

The double intended:

Twice...Once a series of portraits by Helen Sear

Sharon Morris

2XJE; 2XDF; 2XCP; 2XAD

Four photographs from Helen Sear's series of portraits, *Twice...Once* hang above my desk. Four pairs of eyes; no catch-light, no specular reflection to return my gaze, no mirroring relation between myself and the subject. The place of the eyes marked by sullen shadow.

no reflection in their eyes

That primary investiture in the position of eyes, nose and mouth so emphatically anchored in perception that within a few hours of birth we respond to the smile of mother.¹ The to-and-fro of gesture and response that is the very heart of communication between 'me' and 'you'. Without this intimate relation there can be no ego; no 'I' without a 'you', no 'I' without a 'not-I'.²

I'm caught looking for you – fascinated

The 'I' brought into being through mimicking and incorporating the other, the 'I' an inheritor of our relations, the skin over the skin of others.³

But there are inevitably aspects of each other that we just can't stand – the other who makes us turn away – who represent those same qualities we dislike in ourselves.

There is then no simple division between 'I' and 'you', the boundary or limit between each other emerges from a complex, messy interaction. 'I' – 'you' a paradoxical structure which allows us to identify with one another and yet know that we are separate, at times strangers to each other.

looking for myself in your eyes

The face – the face that stares from the TV screen, Sear's portraits, your face – has the capacity to evoke a powerful emotional response, putting into crisis the very existence of the 'I'. As if, in our deepest and most intimate encounter with an 'other', we are forever in danger of repeating our earliest ecstatic and terrifying experiences of utter dependency.

as if a mirror

Looking into the mirror evokes not only the reassuring familiarity of our reflection but also, perhaps, the disquieting disappointment that we don't look like the 'ideal woman' or 'ideal man.'

1. C Trevarthen 'Infant Semiosis', *Origins of Semiosis*, ed. by Nothe Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin/NY 1994.

2. S Freud, 1895 *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis, Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887-1902*, trans. Mosbacher and Strachey, ed. by M Bonaparte, A Freud and E Kris, Imago, London, 1954, pp.393-4.

3. S Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' 1917 *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. J Strachey, Hogarth Press, London, 1955 (abbr. SE) vol XIV pp.249, 256.



Some Kind of Balance.
© Helen Sear 1983.

seeing my own face and ...

Suddenly, the reflection is no longer our own. The reflection no longer a mimetic double but a stranger, an other who can quickly evoke not only indifference but feelings of hate. Fascination with this 'other me' becomes an expulsion of the other. 'You and 'I' gives way to 'either you or I'.⁴

It's this tension of the 'I-you' relation which vitalises the self-portraits of surrealist artist and writer, Claude Cahun. In *Self-portrait*, 1928⁵ Cahun's reflection looks out of the frame but Cahun looks straight at the camera, her eyes direct an emphatic confrontation with the viewer, a look which grips the viewer by both inviting our identification and teasing our desire.⁶

you – what are you looking at?

Sear's performance *Some Kind of Balance*, 1983 directly stages the drama of the 'I' and 'you'.⁷ Removing the silver from the back of the mirror, Sear's co-performer, Leslie Arden, is gradually revealed. Tearing away at the silver, like scales of an exoskeleton, Sear scratches at the armoury of separation between herself and Arden. They search not for the comforting twin in the mirror but the face, which, like a scar signals the body through the aching physicality of embodiment.

I need an expression, any expression ...

Any expression will be sufficient according to the text of Sear's performance. The mirror does not stay as the support of visual reflection but serves to reveal the stranger behind the glass.⁸

to find myself in you

Sear and Arden are now located in the same space, demanding a changed relation, demanding to be recognised as separate individuals.

I'm blinded by my reflection

This is the paradox which Hegel describes as central to all human relationships: we are all de-centred subjects who find ourselves only in the other.⁹

Desire is equally difficult to untangle. Desire may be nothing other than the need to be desired. Our whole childhood, and unfortunately the rest of our lives, directed towards pleasing those we love.

4. The psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche accounts for the sudden switch from love to hate as an evocation of our earliest mirroring relations, the mimetic relation by which the ego is formed. J Laplanche 'The So-Called "Death Drive": a Sexual Drive', *The Death Drive: New Life for a Dead Subject?* ed. R Weatherill, Rebus Press, London, 1999, pp.40-59.

5. F Leperlier, Claude Cahun, *l'écart et la métamorphose*, Jean-Michel Place, Paris, 1992.

6. For a discussion of the viewer's desire and identification in relation to Cahun's self-portraits, please see S Morris 'The Androgynous Self: Höch and Cahun', *The Bisexual Imaginary* Cassell, London, 1997, ed. BI-Academic Intervention.

7. 'Women in Art Education Conference', *Some Kind of Balance*, performance and tape slide, written, directed and performed by Helen Sear; costumes designed by Deborah Thomas; co-performer Leslie Arden. Battersea Arts Centre 1983.

8. Cahun also refers to the removal of the silver backing on the mirror: 'Take a mirror, scratch the silvering at a height of several centimetres above the eye; pass behind that lightened spot a strip on which you had fixed little heterogeneous objects, and look at yourself at the point of the cross-over, eyes in the eyes.' 'Prenez garde aux objets domestiques'. *L'Objet, Cahiers d'art I*, in F Leperlier, (op. cit p.217).

9. Robert Williams traces the development of Hegel's dialectical theory of relations from its roots in German idealism. His book also offers a summary of contemporary criticism: R Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, University of California Press, Berkeley/LA, 1997.

wanting to know how you see me

There is another danger, however, that we make use of each other, only to find our selves. No doubt we all do this; reduce our relationships to acts of exchange or a means of 'self-development'. It's easy to misuse people, especially when we see only their group identity. But it's not so easy to hold onto our prejudices, to stereotype and discriminate, when we really get to know someone, when we're actively touched by their lives.

Hegel's later insight into the dialectical structure of relations shows how the master by refusing freedom to the slave also refuses his own humanity.¹⁰ What stops us falling into a reiteration of power and subservience is our face-to-face encounter with an individual based on mutual recognition of our individual feelings, thoughts and human rights. Recognition is the recognition of individual existence.

10. *ibid.* p.6; pp.77-8.

11. 'The photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination... (on the one hand "it is not there," on the other "but it has indeed been"): a mad image, chafed by reality.' R Barthes, *Camera Lucida* Fontana, London, 1984, p.115.

12 Instead of a linguistic concept of the sign, CS Peirce's general sign theory privileges interactive relations between 'things'; the iconic, indexical and symbolic. CS Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Harvard University Press, 1931, ed. Hartshorne and Weiss, 8 vols. 2. 247-9. Peirce takes the photograph as a complex sign 2.281.

2XJE; 2XDF; 2XCP; 2XAD

Each photograph in the series *Twice...Once* oscillates between its role as part of a series and its specific role as portrait of an individual. The title includes the initials of the person's fore-name and family name. As photographic documents they invoke the viewer's belief in the existence of a particular person as opposed to presenting a display of manipulation and morphing.

and that photograph of you

In spite of our sophisticated reading of images and our understanding of photographic construction, we persist in carrying around photographs of those we love. Sometimes we say, 'oh she looks just like that!', and at other times, 'No, I'm just not photogenic'. The capacity of the photograph to act as a mimetic sign, an *icon*, of our memories and fantasies varies.

why does it haunt me?

But what doesn't vary, even in those photographs with the top of the head and feet missing, is that the photograph says – 'yes we were there', and 'yes you were alive then'. The photograph functions as a material sign, an *index*, of being: the trace of light on the negative is, then, the material *trace* of being.

as if a kind of madness

It is this *indexical* capacity of the photograph which Roland Barthes describes as akin to a 'hallucination', because the photograph has the capacity to refer so potently to what has passed. Even to what we never knew, for example Barthes' photograph of his mother taken before his memories of her.¹¹

The photograph is also an intelligible *symbol* that can 'read' and interpret the image through our knowledge of the conventions of black and white photography.¹² It is the photograph which the philosopher C.S. Peirce uses as an example of how representation takes the form of three kinds of relations: *iconic*, *indexical* and *symbolic*.

We experience the *index* when we're forced to recognise the brute reality of the world we live in. Reality always a shock, the shock of how the world resists our manipulation – gravity, ageing, the pavement we trip over.



Self Portrait, 1928, Claude Cahun.
Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Trust.

... that difference, between 'me' and 'you', which keeps me a bookend.

The 'you' we recognise as a subject in their own right, is the *indexical* other. This *index* of the other – physical body and will – guarantees separation, cutting the Gordian knot of assimilation. From mutual recognition, at its best comes the transformative 'we': our consciousness remains doubled.¹³

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Each portrait of *Twice...Once* is printed through two negatives. The negatives bent so that only their vertical edges touch the paper, creating a gap between the two images of the face. A gap which could stand as an analogue of the two modes of relating: identification and desire. A gap in the photographic process which produces a distortion of the face.

somewhat, I sense the missing detail

No two faces are absolutely alike, even those of identical twins. The sheer diversity of how the eyes, mouth, nose and lips are distributed according to a genetic infinity. Like the thumbprint, the face is an *index* of our individuality.

Cahun's nose, which she herself compares to the beak of a curlew, is instantly recognisable, irrespective of distortion and dark-room manipulation.¹⁴ It is this function of the *index* which defines 'thisness', *haeccity*, according to Peirce's philosophy. In this case defining our capacity to single out Cahun's face which marks the 'thisness' of her being: Cahun's being as opposed to any one else.

I showed Cahun's self-portraits to a friend

Central to Levinas' discussion on ethics is the human encounter, face-to-face. In resisting the temptation to reduce the 'face' to representation, Levinas shifts emphasis from the phenomenon of the visage, to the *trace*.¹⁵ Rather than image, the *trace* bears the sheer proximity of the other, the other as neighbour. The presence of the face as *trace* is 'beyond visibility'; for Levinas, intelligible only in the language of ethics.

he shut the book

To find the *index* of the face means turning away from the bland idealism so enamoured by the media. The 'perfect' nose, eyes, lips, ears – the face that launched a thousand magazine covers, billboards and hoardings – falls to the demands of our mutual recognition.

'they're too disturbing for my bedroom wall', he said

Sear's images, *Twice...Once* trigger a deep discontent. The face lies half in shadow; detail is reduced to render the face barely recognisable as a specific face. It is this absence of the detail of skin, tonality, the minutiae of facial hair, wrinkles, the fine lines around the mouth bearing the trace of everyday experience, which have been lost.

13. The creation of a genuinely transformative 'we' depends on mutual recognition, a genuine interaction rather than a non-relation, when each individual retreats into their own 'beautiful soul.' Williams, op. cit. pp.53-4.

14. C Cahun, whose earlier pseudonym was 'Courlis', curlew. Photo-collage plate VIII of *Cahun Aveux non aveux*, Editions du Carrefour, Paris, 1930, makes visual equivalence between the neck and beak of a curlew and parts of her body.

15. E Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, 1998, trans. A Lingis, pp.86-93.

In resisting the face as representation, Levinas rejects linguistic sign theories which break the sign into signifier and signified. Peirce's concept of the index could provide a mode of conceiving the relational effects of the face.

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The photographs are recalcitrant in their refusal to give up meaning.

what have they seen, what have they witnessed?

Captured in the stasis of the black and white photograph, these images are 'death masks', masks which conceal the unnameable.¹⁶ Though these portraits don't imply a specific narrative of death, their *iconic* resemblance to a death mask points towards the *index* of death. The 'you', the unnameable 'other' of our existence is our ceasing to live.

that which I can't face

Separation of self and other entreats us to reach out for that 'contact at a distance'. But Sear's double negatives *Twice...Once* insist on the uncomfortable truth that we refuse the difficult other, the other who comes to represent what we find threatening.¹⁷

It is the *indexical* force of *Twice...Once*, which sustains our engagement with the unbroken silence of these portraits. Under a blanket of solitude, an essential solitude somnolent with the residues of childhood, the images continue to seize us, we are kept resolutely at an absolute distance.¹⁸

you, from an unbearable distance

It's love which is so difficult: love, rather than sexuality or desire, which brings in our sufferance locked in the lost love relations of childhood. For all love is an *iconic* echo of our earliest selves – a resonance of our vulnerability and shame.

And love, in its role as Eros, which maintains the structure of our 'self'; ego and subjecthood.¹⁹ Somehow all those messy feelings, thoughts, memories and images, that drift and coalesce in the seas of our dreams and fantasies come ashore in our intimate relationships. Images and traces of experience are reorganised into relations directed towards the object of our love – a beloved other or our own ego.

to unbearable intimacy

Crossing that distance to close the gap between self and other, however, risks the dissolution of our stable selves, either through the excess of pleasure or the fight to preserve our identity. There is always the risk of losing control and the fragmentation of the body, not only the lucid body-image in the mirror, but the searing ache in the heart, the womb, the groin, as we literally embody the *index* of the other.

so hard to find some kind of balance, so hard to endure...

16. The importance of the photograph as an ontological object, a form of 'presence' akin to the function of Egyptian mummies, yet tempting our contemporary and more sceptical spectatorship, introduces the essay by cineaste A Bazin: 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', *What is Cinema?* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1967.

17. 'Proximity'... is an immediacy older than the abstractness of nature. Nor is it fusion; it is contact with the other....In contact itself the touching and the touched separate...', E Levinas, op. cit. p.86.

18. M Blanchot, 'The Essential Solitude', *The Gaze of Orpheus*, Station Hill Press, Barrytown, NY, 1981, trans. G Hartman and L Davis: ed. PA Sitney, pp.63-78.

19. S Freud, 1920. 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', SE vol. XVIII, pp.1-64, presents a theory of the ego as limited by Eros, the principle of binding dissipated energy, the energy of the psycho-physical system. Exceeding the principle of pleasure transgresses the limits of the stable self. It is this dissolution which Freud represents as the appearance of the 'death drive'.

Once Bitten, Twice Shy

David Bate

Landscape is the form of picture most often connected with studies of nature, a contemplation of mood and the composition of figures in space. Helen Sear's series of 'animal landscapes' called *Grounded* eschew these assumptions about the genre and makes a challenge to the category of landscape itself. She takes us back and forward to the Baroque.

Grounded is the collective name of an ongoing series of colour photographs, juxtapositions of skies and animal bodies, put together on a computer between 2000 and 2001. They are 'virtual landscapes', pictures made through digital montage. Each image is sealed, mounted behind perspex and, like insects in amber, these composite 'landscapes' pose a series of questions for the spectator to wonder. What animals are these bodies from? What relations between skies and bodies do they construct and what might these juxtapositions of animal bodies in proximity to different skies actually mean?

Each image contributes something different to the series, each one is *different*. Summer skies, dark skies, dusk and dawn, bright and blue, pale and cold, each sky has its own mood. Under those skies are the bulk of animals, we only see their skins, any identity of these animals that could be revealed by the rest of their bodies is hidden, 'off-frame'. Yet, these bodies also seem to speak of different moods and states of being, some are 'heavy', others are light, some seem young, others old. One appears to be covered in snow and is definitely 'cold'. What to make of these skins and skies, so visually appealing yet also so disturbing?

In the Renaissance landscape was essentially used as the background setting and scene for the events of religious stories, but then increasingly towards the eighteenth century the landscape became foregrounded as the object of a picture in its own right. Human figures receded into the

landscape and the scene itself as the image became more important. The 'decline' of the European Renaissance is the beginning of the Baroque and the origins of the Modern era.¹ In this sense the Baroque is sandwiched between the Renaissance and Industrialisation; and this is what makes it interesting for the work of Helen Sear.

In the Baroque there is a concept of space as infinite, not necessarily inhabited by God(s) or even 'man'. A Baroque aesthetic implies a combination of naturalistic elements in such a way that they have clashing perspectives, a conflict of antagonistic forces and a resulting strangeness of space in the pictures. In short, there is a kind of 'theatricality' which pervades Baroque iconography. Erwin Panofsky praises the Baroque because it

overcame its inherent conflicts not by just smoothing them away (as did the Cinquecento), but by realizing them consciously and transforming them into subjective emotional energy with all the consequences of this subjectivization.²

A Baroque image is more than just a picture of a place or thing, it has an 'emotional energy' which is gathered up for the productivity of the spectator. It is usually this energy which is, in the Baroque, recruited to an emotional signification of 'freedom' – that is the aim of the signifier in Baroque imagery. We find here, in the elements of Helen Sear's work something of this Baroque energy motivated towards an investigation of 'nature'. When asked in an interview about the meaning of these animal-sky series of pictures, her response was that they question

what does 'nature' mean, particularly in its primitive state outside the constraints of culture: what is it to be both human and an animal in the material world?³

These issues, ones that confronted eighteenth century philosophers, are problems to which we are currently returned via a modern reformulation of conception of animality and the human body in their relations to Nature. Such questions were generally repressed in twentieth century modernism. In modernism the body of the human *as a question* was only tolerated under the sign of fetishism (of the female or child body). The issue of animals was simply *not* in the frame of reference of modernism. The *sky* was in modernism. Alfred Stieglitz's photographs of skies, as symbolic 'equivalents' for feelings, echoed arguments made by John Ruskin in his *Modern Painters* (via Henry Peach Robinson's appropriation of them in his 1869 *Pictorial Effect in Photography*) about the values to be found in and to be attributed to the image of the sky and its symbolic essence in nature. The repertoires of nineteenth century art that were set in the countryside showed scenes of social dramas; peasants, farm animals and domestic issues were recruited to the politics of the nation and the order of people within it. As all this gave way to the iconography of metropolitan and urban scenes of the objects and habits of town dwelling modernism, pictures of nature only appeared as images of purity, or its opposite. For Modern art, nature was either 'pure' or 'defiled', 'nice' or 'violent', dead or alive, beautiful or sublime. Animals never quite fitted into that picture. In contrast to all this, Helen Sear's work relates to and references the modernist trope of the sky, but goes *beyond* that to include within this sphere the animal and animality: the beautiful *and* the sublime are both included *together*. *Grounded* puts the beast back into the frame of reference of the picture of art – literally. She takes her images out of modernism of which they are, implicitly, a critique. But are they out of culture?

If it is possible to consider 'nature' outside of culture, we would find ourselves in the animal kingdom, as outside of the language of culture. What kind of freedom would that be? Or is it a freedom? Is it perhaps more the opposite, not that language is restrictive, but that simply not everything can ever be said within or with it? It was this problematic, outside of a theocratic universe which also puzzled eighteenth century philosophers and would be anthropologists: how do other cultures manage their communications.

Baroque art is like the moment of a tantrum. It is interested in the expression of what does not fit in language, of something that seems inexpressible. What is this 'inexpressible' thing? These are images of beasts: wild, maybe foul and sensual, smelly and large, heaving and breathing, perhaps domesticated or brutal, beaten or bestial and so on. Their

bodies all begin to resonate as metaphors for emotions. In the pictures the bodies are, each one, equally raw and unformed, organised but not articulated, moody but not tamed or actually *named*. It is as though if we could name these animals (see all of their bodies, not just their 'hide') we could name an emotion, the feeling they give us. Do they seem to move? It is in the fantasy of what these animals are, their very breathing (even if we cannot know if they are alive or not from the photographs, this is not about rational thought) that the gestures, perceived in the folds of their skin and the round (or not) of their backs, signifies certain states of being. Here we find the impossibility of falling out of culture, we are anthropomorphic and the meanings of the images reside in their capacity as analogies or even as allegories. It is the sides of these animals, the bellies, the bulk of their 'carcass' that speaks to and lives under the sky above it. And in the infinite space of the sky and the specificity of the body under it, dreams open up. Not the dreams of animals, but the animality of dreams: the unconscious and its 'sexuality'.

But rather than try to 'explain' in language what dreams these images in *Grounded* might provoke, in other words to try to avoid a closure of meaning around these pictures, perhaps it is more constructive to ask another question: Why do animals appear so often in jokes, cartoons, caricatures, childrens stories, folk-tales, horror and other stories? Why do images of so many different animals accompany us throughout our lives? The lion, the wolf, the monkey, the elephant, the hyena, dogs, cats and rabbits (male or female) for example, all have, or rather are given characteristics that are employed constantly as human traits. The characteristics of animals are considered as 'like' the characteristics of individuals and their particular ways of being in the world. We can add to this the images of humans which, from antiquity to folk tales, have upper bodies as human but have lower halves which are animal or fish-like; these images too also pervade the human imaginary. In such images, from the Centaur to the little mermaid, is the half-transformation of human figures where their lower halves signify their sexuality.⁴ They are half-animal metaphors. It is as though the lower half of the body has simply 'become' their bestial sexual selves.

But then above these bestial bodies in Helen Sear's pictures, there is also the part played here by the sky, the clouds and streaks of light that hang over the animals in the pictures. They cast a certain light over those bodies. Melancholic, bright, overcast, cloudy, or with sunlight

'breaking through' are all metaphors for moods. We truly find ourselves in the moody and emotional intensity of a Baroque rhetoric. Whether the mood of this nature and the compositions of space imply a politics of 'nature' or not is to do with the psychological investment of our own composure within the organisation of the depicted scene.⁵ Even if there is and alongside of that, there is also in the images a movement towards desire. The beast awakens and is aroused. Under the movement of these skies, the bodies pulsate in an imaginary restless flux of desire. It is towards this recognition of unbounded desire and sexuality that the Baroque image strives to bring a freedom that is nevertheless bound in metaphors. This is the sublime image of Baroque thinking and a post-Romantic 'beauty' of the 'animal' sublime.

In the story of *Beauty and the Beast* we see the animal tamed into civility, the prince is recognised. The desire of the beast is tamed in love. Such a morality leaves no space for the animality of adults, male or female. Good behaviour does not bite. In the sublime, desire is not tamed, animality is present and the desire of the viewer is confronted with that of an other. In the sublime, the image threatens to bite back. Similarly we should never underestimate the fear that is involved in the approach to animals. Peasant culture, (something which is extinct in England) needs to sustain a discourse of mastery over the animal, no matter how much or how little affection is spoken towards them. The potential threat of being overwhelmed by them is always there and needs to be at least in the back of the mind of the animal keeper. There is then, a sense that these images can turn on us, we can be bitten by them, but if an image bites us we should not turn shy. We should bite it back.

1. See Erwin Panofsky, 'What is Baroque?' in *Three Essays on Style*, MIT Press, London, 1995.

2. Panofsky, p.88.

3. Helen Sear, *The Whole Story*, ed. Liz Kent Photoworks, 2000.

4. See Otto Fenichel, 'Scotophilic Instinct and Identification', *The Collected Works of Otto Fenichel, Vol 1*, ed. Hanna Fenichel and David Rapoport, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1954, p.389.

5. See my 'Notes of Beauty and Landscape' in *Shifting Horizons*, ed. C. Fehily, K. Newton & L. Wells, I.B. Tauris, London 2000.