

The Diagonal – of Lacan’s Logical Square (after the flood)

Introduction

The contention of the project, Flood’s Tidal-turn on Relevance, 2025 – 2002, is that the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s Logical Square can be adapted to the question of artistic research as an experiential process that moves as it develops, based on what I read and interpret in Lacan’s (2018, pp.185-6) Seminar XIX, *...or Worse*. (The adaptation responds to the formatting of the Logical Square as shown on page 186 of the aforementioned publication of Seminar XIX.)

Operative descriptors

Lacan (2018, p.186) indicates that the linguistic terms (variously hyphenated and normal, shown in bold in the publication) **necessary**, **impossible**, **possible**, **contingent**, shown attributed to one each of the four corners of the square in both diagrams (2018, p.186), come firstly from Aristotle. Kneale and Kneale (1971, pp.81-6) discuss Aristotle’s use of the terms ‘necessary’ and ‘possible’ as necessary to ‘modal statements’. Kneale and Kneale (1971, p.85) state that the role of ‘contingent’ in Aristotle’s theory ‘...may then be defined as what is possible and not necessary’. In Aristotle’s ‘square of opposition’, as shown by Kneale and Kneale (1971, p.86), while lower-left corner of the square is ‘It is possible that...’, and lower-right corner is ‘It is not necessary that...’, ‘contingent’ is a statement midway between both corners, ‘It is contingent that...’, which links ‘possible’ and ‘not-necessary’. In Lacan’s (2018, p.186) Logical Square, ‘not-necessary’ is replaced by **contingent**, and what links lower-left, **possible**, and lower-right, **contingent**, is **object a**. If ‘contingent’ in Aristotle means ‘what is possible and not necessary’ (Kneale and Kneale, 1971, p.85), **object a** in Lacan could be considered to mean what is **possible** and **contingent**.

This idea suits the related contention that artistic research begins at **possible** and is driven by **object/s a** towards the core locus of such research at **contingent** and as deduced from contingent episodes and events.

Where Lacan’s Logical Square differs most from Aristotle’s Square of Opposition, at least as shown in Kneale and Kneale (1971, p.86), is that the key terms of Aristotle’s modal statements are supports, in a sense, *descriptors*, of the function of Lacan’s four basic mathemes. The mathemes, here written as language, correspond to the descriptors as follows:

At least one x is not submitted to the phallic function

necessary

There is no x that is not submitted to the phallic function

impossible

All x are submitted to the phallic function

possible

Not-all x are submitted to the phallic function

contingent

While the function of Aristotle's terms is to define language-based modal statements, their use by Lacan are as descriptors of relevance to one of each of four *mathemes* (Lacan's own symbolic representations of his ideas) of the psychical structure of man and woman, including objects and object-elements. How the mathemes variously support and contradict one another concerns the permeation of often gendered elements, one with another, and combinations. This is possibly how the Logical Square may be read insofar as it is represented by Lacan in Seminar XIX, ...or Worse.

Enter the big Other

After any *finish*, even due to failure the artist goes back, in a sense, to *start*. For purposes of explaining the artistic research process, start, as in completion even when one has failed, locates at **necessary**, top-left of Lacan's Logical Square, which is most likely the region of Lacan's Symbolic register where *man* – meant as humankind – resides, where one *has to* reside to stay sane, and is subject to an exception to the rule of symbolic phallic castration in the form of an illusionary big Other. The big Other has in this instance *struck* one, as it were, by means of the flood, sufficiently to have curtailed the finish of the referenced project at *failed* – more strongly termed than *incomplete* – placing one back in the position *normal*, from which to assess the situation of an unresolved-suddenly-elevated-to-finished work to be considered as Real.

A third contention is that any finished work is Real, occupying the position **impossible**, top-right corner of the Logical Square. With the artist now to the left of this top horizontal axis of the square and the finished failed work to the right, one can review the situation if or as needed. The purpose at this time, however, is not this consideration, so much as to suggest that the flood has come in as a wrathful gesture of the Other, but in a sense also as an ideal meting out of change from the position where Real participation may exist – *jouissance* of the Other – in Lacan's formulae; **contingent**, lower-right of the square. This is the set conforming to symbolic phallic castration top-left of the square as **necessary**, with the exception of one who/that is not subject. Mainly the *other* position of woman – since all of us are

subject to the rule of phallic castration albeit in different terms according to the idea's confluence with human biology – this may be considered where contingency oscillates proper with **contingent** as such, which is also where artistic research oscillates as, itself, ever-active manner of contingency. (While it is not within the scope of the project, or this article, to consider, the psychoanalyst and visual artist Bracha Ettinger has countered the phallogocentric tendency of Lacan's theory with her own theory of the *matrixial* feminine, which begins as intra-uterine at the third stage of gestation of a pregnancy (see, for example, Ettinger, 2002, pp.218-237). At such a stage the matrixial is non-gendered feminine, and continues outwards through pre-Oedipal and Oedipal, from Lacan's psychic structural register Imaginary, and continuing into and through the adult language-based psychic structural register Symbolic, as a both contiguous and interacting other dynamic that can express as *metramorphosis* through and as art.)

Backslash diagonal

The two positions, **necessary**, top-left, and **contingent**, lower-right, are on a backward-slanting diagonal. Arguably, one comes into one's research lower left at **possible**, since one always comes in with something – the idea conveyed in the videos, and in the last visual iteration left-side of the larger wall-based work before the flood – and moves towards **contingent**, lower-right, before completing as still-unfinished although at its most conceptual stage at **undecidable**, midway between **contingent** and **impossible**, right vertical axis, Figure 1.



Figure 1: Studio shot of the unfinished large work, October 2024

Cut short, as it were, at **contingent**, due to the flood, one can only take the failure as a finish and review it from the position of **necessary**, which is in effect the top-left

apex of a diagonal axis of relation/non-relation. In Lacanian theory this is the position of all humankind subject to symbolic castration – with the exception of one, the big Other, who/that is not – looking down towards the contingent relation of woman at **contingent** as *not-all* oscillating outside of the rule as a participatory Other *jouissance*. Reciprocally, woman in/from this aspect looks back towards **necessary** for the Other as *ideal*. An artist in the position **necessary** will have completed the work, and is now reviewing at best a successful operation that has resulted in a finish. In this case, the operation was an enforced abort, the flood having wrought havoc on a fragile position of still unresolved, due to which one retreats to **necessary** to review one's remaining circumstances, the backward inflection of the diagonal eminently suiting one's case.

Journal entry

(28th October, 2024)

What does the basket wash towards one, the rough midway between the converging diagonal dynamics? The basket of a history, a *basket case*, recovering vestiges of degradation from among the deluge, so much further degraded by toxic water awash with orange-brown mud. A basket of goodies, in a sense, brought back to me from their orientation in the early 2000s', as **contingent**; *not-all* in their present disinclination to be not quite what I purported of them at their points of origin. They evade **necessary** by being no longer so necessary, virility left behind, as it were, through its dissipation naturally through the course of time, yet, as virile, subject to the constraint of assuming there's one in essence out there, the aggregate of an indefinite many, who knows either so much more and better, or the single thing that one may, oneself, never know. One looks down in expectation from top-left corner at **necessary**, towards **contingent**, on the basis that there, through the sidestepping nature of contingency, as the place of the exception's endless manifestations. From there, in mutual discord, or one may say very lack of discord, one looks longingly towards **necessary**, to a perspective on finish that embodies the ideal of the subject, *subject* to the exception supposed to know more and better. While to oscillate amidst the middle of the diagonal, let's say preferably below centre on the side of **contingent**, is perhaps the ideal circumstance, one *does* harbour the inclination to rush the circuit to finish. The greyhound never catches the automated rabbit, yet the compulsion to catch it, and hence finish, is no less insatiable; and here one may be talking about desire. The

diagonal axis, backslash **contingent/necessary** – **necessary/contingent**, is really the interplay between two askance takes on desire, and hence will never reach an equilibrium. Between centre and either of the two apexes of the axis there's a swelling out, which is the domain in which one wrestles with the question.

Diagrams

The diagrams as represented in Lacan's Seminar XIX, *...or Worse* (Lacan, 2018, p.186), lend themselves to reworking with the application of routes and emphases around the square according to one's interpretation; in the present context, the question of *negation* turned to *obstacle*. Lacan (2018, p.86) declares that while he has used 'the sudden emergence of mathematics in logic', inferring Aristotle's square of opposition and its elaboration, he has adapted it to his own needs. Lacan explains of the negation inferred by each of the two horizontal lines, top left and top right (**necessary/impossible**), lower left and lower right (**possible/contingent**) corners of the Logical Square, which in Aristotle's formulae work between truth and falsehood, that in his re-working, each side of the two pairs represents an obstacle to the other concerning the positing or negation of the phallic functioning, Figure 2.

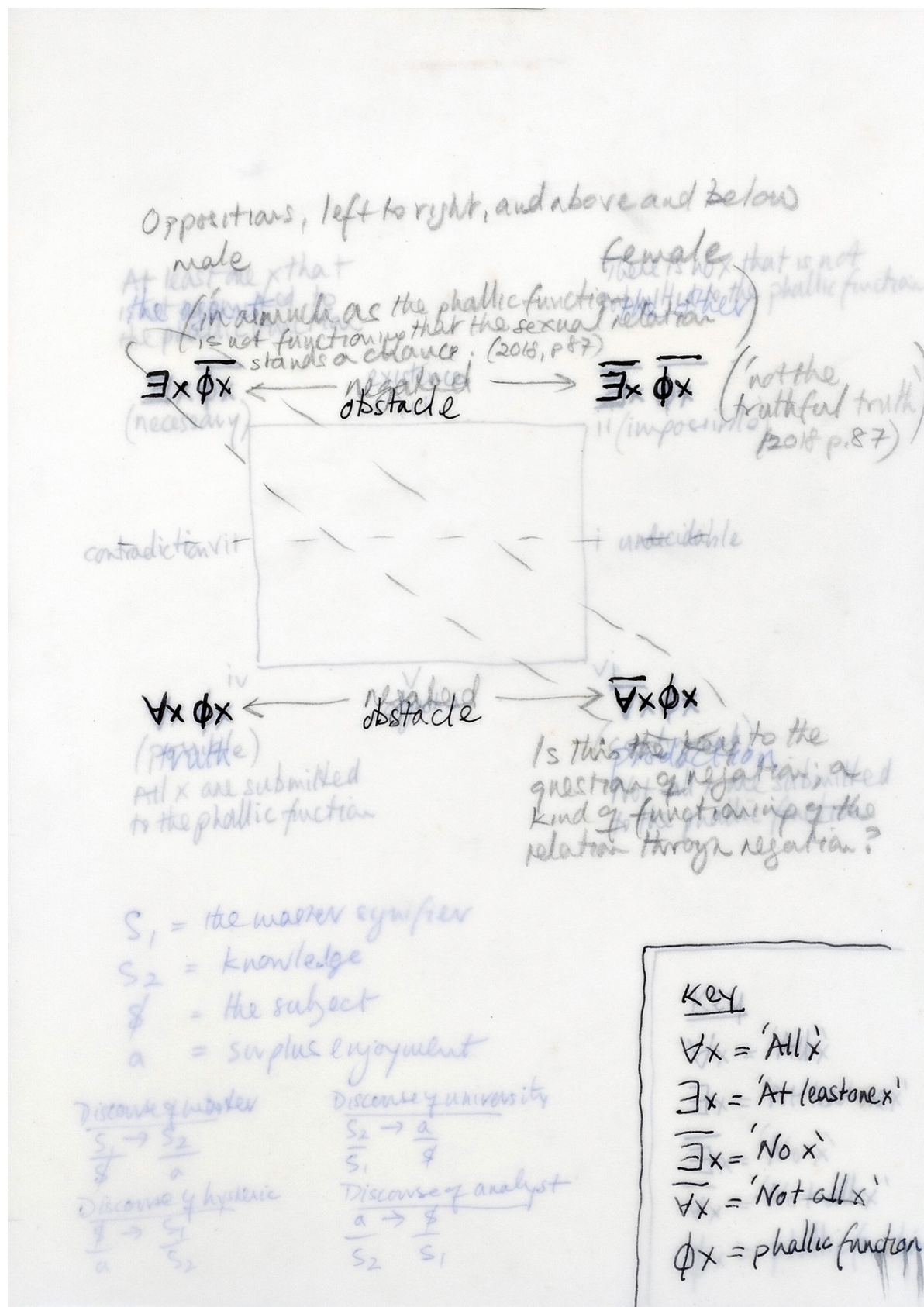


Figure 2: Author's derivation of Lacan's diagram of his Logical Square, pencil and ink on paper with ink on tracing-paper overlay, A5, 2023

Of the Aristotelian terms, *negation*, *conjunction*, *disjunction*, *implication*, of his square of opposition, according to Lacan (2018, p.87) one cannot have *conjunction* in his own version of the square because '*there exists*', top left (**necessary**), and '*there does not exist*', top right (**impossible**), cannot both be true, and the universal propositions of the phallic function cannot 'conjoin' because woman, or in some instances man, object, or object element, can be the exception to '*all x*', lower-left corner (**contingent**). Equally, disjunction does not exist because '...for there to be disjunction, the minimum requirement allows that one proposition is true and the other false, or else both are true'. What is in question in Lacan's Logical Square is any straightforward negation of either true or false, and what kind of truth is *truth*. Lacan (2018, p.87) states that '...it's inasmuch as the phallic function is not functioning that sexual relation stands a chance', the key perhaps being the relation, through their very non-relation, between the exception to submission to the phallic function in the top-left corner (**necessary**) and the *not-all x* in the lower right corner (**contingent**), as shown by the dashed diagonal stretched ellipse in Figure 3.

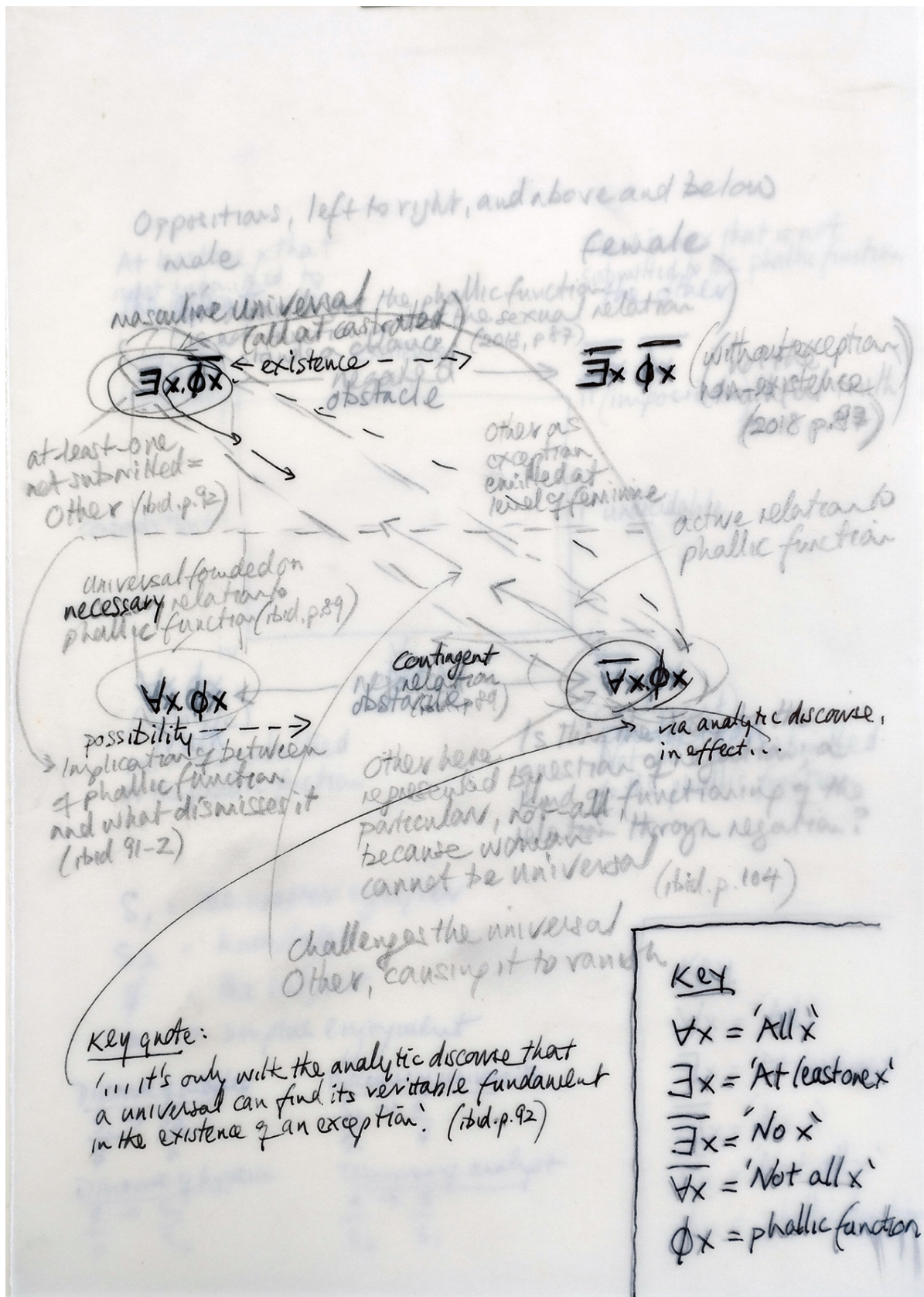


Figure 3: Author's derivation of Lacan's diagram of his Logical Square, pencil on paper with ink on tracing-paper overlay, A5, 2023

While Lacan's discussion concerns woman, the Logical Square is here adapted to the question of movement of artistic research.

At the heart of Lacan's logic is *impossibility*, represented by the barring of the subject from meaning, and by the **impossible** basis of the Real. The scope for being able to take a degree of liberty with Lacan's argument that there can be no such thing as sexual rapport, is provided by Lacan himself when Leupin (2004, xxxii) citing Lacan, states: "A writing is not meant to be understood [...] If you don't understand them [Lacan's *Ecrits*], so much the better, it will give you the opportunity to explain them". Then Leupin (2004, xxxii) adds: '[...] in order to access Lacan, we make our own intellectual contribution to the undertaking, to avoid understanding what we have already understood from the beginning'. According to Leupin (2004, xxxv), Lacan's use of 'algorithms', which may include both mathemes – such as how each corner of the Logical Square is written – and topologies, instate in abstract formalisation '[...] what is integrally transmissible of his doctrine'. Leupin (2004, xxxv) adds: '[...] the more general the formalisation, the easier it is to lodge an individual case in it, without forgetting that a case possesses an irreducible singularity that escapes any formalisation'.

This article's hand-drawn diagrams that largely copy diagrams contained in the referenced texts do themselves exercise a degree of liberty, not least through one's reflexive integration in them of their own signatory aesthetic. In a sense, one hopes that such subjective integration in such formalised visualisation will be the case, leading one's own logic via trying to understand Lacan's logic as much as one can, increasingly towards individual interpretation. A case in point, which is an attempt to visualise Lacan's (2018, p.104) idea that '*not-all x*', at this time meaning woman, is '*between centre and absence*', is Figure 4.

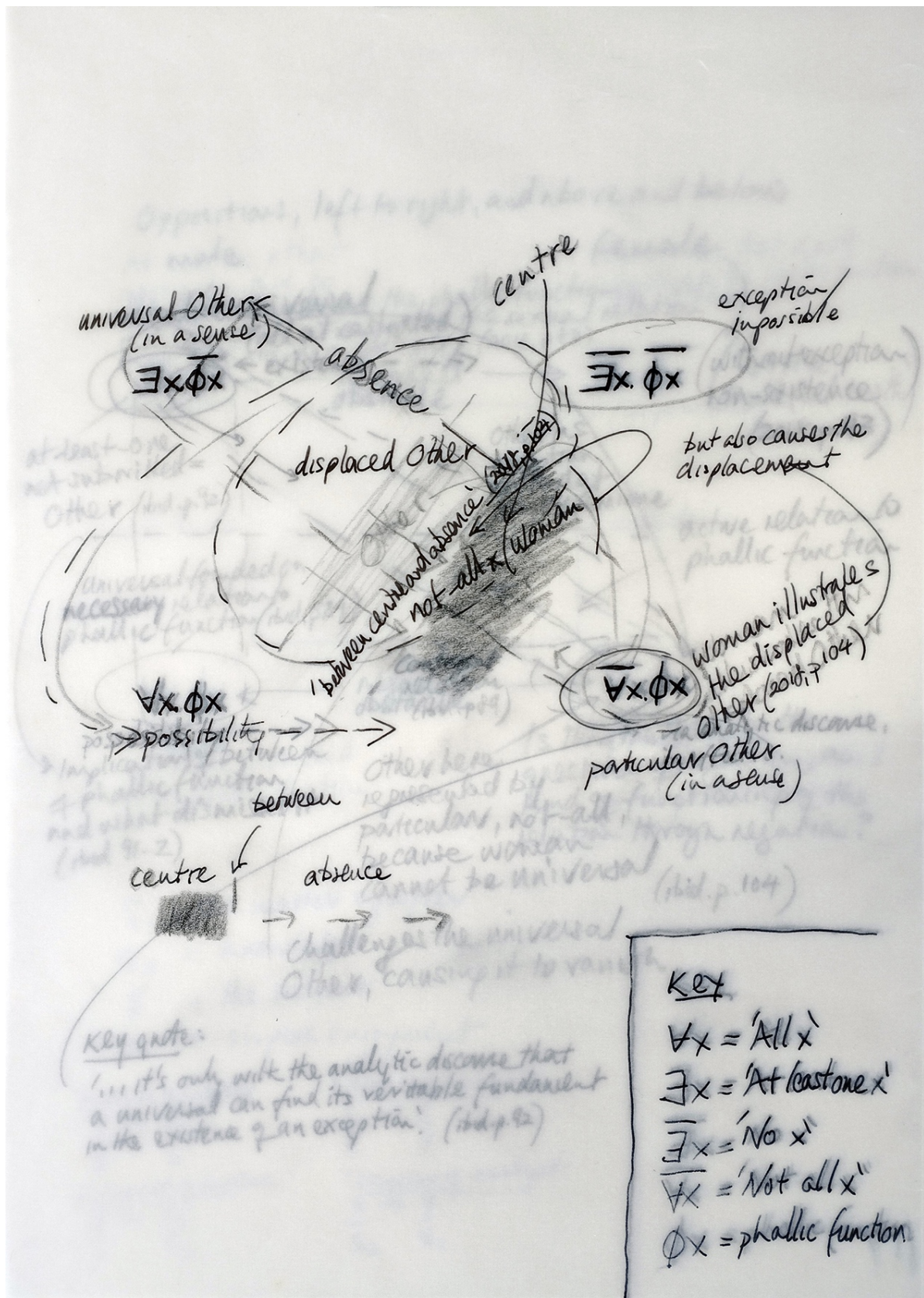


Figure 4: Author's derivation of Lacan's diagram of his Logical Square, pencil and ink on paper with ink and soft pencil on tracing-paper overlay, A5, 2023

Pitching something between centre and absence, written as a forward-slash diagonal on the diagram Figure 4, above, infers that the in-between, which is a point of centre, not only has two sides, but that one of them is itself 'centre' and the other, as 'absence', is not simply nothing.

Reading the diagram itself, rather than the content from Lacan's Seminar XIX, variously cited above, on which the diagram is derived, there may be nuances of one's own interpretation based on oneself as artist/author *subject* within the text as well as the inflections brought by the visualisation, initially prompted by my reading of the seminar. Firstly, the emphasis has stayed with the relationship/non-relationship between lower-right and top-left corners, respectively the particular Other of **contingent** and universal Other of **necessary**. The particular Other of the lower-right corner is represented by woman, man in certain roles, and object and object-element/s within the mathematical symbol x that cause the displacement of the Other.

As artistic research

The movement of artistic research ends at **undecidable**, midway between lower-right **contingent** and top-right **impossible**, with, as inferred by the diagram Figure 4, above, major emphasis or swelling out between lower-right **contingent** and the lower side of a diagonal dividing line termed 'between centre and absence' (Lacan, 2018, p.104). In Lacan's (2018, p.104) theory this is the *not-all* of woman who is '[...] not contained within the phallic function without being its negation either'. However, it has been the contention of this article that **contingent** is the place of maximal exploration of artistic research, while not negating the possibility of its iteration in and as not so much the finished artwork as Real, as one's rationalisation of the finished artwork in terms of what one has done. The one (**necessary**) looks to the other (**contingent**) for certitude, while achieving neither, yet the dynamic, the backslash diagonal, is not exactly without relationship.

References

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