'conflate the image as present' with 'the image as eternal and transcendent.'⁴⁷⁴ Loizeaux's argument presents Sexton's work as an exercise in ekphrasis by comparing the stylistic elements of this specific poem with her 'predecessors' who had a 'Romantic belief in the transcendence of the image married to a concatenation of genius, early death and suicide as a "dramatic gesture".'⁴⁷⁵

However, suicidal impulses were not exactly a "dramatic gesture" for Sexton. They were the lived experience of her battle with depression and a state of mental health that we would now describe as bipolar and/or borderline personality

⁴⁷³ Loizeaux, *Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 115.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

disorder.⁴⁷⁶ Setting aside these biographical facts and the stylistic expressions of ekphrasis, there is still no clear reason why looking at Van Gogh's *Starry Night* would prompt Sexton to write about suicide. In fact, there is very little about this poem that speaks through or for the artist Van Gogh.

In my view, Sexton is here writing out the effect of her encounter with the painting in an instance of erotic responsiveness. She sees in the painting what she can only metaphorically assign as the "drowned woman," instead of a tree, aiming towards the "hot sky." This use of metaphor is a clear indication that the act of viewing and interpretation are bound to the standpoint and experience of the subject engaging in the encounter with an artwork. As far as I am aware, there is no other reference to female embodiment made by any other author contemplating Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Sexton is clearly employing the auto/biographical mode and relies heavily on metaphor to express the affective encounter.

I would like to try and clarify two points at this stage of Sexton's encounter and how it relates to the concept of erotic responsiveness. The first point concerns a clarification of the term nonconscious and how it relates both to the practice of writing and subjectivity. The second point has to do with metaphors. I will start with the second in order to clarify the first. Metaphors are the stylistic and poignant literary tools that writers employ to elucidate or display emotions, feelings, ideas that could not be described in ordinary language. However, I will argue that metaphors also have a deeper association to subjectivity in that they bring to surface what might otherwise be too difficult, too hidden or not entirely conscious *for the writer*. The first point regarding the nonconscious is inextricably connected to the second point on metaphors, in that the second point is dependent on the first to bring about its

⁴⁷⁶ Skorczewski, *Accident of Hope*, xxii.

existence. That is, metaphors can become the textual traces of a nonconscious affective encounter.

Assessing the relationship between metaphors and feminist theory and criticism, Nancy Miller's meditations are worth quoting at length:

metaphors are to be taken very seriously, and they still appeal to me as an economical way both to theorize outside of systems dependent on a unitary signature (allowing you to combine things that usually don't go together) and to imagine in the material of language what hasn't yet come – what might not be able to come – into social being. Although I of course do not make the claim that the use of metaphor in critical theory is specifically (essentially) feminist, I do think that metaphor, which as a figure involves a movement (displacement, transfer) of meaning, has been particularly productive for feminist utopian thought. [...] Perhaps what seems most "feminist" to me about the uses of both metaphor and narrative criticism is the self-consciousness these modes of analysis tend to display about their own processes of theorization; a self-consciousness that points to the fictional strategies inherent in all theory.⁴⁷⁷

I would like to transpose from Miller's text a few useful remarks to think about the relationship between language, embodiment and consciousness. Moreover, what effect this relationship might have on the discourse on subjectivity, when the self is here conjured as yearning a "utopian" existence, a self that is yet to come "into social being" as Miller remarks. What kind of subject do we have in mind when its author employs metaphors to transgress the confines of social conditioning? In this specific poem, Sexton's verse "this is how I want to die," locates the utopian in an afterlife. Is the suicidal impulse to be taken as a true desire, or is it another metaphorical expression for putting an end to a situation?

I suggest that in this specific poem we can unfold another story that has slipped Loizeaux's analysis, but which we can locate if the poem is considered as an auto/biographical art-writing response. The poem was written in May 1960 following

⁴⁷⁷ Miller, *Getting Personal*, xii

an abortion that Sexton undertook that same month. For a period of approximately three months, Sexton was very much preoccupied with this incident. The decision that led to an abortion was the result of a tough bargain that pivoted on whether Sexton's husband was indeed the father of her child. Middlebrook's biography indicates that she had communicated her distress to friend and poet Ruth Soter who tried to offer her spiritual guidance by sending her a small crucifix as a gift. This gesture from Ruth became the material for the poem "Mercy for the Greedy" which was also written in May 1960 along with "The Abortion." Middlebrook notes how "Mercy for the Greedy" exemplifies Sexton's relationship to religion:

Sexton sets up two parallel kinds of "mercy": the one available to Ruth through religious practices, and the one she herself achieves through writing poetry. Both derive their power from confession. Ruth's practice has been codified: her rebirth, through the sacrament of baptism, assures that she can gain absolution from sin through the sacrament of confession, and reunite herself with Spirit through the sacrament of communion. This kind of mercy is not – or is not yet – available to Sexton: "I detest my sins and I try to believe/in The Cross. [...] But I can't. Need is not quite belief."⁴⁷⁸

I quote Middlebrook at length since the material of "Mercy for the Greedy" makes its way into "The Starry Night" in similar form. Structurally, both poems switch from 'statement to metaphor' which for Middlebrook requires 'quite a different method of reading to get at the meanings [...] It requires [...] alertness to a multiplicity of connections latent in the signs on the page. Like Soter's cross, Sexton's metaphors are vehicles of Spirit.'⁴⁷⁹ However, it will not suffice to figure Sexton's work through the lens of identification as such a process involves a very conscious way of perceiving one's image as a reflection of someone else. While writing can eventually lead to such a state of consciousness, the desire to respond to a work of art

⁴⁷⁸ Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 122-123.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

necessitates that affective information reach the subject on a nonconscious level, created by a two-way communication between Sexton and the painting. The encounter with a work of art creates the conditions of an affective engagement that often entails recourse to images, memories, lived experiences, emotions, sensations, archaic inscriptions and metaphors to express the encounter.

Loizeaux's reading tests these metaphors under the lens of ekphrasis. She interprets Sexton's verses "no flag,/no belly,/ no cry" as matching death to a state of transcendence where "no cry" is a metonymy for no pain, and "no flag" a metaphor for leaving no sign.⁴⁸⁰ The metaphor "no belly" is here left unattended. Sexton's desire to split from her life with no trace, no mark of having lived (no flag) and no relationship to suffering (no cry) is clearly demonstrated. However, it is the metaphor of "no belly" that reveals the root of this desire. Sexton's desire is not so much the desire for suicide, as Loizeaux suggests, but a desire to put an end to the torment that comes with abortion, an issue that Loizeaux circumvents.

Literary critic Shoshana Felman remarks that traumatic experience can often be too difficult to recall and might require that 'people tell their stories (which they do not know or cannot speak) through others' stories.'⁴⁸¹ Felman argues that writing which attempts to convey trauma 'cannot be simply remembered, it cannot simply be "confessed": it must be testified to, in a struggle shared between a speaker and a listener to recover something the speaking subject is not – and cannot be – in possession of.'⁴⁸² The idea of testimony as a shared struggle resonates with Bracha L. Ettinger's framing of aesthetic experience as an event that can offer the circumstances for trauma to be processed. Ettinger argues that 'trauma's transformed

⁴⁸⁰ Loizeaux, *Poetry and the Visual Arts*, 116.

⁴⁸¹ Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 18.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 16.

affectability in wit(h)nessing in/by art,’ may provide ways to examine both transgenerational and personal trauma in ways that hold ‘ethical and even therapeutic consequences.’⁴⁸³

Encountering an artwork can then provide the means for a creative response to arise and for traumatic experience to be shared. Ettinger provides a framework to envision ‘new possibilities for affective apprehending,’ possibilities that can also create ‘new artistic effects where aesthetics converges with ethics even beyond the artist’s intentions or conscious control.’⁴⁸⁴ Sexton’s poem should be considered as a distinct form of art-writing that provides an auto/biographical response, a “wit(h)nessing in/by art,” with further consequences both for the artwork’s trauma – captured through the testimony of words and metaphors – and the subject’s attempt to convey the psychophysical impact experienced during the encounter. Such a response to an encounter with a work of art activates nonconscious inscriptions, exposed in the methodology of disclosing the unique encounter with the work, through the practice of auto/biographical art-writing. Corporeal affective responses to an encounter with aesthetics weave psychophysical experience into narratives as a way to confront and negotiate trauma. As this process is not necessarily always a conscious mechanism, exploring metaphors and images within the work may lead to a reading that locates traces of the uniqueness of the subject narrating and the artwork being narrated. Perhaps, as Erica Jong hopes, Sexton’s poems ‘will be understood in time – not as “women’s poetry” or “confessional poetry” – but as myths that expand the human consciousness.’⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸³ Ettinger, “Wit(h)nessing Trauma,” 148.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Erica Jong, “Remembering Anne Sexton”.

CHAPTER THREE

Love Is What You Fear: Reading Tracey Emin with Hélène Cixous

After the Movie

*My friend Michael and I are walking home arguing about the movie.
He says that he believes a person can love someone
and still be able to murder that person.*

*I say, No, that's not love. That's attachment.
Michael says, No, that's love. You can love someone, then come to a
day*

*when you're forced to think "it's him or me"
think "me" and kill him.*

*I say, Then its not love anymore.
Michael says, It was love up to then though.*

*I say, Maybe we mean different things by the same word.
Michael says, Humans are complicated: love can exist even in the
murderous heart.*

*I say that what he might mean by love is desire.
Love is not a feeling, I say. And Michael says, Then what is it?*

*We're walking along West 16th Street — a clear unclouded night —
and I hear my voice
repeating what I used to say to my husband: Love is action, I used to
say to him.*

*Simone Weil says that when you really love you are able to look at
someone you want to eat and not eat them.*

Janis Joplin says, take another little piece of my heart now baby.

*Meister Eckhart says that as long as we love images we are doomed
to live in purgatory.*

– Marie Howe, excerpt from the poem *After the Movie*.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁶ Mary Howe, *The Kingdom Of Ordinary Time* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 21-22.

The catalogue of Tracey Emin's first major retrospective *Love Is What You Want* sits on my shelf.⁴⁸⁷ It has been sitting quietly and beautifully patient in its ivory purity for a while now – coming up to three years soon – a long while. It forces me to reflect. I fear it. I fear her work, I fear the artist. The title confronts me like an omen. A supercilious prophecy that reads: love is what you want. The curse of a life, the unbearable knowledge of what living is often reduced to: Love. I hold it and I am held captive. When I am held I can open up. About half way through this mortal life, I realise that the more one lives, the more courage it takes to open up the past than it takes to unfold a future. There is no easy way to go about love and its loss. There is no carved out path of a promised journey. *Per aspera ad astra*. It's through hardship that one gets to the stars. In the case of love, it is in retrospect, after the hardship, that one can experience the universe afresh. Emin's catalogue holds a new experience, a retrospective encounter with the retrospective exhibition. There is a small, hastily scribbled inscription on the top-right corner of the first page. It reads:

*To a Happy New Year
& New Associations.
2011.*

The scribble looks upset. It resembles a medical prescription – frustrated, barely legible and rushed out with no trace of feeling. What emotionally depleted human could possibly inscribe such a detached, stiff and sterile sentence unto the page of a book soaked with emotions? Perhaps it's a natural reaction, even a wise one. To balance out an excess of feelings one should react with no feelings at all.

⁴⁸⁷ Tracey Emin, *Love Is What You Want*, catalogue of exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, 18 May – 29 August 2011 (London: Hayward Publishing, 2011).

As writers we were both trained to be unemotional in our criticism. We heard whispers of how certain texts were very “well-written” but not chiselled enough to be made employable in the ranks of com-*man*-ding theory. Emotions obscure and distort perception. Our criticism would be skewed or altogether hindered. Or, far worse, it would be weak.

There is some truth in this equation but it all depends on what side of criticism you are. Critics that construe emotions as weakness employ the literary powers of distance and generalization. They find that emotional and personal approaches to criticism may be interpreted as judgments, statements of taste or personal accounts of the self in relation to the object, rather than accounts of how the object transforms the worlds it encounters. Yet, this world is varied and made up of distinct individuals, and so, when we looked at the work, he and I saw, felt and thought very different things. He liked to see patterns and repetitions and trace them back and forth from history to the present. To some extent, using these calculations, he was able to predict the future. A clairvoyance without criticality, a future reproductive of the past, a future that, in this respect, is rendered successful. It is this sort of fortune telling that contradicted what the founder of our department, Professor Irit Rogoff, was patiently and militantly trying to instil in all of us: the recognition of ‘the limitations of one’s thought for one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old, otherwise one is simply adding information rather than rethinking a structure.’⁴⁸⁸

Inevitably, the way we loved at the time, and the way we exercised our criticality were very similar. Every relationship we carried out followed the same pattern: desire to self-destruction. We learnt nothing new; we followed the same

⁴⁸⁸ Irit Rogoff, “What is a Theorist,” in *The State of Art Criticism*, Eds. Michael Newman and James Elkins (Taylor & Francis e-library, 2007), 99.

structure of what we knew both of love and criticism. We were both stuck because we didn't know how to effectively risk all that we had learnt. Plus, there was the fear of failure. Fear is the main obstacle to any growth – be it thinking, feeling or loving. Following a structure might be easier, but it does not produce change. And it certainly does not undo the self, the self's ability to love and to be critical.⁴⁸⁹

I would tell him that criticism was an act of love. That in order to be critical one must love, and in order to love, one must abandon power. The problem was that we were both held locked in the delusion that power came with critical distance, and we locked our audiences in the illusions afforded by universal statements borrowed from other voices. We had sedated the ability to tap into our vulnerabilities, our fragility, our weaknesses and the complexity of our emotions. It's what the structure demanded in order for us to effectively relate to that which is outside the self. A self that was lacking a personal voice, body, background or identity. A sort of relation without a self. This was all well and acceptable in terms of art criticism, but it didn't fare so well when the self related to real people. We sensed that we were orchestrating a scam of some sort, that people would soon figure out that our statements were not our own but ideas borrowed and repeated in their fullest intensity. A performance. We never stopped believing that love was the very stuff of attentive and subjective criticism. Subjective criticism is not personal criticism,

⁴⁸⁹ This extract is inspired by Rogoff's account of a theorist being "one who has been undone by theory". Rogoff is here trying to establish a relation between loss, 'giving up', 'moving away', 'being without' as fundamental to the production of not only new knowledges but alternative configurations of engaging with culture that might altogether abandon critical analysis. The shift towards what Rogoff terms "criticality" bears an urgency and contemporary engagement with culture that occasionally finds itself at a loss for the right methodology. Rogoff hints at a certain type of 'theoretical articulation' preliminarily described as 'a "writing with" an artist's work rather than writing about it, a dehierarchization of the question of whether the artist, the critic, or the historian, the advertising copy-writer or the commercial sponsor, the studio or the director, has the final word in determining the meaning of a work in visual culture.' See Irit Rogoff, "What is a Theorist," in *The State of Art Criticism*, eds. Michael Newman and James Elkins (Taylor & Francis e-library, 2007), 104.

rather, it is a profound preoccupation with the experience of an artwork, an experience that can only be relayed from a unique mind-body unity and not an abstract universal objectivity. Unfortunately, by this point, there was no self left to execute such love.

Critical love and attentive criticality are fleeting experiences that necessitate an exposure of one's vulnerability to an affective encounter. The ability to surrender one's power cannot endure the test of time without liquidating the monument of the self. It's as if, for a few moments, vision is pure, senses alert, extracting, assessing, examining, steadily and patiently loving through a powerless process of understanding; not that which we *can* understand but that which is trying to make itself understood. Being in such a state of existence on a permanent basis can also lead to self-annihilation. The world is not a safe place. It is violent, vampiric and too vulgar for a state of permanent fragility. Art, on the other hand, demands our fragility. It demands our loving, living, critical attention; our sensorial and sensual faculties and an openness to affective engagement; it demands a response, be it laughter, feeling, contemplation, conversation, inspiration or writing.

Yet, most writing about art is an exercise in hermeneutics: a dry logic of unemotional geometry. For this reason, I eventually came to condone the violation of his inscription. I recognised what an enormous challenge it must have been for him to write anything at all. I imagined the circles his thoughts wreathed to extract this succinct elegy. I remembered the long hours we spent patiently computing the impossible sides of his triangular affairs. By assessing his patterns of thought and (immaterialized) action, I reached a level of dry logic forgiveness. I forgave him, this friend that doesn't add up, this friend minus the words. The man with whom I shared an entire year of excessive emotions, who is now sentencing me to a year of new

associations. I forgive him for having always carved out emotions into prescriptions. I am sure that he has forgiven me for being soaked with mine.

* * *

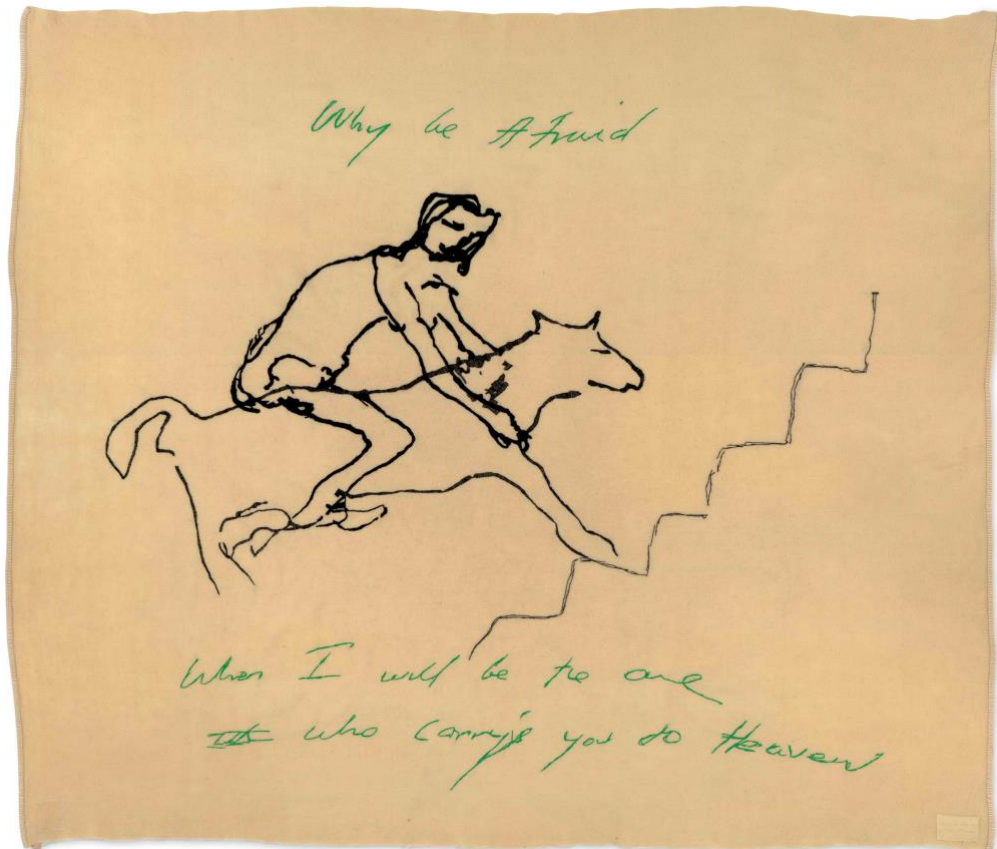


Fig. 9 Tracey Emin, *Why Be Afraid* (2009).

I know what I am looking for in this catalogue. I know because I have a desire to see – I am ready to look, to search, to unfold. I have imagined it, replayed the scene in the theatre of my mind innumerable times since she left.

We were standing in one of the large rooms of the top floor of the Hayward Gallery in London. A little pressed for time as her mother had to leave. A little pressed because I was meeting her mother. An hour late (why would I be late to such

a meeting?) I was introduced to *Mummy*. Not as a friend, not as an association, not as, rather *just as*, a baptismal name.

“*Mummy, this is Diana.*”

Standing under a larger-than-I frame, I cannot recall whether I had expressed my passion for this labor of quixotic promise that came in the form of a gentle cajole: *why be afraid...* [fig. 9] Three entire years have eclipsed since Tracey Emin weaved this question onto the fabric and into the lining of my mind. Just over two meters on each side, in a white thick wooden frame hangs a fabric embroidered with the textile of dreams. Calico cotton. *Écru, brut, naturel*. A meticulously sewed web of reverie – raw and unprocessed – the material of love locks you in a rhetorical seduction: *why be afraid?*

I wanted to tell her that the future is adventurous. A future where intergalactic journeys await those who are unafraid. That the distance from hellish Mars to those bursting stars is a mere tilt of the head. Perception, they like to call it. I am looking, eyes transfixed onto the agile body of a wolf. A wolf sewn out of threads. Or is it a dog? What do you see when you see this figure with a crooked tail ascending a flight of faint steps? It must, undeniably, be a wolf. Only a wolf can carry a girl its own size on its back. Only a wolf would know the direction to the stars. Like the wolf, I howl and curse at the moon for snatching my passenger before our journey could begin. I wanted to tell her that it’s all right to be afraid. That the stitching on the calico love was a messily scribbled testament to Hélène Cixous’ philosophy that ‘there is no love except where there is fear.’⁴⁹⁰ All love *begins* with fear. All love begins with the fearful end at its kernel.

⁴⁹⁰ Hélène Cixous, “Love of the Wolf,” in *Stigmata* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 73.

The girl sits on the wolf, torso leaning over and arms extended into a brave and gentle grasp around the furry neck. Her hands intermingle with the overcoat of the wolf's nape. It is difficult to discern where the girl ends and the wolf begins when they are stitched and folded into and unto *eachother* like an assemblage of ascending force. Who knows the direction to heaven? The girl or the wolf? For a long time, three years now, I believed that it was the wolf. I wanted to believe that it was the wolf. Perception, they call it. My perception at the time, led me to believe that it was the wolf that was howling: *why be afraid?* That this artwork involved an impassioned, stoic, protective and alert central figure of the lover (the wolf) whose main concern was the exaltation of the beloved (the girl). Blinded by my desire, I wanted so much to be that wolf, to persuasively announce: *I will be the one who carries you to Heaven!* That there is no need to be afraid because *I will be the one who carries you to Heaven.* But I never did. I never did because I never knew whether I could. I never knew, just like the wolf, where I ended, and where she began. Perception, they like to call it. Another word for perception is boundaries.

I, Me, My, Mythob(I)ography

The “I” of Tracey Emin’s work intentionally and regularly evokes the “you”. In the work *Why be Afraid* the woven text declares: ‘I will be the one.’ But who is “the one” in this work which depicts two figures. This is the one, and only, work of Emin that I have come across that contains two figures and a single “I”. Occasionally, there are a few works with other figures: Emin and a dog, Emin and a flower, Emin and her mum. All these works have clear-cut identities. Emin’s mum is clearly Emin’s

mum. The dog is clearly a dog even though it serves as a metaphor for a canine sort of relating. This was made especially clear in the drawing series *Dog Brains*. Over 800 monoprints executed in a few seconds and drawn in reverse. Emin states that these are ‘a series of self-portraits about being drunk.’⁴⁹¹ I guess being drunk really is being figured in reverse.

Even though the “I versus You” motif is present throughout most of her work, it is usually apparent where Emin herself is located, both visually and textually in the representational or textual strategy of her artwork.⁴⁹² The “I” is always Tracey. The “you” is the beloved, the enemy, society, the state, the art market. But to arrive at this binary setup, there ought to be an investigation (a story told) about where and how the “I” has been represented in her work as a single figure thus far.



Fig. 10 Tracey Emin, *Sometimes I Feel Beautiful*, 2000.

⁴⁹¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2003/jun/21/artsfeatures5>

⁴⁹² The “I versus You” motif can be considered as a mode of address and an artistic strategy frequently employed by feminist artists to expose power relations. See for instance work by the artist Barbara Kruger such as *Untitled (You Construct Intricate Rituals)*, 1981 or *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, 1981 where “you” signifies the male hero, patriarchy, the oppressor, while “I” or “my” is assigned to the female, the feminine or the objectified. Also, artist Jenny Holzer’s textual work that appears in print-based or LED panels. For instance, in the work *Survival Series 1983-1985* we read *If you had behaved nicely the communists wouldn’t exist* and also *Men don’t protect you anymore*, where “you” here signifies the fascist opposition or patriarchal nepotism. More recently, in the series *Naked in Africa*, 2014, artist Eca Eps addresses gender discrimination in Africa with photographic works that capture white text projected on a black naked female body that reads *Your God is Not My God* and *I Did Not Come From Your Rib, You Came From My Vagina*.

The protagonist is clearly represented in photographic self-portraits such as *Sometimes I feel beautiful* (2000) [fig. 10] and *I've got it all* (2000) [fig. 11]. Both are taken the same year and both capture Emin in powerful, carnal and sanguine states. In *I've got it all*, Emin is depicted with legs spread apart, sprinkled with banknotes and coins which she clutches and presses inwards onto her crotch and abdomen. I would suggest that the central themes of Emin's work stem from these two creatively informed sites of the body: the crotch and the abdomen. Through a variety of media such as photographs, video, painting and embroidery, Emin is perpetually being informed by her experience as a female artist, a female lover, and a female who has consciously rejected her body's procreative capacity.



Fig. 11 Tracey Emin, *I've Got It All*, 2000.

Traditionally, this would explain why being female, or feminine for that matter, and simultaneously being an artist were cast as oppositions. Socially speaking, a “female” requires at least some degree of adherence to the expected stereotypes of femininity, and therefore at least some of the associations that this category conjures: passive, maternal, lady-like and so forth. The “female” then contradicts the commonly accepted representation of the active, rowdy and autonomous (male) artist. In this sense, Emin is a “better” artist than she is a female, if stereotypes are to be kept in mind.⁴⁹³ Yet, Emin works with what has been traditionally encoded as feminine in the arts – women’s crafts such as weaving or women’s issues such as abortion – and repositions these traditions and issues into the sphere of art. Working against the stereotype of gender expectations, she employs the tropes of “the artist” to deconstruct notions of femininity. A femininity that is not gender specific. It could be dog-like.

Similarly, in *Sometimes I Feel Beautiful*, Emin sits in the narrow space of a foam-filled bathtub; thighs are again ajar, while this time she is being sprinkled with water descending from a showerhead. There are many associations one could make here: a baptism, a cleansing, a re-birth of a modern-day Venus in a tub. But my associations borrow from the culture I was raised in, one which is very much in a geographical proximity (and tension) to Emin’s background.⁴⁹⁴ Myth has it that when Cronus amputated Uranus’ testicles and threw them into the sea, the foam that

⁴⁹³ The art critic and theorist Jennifer Doyle notes that the public considers Emin as ‘a sort of wise female Keith Richards haloed by a mythology of debauchery, creative genius, and stamina.’ While these masculine characterisations seem to attract positive consensus, the “feminine” aspects of Emin’s work such as the confessional and the personal seem to gather more negative criticism. See Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 97 and 105-107.

⁴⁹⁴ Emin is of Turkish-Cypriot descent while I am of mixed Greek-Cypriot and Polish parentage. The Republic of Cyprus is a Mediterranean island which was invaded in 1974 by Turkish military. Since then, the north-eastern part of the island remains under Turkish occupation, with continuous discussions towards a solution through reunification or the creation of a bi-communal federation.

resulted from this colossal splash gave rise to the goddess Aphrodite on a Cypriot shore. I wonder who paid the price for Tracey's re-birth, for 'having it all' and for 'feeling beautiful.' We all found out in the video *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995) that 'Shane, Eddy, Tony, Doug and Richard' were left feeling a little emasculated by Emin's success.⁴⁹⁵

In such work, the "I" of Tracey Emin is not only clearly depicted, it is forcefully projected. Emin also announces her presence with "me" and "my" which frequently serve as substitutes for the term "I". What is significant about this observation is that "me", "my" and "I" are always represented with a female figure. None of her other work contains symbols or metaphors for representing herself. The subject always appears as the figure, head, body, headless body of a woman and/or girl.

On the other hand, dogs have provided Emin with the necessary allegorical means to create her work, specifically work about debauchery, dishevelled states and a simultaneous kind of eroticism and loyalty. But the dog also figures as the longed-for lover, the longing to love and be loved faithfully. In this respect, the dog becomes a symbol of identification, as can be seen in the red neon installation that reads: *Some Crazy Fucked Up Dog Like Hell That's How it Feels to Live without Love* (2009)

⁴⁹⁵ This video consists of footage of the town Margate which Emin grew up in. Through the use of a voice-over, Emin speaks about her sexual encounters with a number of men whilst growing up there: "I remember the first time someone asked me to grab their balls. I remember the power it gave me. But it wasn't always like that. Sometimes they'd just cum. And then they'd leave me there, wherever I was, half-naked." Emin continues the narrative with how she found dancing liberating and thought that winning a final local dance competition would be an opportunity to leave Margate behind and move to London. But, as she started to dance and people started to clap, a group of men she had slept with were shouting "Slag! Slag! Slag!" from the audience floor. Emin narrates how she left Margate anyhow, that she was "better than all of these men," and that she felt free. The video concludes with Emin dancing in a large, empty luxury flat with what seems like a view of London – a clear indication of her wealth and success. In her final words before the video documents her dancing in the flat, she refers to the boys from Margate and says: 'Shane, Eddy, Tony, Doug, Richard, this one's for you!' See the video, Tracey Emin, *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, 1995, here <https://vimeo.com/79687251>.

[fig. 12]. The neon text represents unrequited love as a dog-like infernal state, a state that Emin often alludes to in her work.



Fig. 12 Tracey Emin, *Some Crazy Fucked Up Dog Like Hell That's How it Feels to Live without Love*, 2009.

However, in encountering the work *Why be Afraid*, there seems to be a confusion between the action represented in textual form and the figures of the dog and the girl conducting the action. We expect the “I” in the phrase *Why be afraid when I will be the one to carry you to Heaven*, to take the form of the girl, since it is how Emin usually depicts herself in her work. However, as it is the dog that carries the girl on its back, the boundaries between the girl and the dog become far more enmeshed than in other depictions, and the statement *Why be afraid* is not clearly consigned to either the dog or the girl. The confusion arises because we assume that the dog is the one steering the action, the one ascending the stairs, the one carrying the girl to Heaven.

Or, at least that was what I initially expected (interpreted) from the work. I wanted this ordinary dog to take on the exceptional mystical qualities of a wolf. To smell any potential threat arriving across miles of moonlit landscapes. To be fit, strong, unafraid and ready to take lovers to the heavens. To be feared and revered. After all, doesn't everyone secretly love that which they fear? The writer Hélène Cixous has portrayed the allegorical figure of the wolf as a representation of desire, defined by a simultaneous fear and love, a proximity of pleasure with danger, or a form of pleasure that arises precisely because of the danger involved:

We love the love of the wolf. We love the fear of the wolf. We're afraid of the wolf: there is love in our fear. Fear is in love with the wolf. Fear loves. Or rather: we are afraid of the person we love. Love terrorizes us. Or else the person we love we call our wolf or our tiger, or our lamb in the manger. We are full of trembling and ready to wolf down.⁴⁹⁶

What is it that we fear when confronted with love? That love or the lover will consume us? Is it that human desire strives for self-annihilation and in that process misconstrues (replaces?) the desire for obliteration with the love of the one who most vividly reminds us of our mortality? In Cixous' passionate universe 'one must almost die in order to take pleasure in being made of flesh.'⁴⁹⁷ In this curious tale of love and fear, Cixous concludes with a subversive portrayal of the wolf. A wolf that comes to be dominated by the lamb. A sort of animal-reversal that in its anthropomorphic sense becomes a gender-reversal. How is the flesh of gender differentiated in its proximity with fatal pleasure? Is it biological sex or the expression of the feminine and masculine in narratives of love and fear, domination and subordination, fragility and strength, that define our relations to each other as

⁴⁹⁶ Hélène Cixous, "Love of the Wolf," in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 73.

⁴⁹⁷ Hélène Cixous, "What is it o'clock?," in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 52.

gendered?⁴⁹⁸ In the relation between the wolf and the lamb, Cixous argues that the lamb's self-sacrifice overwhelms and transfigures the wolf:

what the wolf loves in the lamb is its own goodness. It's thanks to the lamb that the wolf accedes to the plane of love – the love that gives of itself without hope, without calculation, without response, but that nevertheless gives of itself, seeing itself give of itself.⁴⁹⁹

By offering itself up as a sacrifice, the lamb evinces its devotion to the wolf and, precisely because of this act of exposure and vulnerability, their complete surrender to the other, the wolf comes to repudiate its own nature. The wolf renounces its savage ways, spares the lamb from being eaten, and in turn proves their love for the lamb. The story transmits the idea that love requires an act of self-abandonment and a relinquishment of one's power. Taken to an extreme manifestation, the protagonists not only contradict their nature, but they come to embody each other's essences:

The lamb loves its wolf. The wolf turns all white and starts quivering out of love of the lamb. The lamb loves the wolf's fragility, and the wolf loves the frail one's force. The wolf is now the lamb's lamb and the lamb has tamed the wolf. Love blackens the lamb.⁵⁰⁰

Emin's work *Why be afraid* appears to capture a similar narrative. The story seemed to portray a resolution where the girl/artist is finally being transported to the heavens by her own tamed wolf. Three years after my initial experience of the work, I now read this artwork from a very different perspective. It has come to symbolize

⁴⁹⁸ Susan Sellers explains that Cixous 'employs the terms masculine and feminine to distinguish between two different "economies" or modes of behavior. Whilst these economies are not dependent on anatomical sex, and can be found in varying degrees according to how the individual has negotiated their experience, Cixous suggests that because of the position women have been assigned within the socio-symbolic scheme, they are potentially closer to a feminine economy than men.' See Hélène Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, edited by Susan Sellers (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003), 131.

⁴⁹⁹ Cixous, "Wolf," 81.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

for me a figure of emancipation. Emin is both the wolf-dog and the girl in one stroke. As is clear from her previous work, Emin identifies with dogs or a dog-like nature, demonstrated in straightforward work such as the series of watercolour portraits of a dog which are entitled *Reincarnation* [fig. 13]. *Why be afraid* is then another allegorical self-portrait of the artist, a lamb and wolf in one stroke, a fear of love which has been overcome, transfigured from fear to love, lamb to wolf and vice versa.

Is there another word that can capture our experience of giving up something of ourselves in the face of an other's offering, or must it necessarily be that all love begins with fear? If all love begins with fear, does it end with indifference? Or, does it intensify and endure through the transfiguration of the lovers? Like artworks, stories will strike a different chord every time they are told. It is the nuanced details of the experience, as well as our lambish approach to the work, that can ignite alternative responses. Artworks can capture the living attention of the reader and, in their embrace, can transfigure both the perception of the work as well as the reader.



Fig.13 Tracey Emin, *Reincarnation V*, 2005.

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