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Drawing the Affiliative Look

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We draw someone’s face. Someone is sitting opposite us and we draw his or her face. We draw the eye, the nose, the mouth; we become unreasonably fixated on the corner of the mouth, where the mouth merges into ‘face,’ or perhaps we become engaged with the maze of the ear, marking, shading, scratching, smudging, erasing, re-marking. We shift our gaze to the whole, to the image we’ve created, becoming the artist-as-viewer. We may be recognising the image as the particular person opposite us, we may be seeing elements that are not mimetic but that nevertheless seem to reveal us a certain essence of the person opposite.

Alternatively, we may be dissatisfied with the portrayal, and the portrait as object before us, and we return to the layered act of mark-making and erasing. Like W. G. Sebald’s protagonist, the fictional artist Max Ferber in The Emigrants (1996), we may be struggling with the elusiveness of portrayal by our continuous marking and erasing. For Max Ferber, the particles created by his erasures are ‘the true product of his continuing endeavours and the most palpable proof of his failure’ (Sebald, 1996, p. 161); Ferber’s dust, as an outcome of his artistic inquiry and testimony to the impossibility of his attempts at representation, itself becomes the object of art.

Attempts at capturing a presence seem to inevitably involve its absence. Drawing and its processes offer a space for negotiating the relationship between the two. Both John Berger (1985, p. 146) and Jacques Derrida (1993, p. 39) – the first comfortable with the language of drawing, the second at odds with his lack of draughtsmanship – write of their compulsion to draw their parent at the time of death. How is it that drawing offers itself within such a private moment? Perhaps at such a time, drawing ‘draws out’ intimacy, as a place that allows for ‘touching’ the subject when actual touch is at once desired and confronting. What is it about drawing that is so simple and immediate, yet so powerful in meaning that it can substitute for words, even for the wordsmith? Drawing is at once descriptive and experiential; as Berger notes, the nature of drawing is that it reveals the process of its own making, its own looking; even an unaccomplished drawing reveals the process of its own creation (1985, p.149). Despite the frustration with his drawing, I speculate that Derrida’s temptation to draw his dying mother was not only to capture her likeness, but to capture his sight of her, alive before death; to touch her alive through the touch or trace of sight.

Familial Looks and Postmemory

In her study of family photographs, Marianne Hirsch (1997) explores the presence of familial looks that are not only to do with inherited likenesses, but with the exchange of looks involved in the family album photograph. Expanding on Roland Barthes’s ideas on photographic reference, in particular the notion that the photograph does not restore the past but attests to its having existed (1980/1981, p. 82), Hirsch presents photographs as ghostly revenants that are situated between memory and postmemory (1997, p. 20). Postmemory, she explains, is a particular way of relating to the past through an imaginative investment and creation. It ‘characterises the experiences of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated’ (1997, p. 22).

Photographs, in particular, family album photographs whose images and narratives extend well into subsequent generations, facilitate this transference. The photograph can be read as trace; as the trace of the photographed person or place, as an ‘outline’ trace of their materiality, and as the trace of time that no longer exists. It signifies both life and death, for it shows evidence of the object that was photographed and at the same time, we recognise the sense of the ‘ça a été’, the ‘having-been-there’ of the photograph that creates the sense of loss in the viewing (1997, p. 20). It both blocks memory because it is not reviving a recollection, and at the same time attests to its past reality (1997, p. 82).

For Hirsch, the function of the photograph as postmemory is to mediate between the past and present. Photographs, she proposes, can connect first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmemory, for they represent what has been and what no longer is, but also what continues to be from the position of those who are viewing (1997, pp. 22-23).
What is particularly meaningful in family photographs beyond documentation is not in representation, but in the performative function of the ‘affiliative’ gaze. ‘The affiliative look’ is a term that Hirsch uses to argue that there is a particular kind of viewing identification with the familial image:

Recognizing an image as familial elicits ... a specific kind of readerly or spectatorial look, an affiliative look through which we are sutured into the image and through which we adopt the image into our own familial narrative. It is idiosyncratic, untheorizable: it is what moves us because of our memories and our histories, and because of the ways in which we structure our own sense of particularity. (p. 93)

When the Italian artist Roberto Cuoghi portrayed his self-as-his-father (c.1998) he was arguably using the site of portraiture as an enactment of postmemory. In a performative depiction, Cuoghi, at the age of twenty-five, assumed his father’s persona for the duration of a year. He dyed his hair grey, grew a beard, put on weight, wore his father’s clothes, and adopted his father’s gestures, rhythm, and habits throughout the year. Very little documentation exists of this performance; its product is the lived experience of Cuoghi and all who encountered him during this time, and in the lore that remains (Cerizza, 2008).

When I first read of Cuoghi’s performative ‘portrayal’ his act of transformation raised for me numerous questions relevant to my own portraits. Who is the ‘portrait’ of? Whose gaze is the viewer witnessing? Whose essential truth is being referred to, Cuoghi’s or his father’s? Is the purpose of this transformation to authenticate, or at least locate, the essence of another by enacting or copying the other? Is this a living attempt to arrest time in a synthesis of past, present and future? I recognised that Cuoghi’s experiment was a ‘portrayal’ that speculates rather than fixes.

As an experiment that internalises the familial gaze through an enactment of postmemory, Cuoghi’s ‘portrayal,’ I believe, is able to move the ‘observer’ (or ‘reader’) through an affiliative gaze – or thought – of identification. This is not a gaze that is restricted to ‘knowledge’ of, or about, the subject, but one in which identification is aligned with the particular intimacy of a familial look or exchange of looks. The affiliative look is defined by its collective sense of intimacy and familiarity, and it is the search for recognition of experience rather than recognition of identity that guides the artistic choices in the portraits of my own practice.

My work sources the personal — family photographs, traces of tactile imprints, the reactive gesture — to explore possibilities beyond the familial, of portrayal as a particular way of mutual looking. In the portraits I will be presenting here, my use of the familial relationship of my subjects involving the photograph, the photocopy, and drawing, proposes a construction not only of a singular familial subjectivity, but of a relational portrait that is simultaneously self and other.
From Photograph to Portrait

The processes of my artistic production may be said to be using the image as a process of thought. The portraits in this body of work comprise two referents – one whom I term the sitter, who has come to my studio to sit for the portrait. The other part of each portrait is the photograph of a parent or child of the sitter, from a time beyond the perimeters of this project. In self-critique, I ask how can I use the photograph as a portrayal equal in human presence to the sitter whose presence I have experienced beyond the image? In answer, I remind myself that it is not the essence of the human behind the photograph that I am portraying, but the image of an absent person whom I know has a presence in some way through their relationship with the person visiting my studio. The portrait is relational; it comprises my relationship to the sitter and the image, in knowledge of and identification with the relationship between the two subjects. I am attempting to portray particularity not so much within the facial features or expression of the person depicted, but in what the image of the person evokes within my own artistic narrative. I am using the photographed image within my creative narrative in a relationship to the image as animated, as alive. Roland Barthes describes his relationship to a photograph that moves him:

*It animates me, and I animate it. So that is how I must name the attraction which makes it exist: an animation. The photograph itself is in no way animated (I do not believe in ‘lifelike’ photographs), but it animates me: this is what creates every adventure.*

(1980/1981, p. 20)

Mine is not only a visual relationship with the photograph, but a material relationship with the transferal of the photograph as I have seen it, to the paper as I re-produce that image physically/materially. With that manipulation of the image, and its subsequent relationship with the sitter’s image, I hope to have created a space that offers another relationality – that of the viewer’s. The Image; the Photocopy

Materially, the photograph presents me with the stillness of past time captured. The photocopy of the photograph becomes a tool for thought. It presents me with possibilities for present and future imaging and imagining. The copy of the photograph is transferred by hand onto paper, at times in several layers with differing manipulations. What is left is the trace of the photograph. It is the trace of the photograph, which had the trace of the subject, captured at one particular time and place.

By using the (photo)copy, I am not aiming for a representation of the absent referent, nor for a representation of the photograph. My intent, rather, is to release the referent from the context of photograph to a new imagery, in order to interact with him or her as animated presence. One could say that I am setting up a challenge – to diffuse the ‘deadness’ of the posed subject, to diffuse the distant ‘other’, both through my material interactions, and/or by the relational positioning of that image to the image of the sitter. It is the continual interaction that contributes to that presence, by interacting not with the ‘pose’, that is the face’s expression or place, but
with the evocation that dialogue with a human face as subject can bring up. The copy mediates between the ‘real’ stilled subject and myself as artist because the image comes alive as subject in my narrative, and my artistic process of production.

In this way, the portrait is not the iconic object that has a life-presence of its own, nor does it represent the uniqueness or essence of the person outside the portrait. Rather it becomes a site of visual culture, of mediation and negotiation, a site of relationality. It is therefore, I suggest, a site of collective presence in subject, material production and viewing production. In the words of Susan Buck-Morss (2004), the task for perception in visual culture ‘is not to get behind the image surface but to stretch it, enrich it, give it definition, give it time’ (p. 25).

**Drawing Time**

Memory and recognition are integral to looking, for what we see at a particular moment in time is the result of multiple previous momentary appearances (Berger, 1985, pp. 148-149). For John Berger, the stillness of a drawing encapsulates the traces of many glances – assembled moments – seen together as a whole rather than as fragments.

Berger claims that drawing presupposes a particular view of time, different to the captured moment of the photographic image. The drawn image reveals the experience of looking, and thereby, through its process critiques appearances. Whereas the photograph has stopped time, the drawing reveals the process of its own creation, and thus encompasses time (1985, p. 149). It is this ability of drawing to expose the artist’s visual and material exploration that opens up possibilities for the affiliative gaze of the viewer beyond identification with the representation as image. For this reason, drawing offers a space for return. The photograph, as Barthes has argued, is evidence for what was. In the experiential space that drawing offers, the subjective familial gaze of the artist can become the affiliative gaze of entry. When we as viewers take the time to stop and enter the time-space of a drawing, we can move within it, rather than move the image in our memory within our lives as we do with photographic images (Berger, 1985).

The use of the photographic image in my work began a number of years ago as an attempt to rid myself of what I felt was an idiosyncratic style of drawing. At the time, I was drawing the dead head of a calla lily, chosen for its shrivelled form that resembled the dynamics of a human body. Drawing this object, stilled at the end of its process of dehydration as if in mid-movement, evoked an expressionistic drawing reaction that I felt was more revealing of me than my object of contemplation. My gestures seemed to be creating a boundary between me and my subject. Or rather, the futurity of my subject, for I felt that my subjectivity was interfering with my ability to relate freshly and progressively to the object I was drawing.
Transferring the photographic image of the object was a strategy for placing on the paper the stilled presence of reality, which I could animate in my drawing. I chose the most available means of doing so by ‘photographing’ the lily in a photocopier and transferring the image onto paper. Needless to say, the result, as a transferral by hand, was not an objective or ‘still’ image.

My current work continues to explore this way of experiencing the image and the subject, the paradoxes of the animated and the still. The emphases of my rubbing, the amount of solvent used, the layers of photocopies, the different toner qualities within the photocopies, the texture of my paper, the speed with which the wet photocopy is lifted off the paper — all the materials, actions and considerations of the process do not result in an objective image, but in a new kind of subjectivity. I am able to use the photograph as image, as evidence of a time that was, and at the same time approach it materially as a drawing.

The Autonomy of Marks: Chance and intentionality

This process of drawing offers the viewer a way into a relationship with the subject and the artist by identifying with its material process. Justine Clark (1995) expands on the performance role of viewing by reflecting on the meaning of accidental smudges and smears in architectural drawings, which, like portraits, refer to a body outside the representation. When unintentional marks such as smudges and smears appear on architectural drawings, they refer to the actions of process (whether on the building site or the office desk) rather than to the building represented. Smudges that are the consequences of action and do not describe in the sense of re-presenting also involve action in the viewing experience, promoting an ‘involved viewer, one who constructs and is constructed and stained by the image’ (Clark, 1995, p. 4).

Clark claims that by suggesting the accidental, smudges disrupt figurative representation, interrupting the representational continuity of the image (1995, p. 1). Chancerelated smudges, and similarly smudges that are the result of erasures, stand out as ‘counter image’ to the figure/object represented. These smudged marks are ambiguous, for they are ill defined, shifting and slipping between line, blur and erasure, between presence and absence.
According to Clark, the clouded image of the smudge directs us to the materiality of the drawing, so that the drawing itself exists as an architectural object as well as the representation of an object. She likens the paper to a body, on which the smudge leaves its caress of matter, and on which the pressure of erasure bruises.

The notion of paper as body describes the sensual possibilities of paper, as a ‘surface of bruises and blushed, tinges and scars’ (Clark, 1995, p. 4). In my work, the ‘residue of body’ that Clark refers to extends from the marks of the hand that mediates sight, to the body of the subject who leaves the trace of skin directly onto the paper to perform the image (MotherDaughter II, his). At other times, the paper as body rubs (the photocopy transfer), scratches and is scratched (sandpaper), absorbs through its surface, and covers (FatherDaughter).

In terms of the portrait, the materiality of the drawing in the process of at once looking and touching can be said to provide the ‘ça a été’ as a sensory, material witness to presence—the traces of the artist’s response to the subject’s presence: In Clark’s words, ‘the coincidence of touch and visuality, material and theory’ (1995, p. 4). Drawing as evidence of its own making, as evidence of the way an object is being seen or examined, offers the image to be shared, rather than discovered. Recognition is instant. Examination of sight takes time (Berger, 1985, p. 150).

Ambiguity in Gesture and Meaning; Ambiguity in the decipherable mark

The marks that occur in my work are not accidental, although chance has a say into their outcome. A space is created for marks involving chance, and opportunities are followed up. The marks are not accidental in their intent—rather in their demarcation. How can chance marks figure beyond description of themselves, or beyond decoration as representation, as contributions to the presence of the portrait as form without necessarily deferring to mimesis? Does ambiguity of mark help or hinder recognition in the portrait? Ambiguity exists in the materiality of drawing; colour that is also line, drawing that is also painting; stains and marks that both seduce and repel (Burton, 2005). As discussed above, one of the ways in which marks become ambiguous is when their meaning shifts between representation and non-representation.

Following Derrida’s (1993) ideas on the blindness of drawing, marks that are representational in intent can paradoxically emphasise absence, while non-representational marks that are traces of action exist as evidence of presence. There is ambiguity too in the representational mark as blind, as lifeless, and the blurred or undecipherable mark of potential—the potential to be imagined. The eye of the sitter/subject, drawn from life in its full representation, marks something that no longer exists in body and in time. It is a mark of loss. It represents a past engagement with the living eye, the stillness of a particular time that is frozen in the representation, and it represents one viewpoint. Moreover, as Derrida points out, when we exchange a look...
or gaze with another, we lose sight of the body of the eye, whereas when there is no reciprocal exchange, we are more engaged with the eye as form: 'This body of the eye ... I can easily stare at in a blind man' (1993, p. 106). The blurred or 'incomplete' eye, on the other hand, is open to be constructed imaginatively.

This ambiguity in the perception of presence suggests a subject positioning that Homi Bhabha (1996) theorises when he writes of the 'narrative address' in art, where narrative is the discourse of self-disclosure, the production of subjects and the positioning of spectators. When a portrait is non-essentialist and performatory, it invites the spectator to negotiate the subjectivity of vision, poetry, and memory. The spectator becomes an integral part of the identity of the portrait, not by recognising the specific individual behind the portrait, but through recognising a relational experience of identification – through the mark-making or artistic medium, through openness or transience of image, or 'deferred' image, through concept and poetic imagination.

Portraits can show us how others represent themselves, and can mirror us through representations of others, but further, can also construct a space for human interaction. The visuality and materiality of the portrait that involves the face, the body, the artist's gestures, the texture and trajectory of the mark and stain, the contrasts and diffusion of light in a photograph, and so forth, provide visual signs that construct the relationship between the viewer and the subject in art 'prior to language': The triangulated engagement of artist, subject and viewer with subjectivity, is in large part the result of the artist's thinking, where that thinking is visual and not based on language (Soussloff, 2006, pp. 120-122). The approach I have presented to the portrait through the act of drawing involves this simultaneous exchange between artist, subject and viewer, offering an affiliative look of identification that mediates through the sitter/subject and the materiality of drawing to a potential viewing that is both animated and intimate.
References


