

## Threads of In-between

There's something in *The Sinthome*, one of Lacan's last seminars, which may relate to the question of the signifier basis of one's painting & drawing practice – I link the two mediums together for convenience although of course there are permanent differences – and how it runs along, both the diversity of signifiers employed and the practice as a single entity, at the expense of the Symbolic. This is the crux of the problem; that the signifier or image basis (roughly using Semiotics' mode of structuring language) that one identifies, and identifies with, through indexical characteristics of the medium such as erasure, trace, surface, texture, tools' marks and abrasiveness, etc., often overrides the work's tendency towards symbolisation that can convey meaning to the work's viewer. What may be suggested in the seminar is that instead of the Symbolic providing a rationale for the signifier basis, the rationale can come from somewhere else. (It would be convenient to say that the *somewhere else* is the Real, but Lacan states that of the three registers, Imaginary, Symbolic, Real, the Real is the one of them that has no direct connection with the body, when one's bodily involvement seems so essential to one's practice.) This suggestion of the rationale coming from somewhere other than the Symbolic means that language, no matter whether linguistic or of another sensory domain, cannot be expected to make transparent sense because it is underpinned by indeterminate factors. In the Lacanian context such factors may be said to be unconscious. In the following paragraphs, in which 'Node Bo' is a name he has given to his extensive play with the Borromean knot during this period of theoretical investigation, Lacan is referring to the language of speech and its transformation as writing – but in terms that may also be considered analogous to visual language:

Truth be told, the Node Bo in question completely changes the sense of writing. It affords this writing an autonomy, one that is all the more remarkable given that there is another form of writing, one that results from what one might call a precipitation of the signifier. Derrida has insisted on this form of writing, but it's quite clear that I showed him the way, as is already indicated amply by the fact that I didn't find anything else to support the signifier besides writing a capital S.

What remains, however, is that the signifier, that is to say, that which is modulated by the voice, has nothing to do with writing. This in any case is what is demonstrated perfectly by my Node Bo, and this changes the sense of writing. It shows that there is something to which one can fasten signifiers. How then does one fasten these signifiers to it? Well, through the intermediary of what I call *dit-mention*.

Once again, because I'm not altogether sure that this hasn't escaped your notice, I'm going to write it down – *mention du dit*, the mention of what is said.

This way of writing has one advantage, which is that it enables *mention* to be extended into *mentionge*, into *mendation*, which indicates that what is said is on no account necessarily true. (2016: 124-5)

Lacan is referring to a kind of language that has a preponderance of signifiers. The present suggestion may be that painting as a language now also tends to have a preponderance of visual signifier equivalents, due to the adaptation to it of semiotic and philosophical discourse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present time. While one may consider what Lacan is suggesting of language that this is how the situation *is*, it should be born in mind that a generic idea will have emerged from what in the seminar is a question of illness manifest in and as language, particularly in the context of the literary language of James Joyce and what Lacan feels it can tell him about the Joyce's psychic condition. Lacan states:

How is it that any of us can help feeling that the words on which we depend are in some sense imposed on us?

It is precisely in this respect that he who is called ill sometimes goes further than he who is called a man of sound mind. Rather, the question is why a normal man, a man said to be normal, doesn't notice that speech is a parasite, that speech is a veneer, that speech is a form of cancer that afflicts the human being? (2016: 78)

However, importantly, Lacan is also suggesting that it is not simply the signifier basis

at the expense of the other components that make up signification, but that something other works as the 'intermediary'.

Lacan then states:

[...] these Bo Nodes gives an idea of how they support an osseous matter, which in turn is sufficiently suggestive of something that on this occasion I shall call the *osbject*.

This is indeed what characterizes the latter that I match to this *osbject*, namely the letter *a*. I reduce the *osbject* to this lowercase *a* precisely in order to indicate that the latter does no more than testify, occasionally, to the introduction of a form of writing as *autre* with a lowercase *a*, as other'. (2016: 125)

The term osseous means bony, of the nature or structure of bone. Would it be possible to deduce from this that the intermediary, different to the Symbolic, that holds the signifiers together in painting is the *other*; one's symptom? While the symptom, as such, may be immaterial, its object container, as it were, could be this connection with the body, osseous, within one's very bones – constitutional – which is what causes one to feel that the relatively autonomous signifiers are making some sort of sense, albeit to oneself only, hence the problem of communication of much contemporary painting.

This is a very speculative idea, but the osseous matter might in a sense be paintings' and drawings' sheer materiality, its stuff, analogous to the body, that offers the signifiers the glue that seems to attribute them with sense, even though the signifiers themselves may or may not have connections with and relevance to the body. In any case, there may have to be something other than the steady stream of signifiers to provide a structure, if not through their subjugation to the sign and signification. This is where there may need to be an alternative theoretical basis to the completion of the signifier component through its alliance with signified to create meaning, Saussure's Semiotics having been the theory that Lacan modified to prioritise the signifier in a ratio of elements of language where the resulting sign has a degree of parallel to the Symbolic in his psychological structure.

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The Lacanian mirror, through its continual theorization eventually becoming the Other, links well with an explanation by Foucault of the mirror as an example of a 'heterotopia'. Levinas, in contrast to Lacan and Foucault, regards one's relation with the Other as a relation of 'responsibility' – in more general terms as a matter of ethics. The difficulty with Levinas, as opposed to Lacan and Foucault, is that is not so easily extend his theory of Other to that of the object. Likewise, it is difficult to apply Lacan and Foucault's approach to the Other to the question of responsibility. However, I have a sense of an idea of Levinas that the image-value of an art object is a projection out from its constituent *inwardness*. Certainly, a property of inwardness of the Other is shared by all three of these authorities.

The emphasis of my own drawing-based visual work always returns to the question of space/surface paradox. In this respect I owe it to myself to attend to an essential value of both painting and drawing. It's not that I have to think much about this, since it was an outcome of one's training, a matter of visual art's *goodness*– to allude to Levinas – albeit in a sense limited to and by certain conceptions of what art is and can be, and one's reciprocal response by being good. It is a collective ethics gained from a combination of what was once taught me and I've subsequently developed through sensory awareness and conceptual understanding. Over the years this has configured in my own personal terms that basically do not disagree with the notion that space and surface have to be locked in a manner of both intimacy and conflict, where one flirts with, worries over and occasionally broadens the boundaries. To flirt, worry, and broaden are modes of approach for, against and with the Other that do have their relevance, in different ways, to the work of the authorities.

The term *authority* might in fact be the key: responsibility to oneself and through one's actions, according to whom, or according to whatever pervading model. In the earlier phase of Lacan's structuring of the human subject as *subject*, the Other seems to *be* authority, an abstract all-pervasive value within and of the psyche that permeates language and all its manifestations in its broadest sense; perhaps everything. Without supporting theoretical reference, this can only be my own opinion of a role of the Other, which, even if it were close to what Lacan means, will

have developed in Lacanian theory and left me behind, as it were, with my struggles to argue and demonstrate how my sense of responsibility to myself reflects assumptions of responsibility in general.

If I can convey a sense of lifting of the surface of forms within the space of the yard sufficiently from their delineations I might be able to convey a sense of release from between them of an in-between. This sense of gap might then be analogous to what in Lacan is the split between oneself and the Other, and in Levinas the mysteriousness of the Other of which one is in relation, without its being anything tangible such as a person or thing. This relates to a street artist I have observed, who paints images on public walls in order to attract the interest of the waiting car drivers, ostensibly, even if the ostensible is a matter of livelihood, to pick up tips, Figure 1.



Figure 1: Street artist working on wall art and turning to encourage tips from drivers of cars waiting at traffic lights © Michael Croft, 2021

As possibility suggested by the photo pair, while working on the wall images with his back to his audience, the artist's representations of the city gaze out, as it were, towards the drivers and attract their attention. If the term gaze were not so philosophized, one might assume it as used in the aforementioned context as a poetic way of talking about projection. What does show itself projecting in the images is a relatively realistic spatial rendering of views of a city – two of them, to be precise, side-by-side – that battle against the unwillingness of the wall as sheer surface to cooperate. Then both within and extending the work's pictorial characteristics, there are some indexical features, such as the forming of shapes in the background of the left-hand view that question whether they are clouds or vegetation, and a sense of affinity of the work, stylistically, with the shadow-play of surrounding objects such as tree and traffic light and the corrosion of the redundant expanse of wall underneath. These features combine and contribute, gazing or projecting out from the image,

therefore, in additional ways to attract their viewer's curiosity all the more significantly, if unconsciously, Figure 2.



Figure 2: Street artist's finished artwork © Michael Croft, 2021

Levinas does have things to say about the non-utilitarian function of the image detached from its role in relation to the object, which I need, inasmuch as this is a manifestation of otherness as responsibility. More obviously, however, what can be

seen in the street art photo pair, Figure 1, the question of Other in the Levinas sense may be engaged when the artist turns and steps into the void space between himself and the waiting traffic.

In relation to the question of responsibility, these photos convey that the artist's work has given him a reason to engage with the waiting drivers, and be engaged by whatever takes place between them. It is as though the Other were made manifest as an invisible holographic illusion; the wall art itself as the two-dimensional image, refracted by the interference pattern formed by the oscillation between the artist and the drivers, to form the Other in the void space between the two tangible operators. The Other is out there, in a sense, invisibly occupying an otherwise redundant space made cogent by its presence. While the drivers unwittingly participate in the artist's *Other* drama, they'll have their own dramas that may or may not link with the situation. In any case, it may be ventured that there's a degree of encouragement towards goodness in the situation; an offering of an image invested with creativity, even a kind of passion, in and towards the likely return of human charity. This hypothetical anecdote is a reading of the situation from a Levinas perspective. From the angle of Lacan, the void space is more of a split or rift in communication, while from Foucault it is perhaps the implications of otherness of the site, the fresco and its content, through its broader meanings and applications to other places and spaces.

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Practically, Foucault's '[...] I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there' is the most useful quote, the mirror being the best analogy for this positioning oneself from the return, as it were, of one's gaze. While it is not the first time I've intuitively been up against this idea of reflection back from the point or object towards which I'm looking, it's the first time I've tried to use the sense to objectify the question of responsibility. There's something primordial about the idea, however, if one considers the origin of the gaze, and the extent to which one first assumes that the object of the gaze is but oneself looking back, in and from the cot. It must be at this pre-verbal time that the origin of one's responsibility towards oneself is born, in the gradual tendency to take on board and to acknowledge to oneself that it's

primarily the mother's gaze that is looking back. Levinas refers to the 'face-to-face of the Other as not a tangible object, as such, even though an object might be a trigger. I guess visual artists deal in triggers while, one might say, nurturing the sense that the trigger is not *it*. I certainly can't say that the derelict builder's yard is *it*, but there *is* something in and about the space that offers itself, due, paradoxically, to its tendency towards *void*. Between one's discovery of being absent from where one is standing because of being projected over there into the mirror, turning around, as it were, and simultaneously viewing oneself from one's mirror view, there is not only a space but an active sense of movement; what Deleuze (2004: 41) refers to in the context of paintings of Francis Bacon Deleuze (2004, 41) as '[...] a movement "in-place," a spasm [...]' . It is this that I'm suggesting is a passage through a void, during which the perimeters of the space, whether they are oneself and one's mirror view, or oneself looking towards what is ostensibly another person or object and their simultaneously looking back, coalesce to form a third image. Such an image can be cursory, ill-defined, a phantom or wraith, or something else, but an image quite other to whatever has been the starting point, or drawn through from the previous work, that the artist struggles to find, which constitutes their responsibility. I have an earlier example of this third image emerging out of or between an image here and an image there, in the form of a drawing of a bottle hung against a mirror, where its mirror image was immediately behind itself as object, Figure 3.

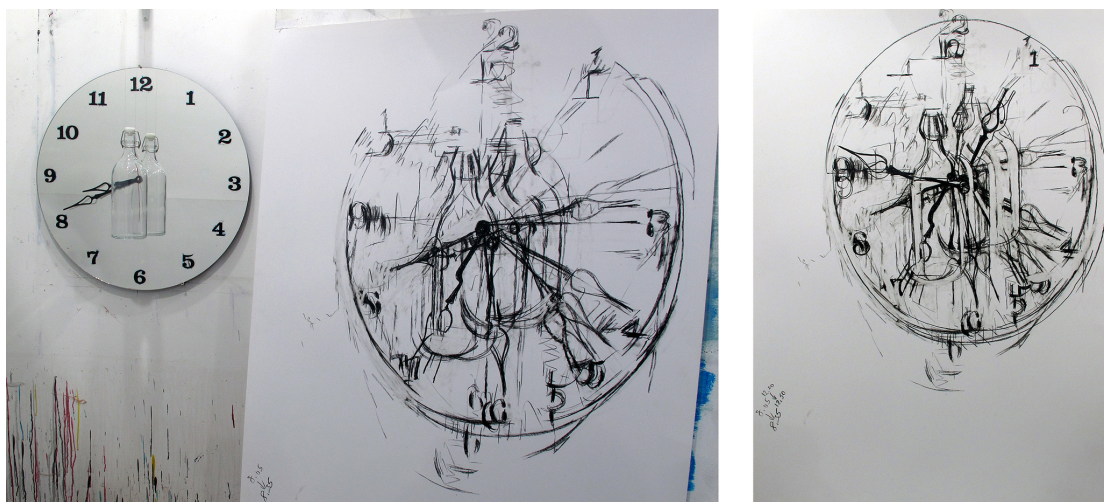


Fig 3: *Clock & Bottle 2*, state 1, photographed alongside the motif, variable dimensions

My struggle was to situate the image amidst the distracted nature of vision, if one acknowledges that the binocularity of vision and one's eyes' ever-restless



movement – had procured a phantom that would thereafter generate multiple visitations of itself in terms that oscillate in and as a middle space, Figure 4.



Fig 4: *Clock & Bottle 5*, Dermatograph pencil and black ink on white laminated cardboard + oil paint on clear plastic overlay, 79 x 110cm, 2018

## References

Deleuze, G. (2004) *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*. London; New York: Continuum

Lacan, J. (2016) *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII* (Ed. Jaques-Alain Miller) UK: Polity