

# Questions on Curating the Confessional / Rethinking Feminist Narcissism

Tags:

**#feminist narcissism**

**#auto-reflexive writing**

**#confessional writing**

**#psychoanalysis**

In a conversation between two prominent authors of auto-fiction, Chris Kraus tells Sheila Heti that she feels the basis of her literary work lies in a sort of actress' performance:

Heti: So... that means that we get our knowledge through putting our bodies through things?

CK: Exactly. As an actress, you're living something through the duration of the play and its geography. I've always seen writing the same way. It's like, somehow, I'm moving through the terrain of the book as a performer, but this time I'm transcribing.<sup>1</sup>

Though seemingly counter-intuitive, this link between acting and auto-reflexive writing is potent, and besides calling into question the much explored and debated topic of the actress' personal material (a topic reaching across fields from performance studies through ethics to ontology), it evokes investigation of what it implies to use and curate one's own life and body in order to create art. Performance art is partially rooted in the gesture of blurring the boundaries between the private person, artistic persona and performer into an often indistinguishable hybrid-subject/object. When it comes to framing the confessional work from a curatorial point of view, meaning curating the confessional work from the position outside of the experience itself, there is a point of ethical-aesthetical intersection that has to be perpetually (re-)negotiated, especially since autobiography is one of the essential modes of (artistic) expression when the speaking voice comes from positions excluded from the dominant hegemonic register.

The tension accumulates becoming both hypervisible and invisible given the rise of the auto-reflexive culture of oversharing, blogging and confessional writing online that is definitely performative:

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<sup>1</sup> Heti, Sheila „An Interview with Chris Kraus”, *The Believer*: <https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-chris-kraus/>

creating digital avatars that are and aren't the person writing, seeping into other cultural modes and terrains. Everyone is a performer online and everyone is writing their own autobiography. This culture also opened up space for amateurism and democratic inclusiveness on the one hand (though to romanticize the scope of this shift would be naïve) and brought on the surge of similar practices in professional and elite/elitist fields on the other. And while auto-modes are becoming more present across various fields, most of Academia only allows for the autobiographical to enter once one has proven worthy as author/ity. More surprisingly (or not), mainstream media also maintains a more traditionalist approach, giving freedom to incorporate elements of autobiography in journalism only to those already prominent voices. And the filter at the gates to these platforms is still mostly shaped by the dominant hegemonic order and prone to tokenism and fetishization of experiences coming from outsider positions. The historically semi-marginalized practice of confessional and autobiographical as modes of articulating lives threatened to be un-livable is entering more central spaces and it is true that a polyphony of voices has never been louder or reached further. But is the subversive potential of auto-reflexive artistic and critical practices and discourses losing its subversiveness as they are becoming institutionalized and mainstream?

And when it comes to reception, the question arises of how to critically engage with confessional art? Is the proliferation of autotheoretical modes of writing, and thinking through writing, a hybrid that best communicates with the rising awareness of identity intersections that have always been present but were historically camouflaged in discursive practices surrounding art? The relation between theory or criticism and autobiography is far from being easy to map out, it's a dynamic history of hiding and revealing the authorial, authoritative, authoritarian (behind the) voice, gaining new strength recently with the expanding presence of autotheory and new essayistic modes of writing as well as new spaces and technologies for expression.

"Do you feel you expose yourself in your critical work, I mean... how much of your own person do you feel shows in your reviews?" an artist asked me during a panel discussion on criticism, adding: "I'm also a psychologist." Obviously, I enjoy exposing myself whenever given the opportunity (which is rarely), but I'm also wary of how this mode of self-exposure also can serve to deflect responsibility for one's writing, how it can profit from the fetishization of supposed *honesty* that is often used as a defense mechanism and shield against criticism, and depending on the artist and work discussed could even write *over* works and perspectives coming from less privileged positions. Authenticity is valued, as well as vulnerability, but what does it imply to trade with the performance of such slippery and ethically charged concepts? The thing is that autobiography is always already a curated narrative, not only of and through oneself, but *to* oneself, a story told (back) to structure experience, to (re-)gain

power over one's personal history. But the power over what is produced in the process is never completely placed in a single position, and is never actually and perpetually under control. The thing with this narcissistic chamber of mirrors is that the reflections are just that, even when they are embodied, and the tension at the space of slippage between these layers should be explored further.

Narcissus is much discussed as the (psychoanalytic) paradigm of contemporary culture<sup>2</sup>, and has been long before selfie-culture took over. Among the most famous diagnosticians of narcissistic culture is Christopher Lasch writing critically in the seventies about the paradigmatic turn<sup>3</sup>. There is a detail in the book that I'd always found interesting, when the author reflects on the autobiographical trend in writing as symptomatic of the predominance of narcissism, as well as inferior to *true* literature based on imagination, *good* journalism and theory based on (the performance of) objectivity. Narcissism has been used as a derogatory label especially in regards to feminist or feminist-inclined art (mostly performance, video and body art) that not only centred on personal experience, but also oftentimes used the body of the artist as both subject and object of the artwork. Even in her recently published extensive study of autotheory as a transmedia practice, Lauren Fournier<sup>4</sup> somehow feels the need to defend feminist artistic practice from the narcissistic label. However, I would argue that applying a moralistic lens to the concept of narcissism is in itself unproductive and perhaps there is a benefit in re-framing narcissism without the ethical bias.

Psychoanalysis, responsible for the concept as we know and use it today, originally didn't regard narcissism as necessarily morally bankrupt and saw it as problematic only when it develops into a pathology, which is only one of its more extreme versions. A point that I find far more interesting is the narcissistic paradigm as a developmental stage, one which Woman as the negatively defined gendered position (not fixed nor anatomically bound) never fully passes through in order to access the symbolic order and become a subject that depends on the illusion of wholeness<sup>5</sup>. If we are able to regard this liminal position of evading the rounded narcissism tied to masculinity as productive and politically/ideologically neutral, that could enable viewing the narcissistic practices of staging one's selves – fragmentary, unstable, in-progress – in a positive light, and more importantly, less

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Benjamin, Jessica *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* Pantheon Books 1988.


<sup>3</sup> Lasch, Christopher *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* W.W. Norton 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Fournier, Lauren *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism* MIT Press 2021.

<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, following primarily the theory of Jacques Lacan (*On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Seminar XX.*, W.W. Norton 1999), especially through Jacqueline Rose in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Mitchell, J. & Rose, J., W.W. Norton & co. 1985

straightforwardly fixed, monolithic, definitive, and unequivocal. I believe this perspective to be more productive, liberating and closer to the ever-elusive reality of lived experience we are so desperately always trying to write up, down, and through. We will only drown if we are unable to detach from the picture, if we fall in love with the mute reflection staring back and forget its nature of a mirage that can only serve us if we embrace its flaky nature and remain willing to step away from the reflection.

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curating  
in  context



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