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Jason Tougaw

The Self Is a Moving Target: The Neuroscience of Siri Hustvedt's Artists

[...] there is a coherent foundational process, or "self representation," that does not observe in the conventional sense but is observed or at least strongly "intermeshed" with various higher perceptual processes. In other words, the self-schema provides input into many sensory analyzers, and it is also strongly influenced by the primal emotional circuits [...] These interactions may constitute affective consciousness.

– Jaak Panksepp (1999: 309)

Ekphrasis – the literary description of visual art – would appear to have little to do with theoretical neuroscience. But in Siri Hustvedt's novels, she represents painting and other visual arts to ask many of the same questions about the meaning of selfhood that animate her interest in neuroscience, psychology, and the philosophy of mind. All of Hustvedt's novels portray artists interested in representing the self – with varying degrees of villainy – and her descriptions of their work belong to the venerable history of ekphrasis: Achilles' shield in Homer's *The Iliad*, the frescoes in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the Grecian urn in Keats, the masterpiece in Zola, Dorian Gray's portrait in Wilde, Icarus falling in Auden, *The Goldfinch* in Donna Tartt. Unlike most of these fictional artworks, Hustvedt's tend to be contiguous with forms of "self representation" our brains engage in.

It's rare enough for a writer to employ ekphrasis so routinely and even rarer for a novelist to describe entire collections or exhibitions of visual art, as Hustvedt does in several of her novels. In Siri Hustvedt's novels, ekphrasis is central to the development of mystery plots whose resolutions require more than the solving of crimes or the revelation of secrets. They require characters to confront Hustvedt's primary preoccupations – with the relations between minds, bodies, identities, and felt, unfelt, and barely felt subjective experience. Visual art – and especially portraits – is one of Hustvedt's vehicles for dramatizing thorny questions about what it feels like to be human. When her artists are villains, it is because they abuse their power to fix or exploit identity through representation. Neuropsychologist Jaak Panksepp (a colleague and friend of Hustvedt's) describes "affective consciousness" – the feeling of having a self – as a product of an organism's experience of the full range of emotions, felt and unfelt, "intermeshed" (or mixed) with "higher perceptual processes" and "strongly influenced by the primal emotional circuits" (1999: 309). Hustvedt's artists tend to invite brainy characters struggling with primal emotions to sit for them. Their portraits tend to reveal the flux of experience that makes identity. They also tend to pro-

voke identity crises, rooted in the subjects' discomfort with what is revealed in the portraits. What is revealed has everything to do with proposals about the physiology of self in the work of neuroscientists – for example, Panksepp's argument about relationships between “primal emotions” and cognition, Damasio's theory about consciousness arising from the brain's mapping of the body's basic functions, or Solms' demonstration of how the psychoanalytic and neurological minds may be reconciled. In Hustvedt, ekphrasis becomes a vehicle for exploring the interpersonal implications of hypotheses like the ones they propose.

Hustvedt nestles a joke into *The Blazing World* (2014) that hints at the connection between art and neuroscience. Her artist-protagonist Harriet Burden places Hustvedt at the end of a lengthy list of writers and thinkers who have theorized the relationship between mind, body, and self: “[...] and an obscure novelist and essayist, Siri Hustvedt, whose position Burden calls a ‘moving target’” (254). The joke signals Hustvedt's stance. She is insistent on the inconsistencies that define her dramatization of identity. Hustvedt's writing is about moving targets, about the framing and reframing that makes selfhood intelligible. Her writing – fiction and nonfiction – invites readers to step into the various frames, to try on points of view. If there is a crime in Hustvedt's fiction, it is nearly always tied to a criminal who clings too rabidly to a philosophical position, refusing or unable to be influenced by other points of view. These crimes nearly always involve works of art, and they tend to yoke questions about mind and body, representation, and barely felt experience. Collectively, the crimes and misdemeanors of Hustvedt's artist characters become an index of the philosophical positions she dramatizes.

Hustvedt's joke works through a form of double ventriloquism. The joke appears in an essay attributed to art critic Richard Brickman, a persona adopted by Harriet Burden, who publishes philosophical essays in academic journals using the pseudonym. In other words, the joke is a product of mixing personae. Siri Hustvedt is Richard Brickman, who is Harriet Burden, philosophizing about the relationship of the work of Siri Hustvedt to a lineage of philosophers and neuroscientists making arguments about the mind, body, and self. Brickman's tone is downright severe; Burden's position is playful, in the sense that she is playing a trick on her academic audience, but her remark is earnest. To get the joke, you have to be in on the levels of ventriloquism that mix the points of view. Hustvedt's position is a moving target because her method is to dramatize gaps and questions in response to a history of arguments and propositions. Taking too firm a position would make her like one of her artist criminals.¹

1 A firm position would also make Hustvedt an author of didactic fiction, designed to instruct

One way to trace the “moving target” of Hustvedt's position is to examine the portrait artists who reappear in all of Hustvedt's six published novels. A significant number of these artists are in the business of exploiting others through portraiture – almost a kind of soul stealing, whereby the artists capture some unnerving image of their subjects, an image that reveals some degree of instability in their identities. Hustvedt is interested in revealing these instabilities, but her narratives condemn their exploitation, which generally involves a fixing of unstable moments, through which a marginal aspect of the subject's identity becomes a public replacement for the person who posed for the portrait.

As Christine Marks argues in her book *“I am because you are”: Relationality in the Works of Siri Hustvedt* (2014), “Hustvedt's work exhibits the inevitable interrelatedness of the human experience while advocating self-other relations based on dialogical intersubjectivity” (2). Marks identifies a lineage of modern thinkers whose theories about “self-other relations” reverberate through Hustvedt's fiction like moving targets, including Hegel, Lacan, Winnicott, and Merleau-Ponty. Marks's choice of verbs captures key qualities of Hustvedt's narrative style. In her novels, she exhibits ideas about the self that she explores in her essays, where she advocates what Marks calls “a philosophy of mixing” – articulated explicitly by the character Violet in *What I Loved*: “mixing is the way of the world. The world passes through us – food, books, pictures, other people” (88). Exhibition is a recurring theme in the novels. Hustvedt's artists capture and exhibit portraits of her other characters, who respond with varying degrees of discomfort to finding images of themselves fixed, framed, and displayed for others. The discomfort arises from a tension that emerges from portraiture. Artist and subject mix in the process of creating images, but the subjects end up feeling exploited through the artists' denials of the mixing. The denials leave the subjects feeling exposed during moments when the world is passing through them.

In Hustvedt's first novel, *The Blindfold* (1992), the artist, a photographer named George, seduces Iris (famously, an anagram for *Siri*), into posing for him. Unnerved by the results, Iris accuses George of stealing her soul:

rather than to catalyze the kinds of subjective experience she writes about. David Brooks's *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* is a useful foil for Hustvedt's fiction. The “hidden sources” in Brooks's fictional thought experiment lie in the unconscious work of the mind-brain. Unlike Hustvedt, Brooks's position is a stable target – the unconscious is the creative, social force of cognitive neuroscience, not the roiling menace of psychoanalysis – and his prose plodding.

"You robbed me." I didn't know what the words meant, but they seemed to identify an amorphous truth.

He looked at me squarely. "You came here. I photographed you. You came because you wanted to come."

I stopped breathing. He was right. (78)

Iris is not sure why the print upsets her, but she knows she does not want it exhibited. The evidence is in her body. When Iris stops breathing, Hustvedt invites readers to imagine the interruption of her breath – to imagine George's power over Iris's autonomic nervous system. Her embodied experience becomes the evidence of his violation *and* her complicity. Iris wanted to be fixed, and George manipulated her. The only resolution to their debate is to acknowledge both truths. Nonetheless, George is the villain. He uses the portrait to instigate social controversy and to hurt her so he can witness her in a state of pain. Outright manipulation trumps a little unconscious desire for objectification. In his "dialogic intersubjective" relationships, George wields power through his position as witness and distributor, the one who controls who mixes with whom and how.

1. The Artists

Most of Hustvedt's artists are portraitists of one kind or another. They work in a range of media; some are obsessive, others nearly deranged, some malicious, some ruthless, others merely eccentric. They share a devotion to visual representation that overshadows decorum. They flout conventional attitudes about privacy, devote themselves to craft at the expense of intimate relationships, and they document what others don't want to see. While they are all interested in challenging cultural and aesthetic convention, their ethical stances – about the relationship between art and life or the portrait and the person – vary enormously. Their ethical positions become legible through their attitudes about framing. They all know that visual composition is powerful because it endows images with meaning. They all enjoy the power to manipulate the meanings of images. They all know that a portrait is a creative distortion. Their portraits frame the "dialogical intersubjectivity" (2014: 2) Christine Marks traces in Hustvedt's fiction. Portraits frame the mixing of artist, subject, and viewer. Reading about Hustvedt's portraits is almost like climbing into this frame to muck around with the materials that shape the encounters they engender. She judges her portraitists according to their ethical relationship to the mixing they provoke.

The artists who exploit portraiture's power to fix their subjects – including *The Blindfold's* George, *What I Loved's* Teddy Giles, *The Sorrows of an American's*

Jeffrey Lane, and *The Blazing World's* Rune – are outright villains. Those who experiment with visual forms that foreground unseen or unrepresentable qualities of their subjects' experience – including *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl's* Edward Shapiro, *What I Loved's* Bill Wechsler, *The Summer without Men's* Abigail, and *The Blazing World's* Harriet Burden – are difficult people who struggle with success at forming mutually rewarding social relationships. *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl's* Martin Petersen is in a category of his own. Deranged by his obsession with the image's power to distort reality, Petersen's work becomes evidence of crime and mental instability, yet his collages and life-size doll project share many of the aesthetic hallmarks of Hustvedt's other artists, especially the emphasis on the ironic relationship between the artist's materials and the subject's experience.

Portraits represent living bodies inhabiting physical space – in Hustvedt, apartments and streets, mostly – but they also represent the immaterial experience of those living bodies and the relationship between artist and subject. In that sense, portraiture is a vehicle for exploring elements of selfhood uncannily similar to the ones that comprise the theory of self and consciousness proposed by António R. Damásio, with whom Hustvedt has engaged in an ongoing public dialogue about their shared preoccupations. Damásio's theory of consciousness hinges on the dynamic relationship between "organisms" and "objects," a relationship that produces the mental "images" that comprise subjective experience (1999: 11). Damásio's model shares a great deal with Panksepp's. Both identify what Damásio calls "primordial feelings" (echoing Panksepp) as a foundation for both self and consciousness. In Damásio's words, these are "the elementary feelings of existence that spring spontaneously" from our brains' constant mapping of the changing states of our bodies (2010: 24). Damásio acknowledges what philosophers call an "explanatory gap" concerning bodies and the feelings that animate them. Hustvedt's artists explore or exploit this gap. In a sense, her novels are about the ethics of visual representation focused on how the artist's tools – paint, camera, plastic, clay – make new objects from selves. Damásio's argument suggests that objectification is fundamental to consciousness. We become who we are through our relationships with the objects in our worlds. As Christine Marks observes, Merleau-Ponty conceptualized self and other as "a union which transcends the distinction between subject and object and allows for intersubjective harmony" (2014: 57). That's the ideal, but as Marks acknowledges, it can go wrong. If relations are not reciprocal, the result can be "cleavage," "loss of subjectivity," and even "annihilation." In Hustvedt's fiction, the relationship between artists and their subjects is fraught with the ethics of reciprocity implied in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the self. The artists document objectification, and her novels dramatize the ethical questions that ensue: What does the new

object – the portrait – do to its subject? Does it foster union or catalyze annihilation? Might it transform the psyche of the subject? Is it the artist's responsibility to care?

Hustvedt doesn't answer these questions in her novels. Instead, she dramatizes the ethics of visual representation – which she explores in more concrete terms in her essays. In *The Blindfold* (1992), George persuades Iris to pose. She objects to the photograph, taken while she danced around his apartment in a frenzy, because it seems to represent her as “a face without reason” (63). The photograph circulates around New York City with a kind of talismanic force, gaining a social life of its own as its subject goes into a kind of peripatetic hiding. In *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996), two portraitists propel the eponymous heroine's confrontations with reality, perception, and illusion. Edward Shapiro, a New York artist visiting the small town where Lily was raised, becomes her lover – and drives her to jealousy when he paints her elderly neighbor while local misfit Martin Petersen builds a life-size doll of Lily. In *What I Loved* (2003), Bill Wechsler's paintings propel plot. The novel opens with narrator Leo Hertzberg's description of a portrait of a woman lying on the floor, haunted by the shadow of the artist and the foot and ankle of a woman apparently walking out of the frame. The second painting is a portrait of Mark, as the two-year-old son of Wechsler's friends and neighbors. When Mark becomes a teenager with a severe case of empathy disorder, he befriends *enfant terrible* artist Teddy Giles, who steals the portrait and exhibits it – torn and slashed – as his own work of metacommentary on the art world. In *The Sorrows of an American* (2008), protagonist Erik Davidsen develops a case of unrequited love for a neighbor whose estranged husband, Jeffrey Lane, is a controversial photographer. Lane photographs his daughter and her mother secretly, breaks into Davidsen's apartment, and photographs him in a state of uncontrolled rage – exhibiting the portrait without his permission. In *The Summer without Men* (2011), the elderly Abigail bewilders the novel's heroine and narrator, Mia Fredericksen, with her sinister “amusements” – works of needlepoint planted with secret buttons that open upon sinister worlds that seem to represent her community's history of sexual violence. In *The Blazing World* (2014), Harriet Burden, a giant, loquacious autodidact of an artist, hires successively three men to exhibit her works as their own, including her various versions of her “metamorphs” – three dimensional portraits of humanity's abject or liminal experience. In the end, the art scammer is scammed by her more ruthless peer, Rune, who taunts her with a video of her dead husband and seduces her into revealing a video portrait of her own antics, whereby the two artists don masks and play a sadomasochistic game. If there is an ethical undercurrent shared by these novels, it goes something like this: Human beings will represent the world and objectify each other in the process.

We should be careful about the process and the results. But the dynamics of objectification vary with relationships, so there is no singular ethical stance to guide us. It is all in the details – and the relations.

If *The Blindfold* inaugurates Hustvedt's use of portraits to propel plot, *The Blazing World*, her latest novel, complicates the narrative role of the portrait in too many ways to trace. Early in *The Blindfold*, Iris and George witness a woman undone by an epileptic seizure on a city street. George swears and fumbles in a failed attempt to get a shot of the suffering woman. Afterwards, he and Iris argue about the ethics of portraiture after she annoys him by suggesting “maybe it was for the best”:

“Why?” said Stephen. He sounded annoyed.

“Well, because it would be terrible for her if she knew, and it seems so invasive, recording a person's suffering.”

“You really believe that there are subjects that shouldn't be photographed?” George said. He spoke evenly and softly.

“Maybe I do,” I said, thinking aloud. (49)

Maybe. George interprets Iris's uncertainty as weakness. But he cannot see what he cannot see. An epileptic seizure represents the kind of experience – primordial feelings – that haunts a portrait. It is powerful and disabling, but it is also inarticulate. It marks a person, but that person cannot remember what happened. Put another way, the phenomenology of experience holds a spectral relationship to the portrait (a relationship Oscar Wilde dramatizes ingeniously in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*).

When Iris poses for George, the scene is a staged re-enactment of the seizure episode, with Iris cast in the part of the epileptic:

It doesn't matter, I said to myself. Maybe that thought was the break, the change I willed in myself without knowing why. The pace quickened. I heard myself laugh. We found a rhythm. George moved from side to side. He squatted, stood, knelt, and I moved with him. He laughed, and I danced, carefully at first, aware of my arms and legs, my waist and hips, seeing myself as in a mirror, but then I forgot myself and moved faster and faster. I gyrated and spun like a lunatic for George, who shouted encouragements and took what seemed like hundreds of pictures, stopping only to put more film in the camera. My feet pounded the floor. I made noise, slapping my thighs, beating a chair with my hands, and hooting with an exuberance that made me dizzy. My heart raced. I don't know how long it went on, but I remember panting from the effort, feeling the sweat in my hair and under my arms, and finally bending over in exhaustion. I looked at George. He grinned. He was sitting on the floor with his camera in his lap. I knelt down and crawled toward him, looking at his lean arms and beautiful mouth. I lifted my right arm and extended my hand toward his face, but something in his expression stopped me. I have what I

want, it seemed to say. Don't come any closer. I dropped my arm and sat back, still breathing hard. (54–55)

Iris performs like one of Charcot's nineteenth-century hysterics, willed by a man into a frenzy of feeling whose physicality and irrationality contrast starkly with her ordinary behavior and identity. She hears herself laugh; she slaps her thighs; she hoots; becomes dizzy and sweats. George grins, because he has gotten what he wanted: an image that seems to capture the interstices of Iris Vegan's composed public identity. His mistake is that he believes the performance is more real than Iris's public self, that unconscious or physical expression are more revealing than public behavior governed by social decorum.

In Hustvedt's fictional worlds, it is usually a mistake to believe in one form of experience at the expense of another. When Iris sees the photo George selects and prints, she is startled by the way it forces her to confront herself:

At first I didn't recognize myself. The person in the picture seemed to bear no resemblance to me, and for an instant I thought George had made a mistake, had given me the wrong photo, but then I saw myself, and I had a peculiar sensation of recovery, of remembering a forgotten event, something unpleasant and disorienting. I tried to catch it, but it was like a fragment of a dream that surfaces for a moment during the day, brought forth by a sight or sound, and then retreats – as quickly as it came – into unconsciousness. I put the picture down on the table but picked it up again. (62)

What does it mean that light projected onto paper, or paint, or plastics, or words can represent fragments of experience that “surfaces for a moment [...] then retreats – as quickly as it came”? How should we respond when forgotten experience or alien aspects of our identities are fixed or objectified in art? These are questions that remain alive throughout all Hustvedt's fiction.

If George's photograph suggests these questions indirectly, Harriet Burden addresses them directly in her work. She makes portraits in the form of three-dimensional metamorphs, whose bodies come in a variety of temperatures. She describes them as “the creatures that lived in my memory, not only actual persons, but those borrowed from my vast collection of books. I don't mean just characters but ideas, voices, shapes, figures, articulated thoughts, unarticulated feelings” (2014: 30). Burden extends and blurs the portrait, plays with its capacity to represent something like what Damásio calls “primordial feelings” (2010: 11). Her metamorphs suggest that aspects of self that cannot be seen can nonetheless be manipulated through portraiture, because what you do see makes you think about what you cannot.

Hustvedt endows Harriet Burden with many of her own philosophical positions – particularly the identity mixing that is so central to both her fiction and

nonfiction. “We are all a ménage,” Harriet states (2014: 230). As the two artists initiate their collaboration, she elaborates:

And, Harry asked, where does it begin? The thoughts, words, joys, and fears of other people enter us and become ours. They live in us from the start. Moral panic, the multiple-personality epidemic, and recovered-memory mania ran wild in the eighties and early nineties as a wave of suggestion passed from one person to another, a kind of mass hypnosis or spreading unconscious permission that allowed countless people to suddenly become a man, a Pandora's box. Therapists reported on patients with dozens of personalities. Whole populations housed inside a single body – men, women, and children coming out as alters. What did it mean? And then when the name of the illness was changed to Dissociative Identity Disorder and skepticism reasserted itself, the numbers of people diagnosed with the illness diminished to a few cases here and there. What Harry wanted to know was: Were we just one person or were we all many? (326–337)

But Harry is a mess. She allows herself to be duped by a sociopathic charlatan with a shallow interest in philosophy and a fixation with provoking a limited range of feelings in his work – mainly shock, terror, and envy. She may be a mess because she cannot resist provoking the populations housed in her body into savage warfare. She cannot resist making herself an experiment.

Burden's metamorphs are experimental portraits in three dimensions. They free their subjects of conventional frames. Her multiple narrators describe them from their own points of view, generally documenting their ambivalence to the uncanny creatures. She exhibits them in a show entitled *The Suffocation Rooms* under the name Phineas Q. Eldridge, one of her lodgers – a drag queen and performance artist whose experiments with mutable identity meld well with her ethos. In Eldridge's words,

When I arrived at the lodge, Harry was tending to her own characters, a group of stuffed figures – cold, coolish, warm, and hot. I became fond of her “metamorphs” (as Harry called them), even though a good number of them were injured or deformed. I take that back. I liked the hurt metamorphs most, the ones with missing legs and arms, with braces and slings, humps, or rashes painted on them. They did not look real, but they felt more human than a lot of humans I know, and Harry was gentle with her homemade critters. (117–118)

Burden “tends” her metamorphs – like you would an infant or a farm animal. Eldridge calls them “homemade critters.” The metamorphs are humanoid, designed to call attention to the fact that a human is an organism, a species of mammal. Their injuries and deformities are reminders that there is no norm or absolute when it comes to human bodies. They do not look like “real” humans, because a portrait is not a real human. But to Eldridge they “*felt* more human than *a lot of humans*” (*italics mine*). Notice the wily slip from “real” to

“human” here. Eldridge uses the two words like synonyms, but there is always a subtle difference in meaning between words that mean almost the same thing. Burden’s metamorphs challenge the idea that we can access another person’s reality. Instead, they emphasize feeling. It is more important that her critters feel human. Eldridge’s “a lot” is a subtle addition to what amounts to a kind of code for reading the metamorphs. A lot of humans do not feel real to him, but this means that others do. Burden’s critters land somewhere between those who feel real to him and those who do not. They disturb binary responses between art and subject. Some art feels more human than humans; some humans feel more human than others; some humans feel less human than art.

The Suffocation Rooms consists of a series of rooms, each a little warmer than the last, amplifying the metamorphs’ peculiar range of body temperatures. Burden has placed critters made from beeswax in boxes, “trying to get out,” and populated the rooms with other metamorphs, who grow larger as visitors walk from one room to the next (125). In Eldridge’s words, “The metamorphs were big, goofy-looking, lumpy things, who sat at their tables in all seven rooms” (125). The seventh room is the warmest and most startling:

Because she did want the person to look like an alien in some 1950s sci-fi film, the model became more and more realistic: skinny, eerily transparent (liver, heart, stomach, and intestines just barely visible), hermaphroditic (small breast buds and not-yet-grown penis), frizzy red human hair. The creature is strangely beautiful, and when you see him/her in the seventh room out of the box, standing on a stool to look out the window, or rather into the mirror, you can’t help feeling touched somehow. The really large (by now) metamorphs have finally noticed that the personage is out and have turned their heads to look at it. (125)

The rooms and the body temperatures replace the conventional frames of portraiture – moving targets replacing fixed ones. *The Suffocation Rooms* involves portraits within portraits. The figure in the box works like a stand-in for all portraits and their subjects, while the metamorphs looking on become portraits of the art’s audience. In that sense, viewers are asked to consider their own identities in the act of relating to portraiture, a collective and dynamic act that makes everybody involved both a subject and an object.

The key difference between Burden’s art and Rune’s lies in their approaches to objectification. Rune makes portraits of himself with the intent to objectify everybody involved, including himself. As Burden’s starving poet lover Bruno observes, “I thought he looked like a goddamn male model with his rippling abdomen, popping biceps, films of him scratching his ass, picking his nose” (160). As the objectifier, though, he gets to be the last remaining subject in a world of objects. Burden’s collaboration with him is a challenge – to herself as much as to

him. She’s determined to convince him that identity is dynamic, relational, messy, hard to see, lost in feelings, recursive. Early in their relationship, Burden buys one of Rune’s video portraits, which Bruno describes in one of the sections he narrates:

I’m not sure Harry really liked the thing she bought by Rune – the video screen with faces cut to bits and put back together again, a movie mishmash of glamour and gore. It was multiple – which meant “not that expensive.” One afternoon, I parked myself in front of the screen and gave it a yeoman’s try. Let me be fair, I said, and not loaded with prejudice just because the artist is an asshole. T.S. Eliot was no paragon, was he? Are these bloody mugs and sliced cheeks any good? Am I interested? Do I care? To be honest, the darned thing stumped me. I told Harry it made me feel lonely, and she laughed, but the she said it made her lonely, too. It’s not about communion. (162)

It’s not about communion. When there is a problem with a portrait in Hustvedt’s work, this is it. Communion is the art of mixing, an antidote to the exploitive potential of portraiture. The climax of Burden’s relationship involves a private game in which the two artists don masks and engage in some gender-switching role playing – embodied portraits of characters that represent their commingled fantasy lives. Burden loses. She cannot help becoming Rune’s object, and in the end he steals her work and discredits her as a lunatic. If *The Blazing World* is a critique of the art world, its thesis is that too often the art world is interested only in objects and objectification.

2. Dorian Gray’s Grandchildren

When Dorian Gray examines his reflection in Basil Hallward’s portrait, seeing his own moral and corporeal decay displaced onto the canvas, ekphrasis – a device that ordinarily freezes time – acquires the momentum of narrative. Dorian Gray’s painting reverses portraiture’s tendency to fix its subjects:

Hour by hour, and week by week, the thing upon the canvas was growing old. It might escape the hideousness of sin, but the hideousness of age was in store for it. The cheeks would become hollow or flaccid. Yellow crow’s feet would creep round the fading eyes and make them horrible. The hair would lose its brightness, the mouth would gape or droop, would be foolish or gross, as the mouths of old men are. There would be the wrinkled throat, the cold, blue-veined hands, the twisted body. (Wilde 1989: 99)

Still beatific, Dorian Gray resists narrative time and maintains his perfection on the surface, but the portrait accumulates his experience and is marked by the sins he displaces. Ordinarily, portraiture captures a moment of subjectivity

while narrative chronicles an indeterminate series of passing moments and feelings. Wilde requires the supernatural to transform conventional portraiture into a form that can represent the flux of identity. Hustvedt's artists require only the magic of aesthetic innovation. Wilde places Dorian Gray before the canvas to read the image of his disintegrating body. Like Iris Vegan, an artist seems to have robbed his soul, but unlike Iris's, Dorian's portrait does not circulate. Comparatively, this turns out to be worse. With Hustvedt's novels as a clue, it is easy to see that Dorian prevents himself from mixing, communing, or relating. He is alone with a portrait that documents the hideous evolution of his primordial feelings.

In his book *Portraiture* (2004), art historian Richard Brilliant surveys an intellectual history of the portrait – a history that focuses on paradoxes and tensions created when the flux of identity is represented in static forms. Sounding a little like Hustvedt, Brilliant observes that “[i]f identity is a flexible concept, then defining the relationship between the original and his portrait is surely problematic” (59). Hustvedt's portrait artists tend to revel in the flexibility of identity – and to various degrees they seek power through manipulating that flexibility by exercising control over the relationship between subject and viewer. The trick is to deliver the viewer with a moment of flux and to fix the subject in that moment. A viewer may wonder about the life that surrounds the subject, but the captured moment dominates.

Brilliant describes portraiture “as a method of packaging individuals in neat containers of personhood” (83), but he acknowledges that the particular method is never simple and the packages rarely neat:

Historically, portrait artists have often sought to discover some central core of personhood as the proper object of their representation. They have done so not because they doubted its existence, as did Klee, but because they wanted to capture, unmistakably, the special quality or qualities of their subject. That invisible core of self was always hard to grasp and even harder to portray, so various solutions were invented that would extend the metaphorical nature of the portrait in a manner consistent with the subject's own behaviour or patterns of self-representation. This mode of portrayal has, as its ruling principle, the presentation of the individual in some special, personal capacity, however extreme that might appear. (67)

Each of Hustvedt's portrait artists deals with the difficulties of grasping “the invisible core self” with particular techniques, using various means to shape “the metaphorical nature of the portrait” in a way that fulfills a set of drives that reveal cracks or gaps in his own flexible identity – though Hustvedt does not provide a sustained representation of the artists' mental lives, thereby making it impossible to do much other than conjecture about what the cracks and gaps mean.

In her book *Portraits and Persons*, philosopher Cynthia Vreeland describes portraiture in similar terms:

[I]n portraiture, both artist and viewer confront the perennial philosophical problem of the mind's relation to the body. The portrait artist is an alchemist who seeks to make inert physical material ‘live’ and show us a person, an actual individual whose physical embodiment reveals psychological awareness, consciousness, and an inner emotional life. (2010: 1)

In Hustvedt's novels, the alchemists are powerful, because they possess a unique control over what is revealed – or concocted – with regard to the relationship between “physical embodiment” and “psychological awareness, consciousness, and an inner emotional life.” Building on this idea, Vreeland argues that “since antiquity, portraits have been valued because they facilitate contact with important persons who are lost to us” (2010: 72–73). Hustvedt's artists are postmodern. They are not in the business of painting important personages, but they do associate loss with portraiture. The subject of a portrait will never be as she was when it was painted.

Bill's portrait of Violet in *What I Loved* illustrates the problem of time in portraiture by including multiple figures:

Bill's painting hung alone on a wall. It was a large picture, about six feet high and eight feet long, that showed a young woman lying on the floor in an empty room. She was propped up on one elbow, and she seemed to be looking at something beyond the edge of the painting. Brilliant light streamed into the room from that side of the canvas and illuminated her face and chest. Her right hand was resting on her pubic bone, and when I moved closer, I saw that she was holding a little taxi in that hand – a miniature version of the ubiquitous yellow cab that moves up and down the streets of New York.

It took me about a minute to understand that there were actually three people in the painting. Far to my right, on the dark side of the canvas, I noticed that a woman was leaving the picture. Only her foot and ankle could be seen inside the frame, but the loafer she was wearing had been rendered with excruciating care, and once I had seen it, I kept looking back at it. The invisible woman became as important as the one who dominated the canvas. The third person was only a shadow. For a moment I mistook the shadow for my own, but then I understood that the artist had included it in the work. The beautiful woman, who was wearing only a man's T-shirt, was being looked at by someone outside the painting, a spectator who seemed to be standing just where I was standing when I noticed the darkness that fell over her belly and her thighs. (2003: 4)

The woman leaving the frame and the artist's shadow suggest a narrative – and therefore time. The light streaming through the windows and the miniature taxi suggest a larger milieu for that narrative. The viewer – in this case the novel's narrator – draws attention to the fact that identity implies relationship: “The in-

visible woman became as important as the one who dominated the canvas.” Why? Because she is a sign of Violet’s relational identity.

Of course, there is a lot the viewer cannot know. His relation to the figures on the canvas involves a fantasy of relating to its subjects. The painter distorts identity through technique; the viewer grasps for it by looking. What happens to the subject of the portrait? That is the question that Hustvedt dramatizes with all her fictional portraits. The answers vary. They are a moving target that depends on the ethical stance of the artist, the social and psychological position of the subject, and both their relationships to a history of ideas about mind and body – a history that is like a canvas for Hustvedt’s narratives. Hustvedt’s representation of characters is focalized by this history of ideas; she puts her own audiences in the position of investing emotionally in the lives of characters who embody its insights and gaps. Theoretical problems become narrative ones, urgent and embodied in fictional lives.

A second portrait animates *What I Loved*, a portrait of Mark as a toddler, painted by Bill and later acquired by the villain-artist Teddy Giles: “The little boy was laughing madly as he held a lamp shade on top of his head like a hat, and he was naked except for a paper diaper so heavy with urine and feces that it had sunk low on his hips” (2003: 289). Cryptically, Teddy Giles informs Leo that he has bought the painting “and may use it” (290). Leo is disturbed:

I knew as well as anyone that paintings circulate – move from owner to owner, languish in dark rooms, reappear, are sold and resold, stolen, destroyed, restored for better or for worse. A painting may resurface anywhere, and yet the sight of that canvas in this place appalled me. (290)

Paintings circulate. They “languish in dark rooms” like Dorian Gray’s. They reappear, are stolen and destroyed, like Iris’s photograph. Why is Leo appalled? Partly because Mark has grown into a problem – a liar who seems to lack empathy, like Teddy Giles. When Teddy repurposes the portrait, he works in a tradition of shock art very much like Rune’s:

Teddy Giles used the painting of Mark in his new exhibition. The scandal revolved around the fact that the valuable canvas had been destroyed. A figure of a murdered woman, missing one arm and a leg, had been pushed through Bill’s painting of his son. Her head protrude through one side of the canvas, choking her at the neck. The rest of her maimed body stuck out on the other side. The force of the piece relied on the fact that an original work of art, owned by Giles, was now as mutilated as the mannequin. (299)

In the art world, the scandal is about the destruction of a valuable work of art. In the novel, it is about the artist’s willful exploitation of the flux of identity. His dark reading of relationality equates it with mutilation. If identity is not fixed, there is no self to value. That is the nihilistic reading shared by Hustvedt’s villains.

Christine Marks emphasizes the “ambivalence of the other’s presence” in Hustvedt’s “conceptualization of vision and visual art” (2014: 68). Marks links this ambivalence to Hustvedt’s deconstruction of “epistemological certainties attributed to the scopic field” (68). Hustvedt’s villains have a way of asserting their own vision as a reflection – or successful manipulation – of the realities they represent. They deny or mock the ambivalence of their subjects. As Marks argues, Hustvedt “highlights how the perception of other people, as a well as the perception of visual art, reflects identity constellations governed by either intersubjective exchange or subject-object domination. [. . .] Looking at somebody else, the individual sees part of herself reflected through the eyes of the other. The look can be both an instrument of subjection and a mediator of affirmation” (69). When a Teddy Giles or a Rune insists on stamping an image with an imprimatur of definitiveness or ownership, he yokes the perception of art and people, he makes art “an instrument of subjection.” When they do, it is up to the subjects to find new, more reciprocal frames to occupy.

3. Hustvedt’s Frames

Siri Hustvedt has at least one thing in common with Harriet Burden: “The woman was chin-deep in the neuroscience of perception, and for some reason those unreadable papers with their abstracts and discussions justified her second life as a scam artist” (2014: 159). Hustvedt’s villain-artists are reductionists, an accusation often lobbed at scientists. They believe they fix identity – or rob souls. That reductionism is key to Hustvedt’s use of portraiture as a means for exploring the questions about identity and embodiment that drive her involvement with neuroscience. She draws explicit connections between art and neuroscience throughout her essay collection *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012). In an essay entitled “Embodied Visions: What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art?” she makes her position with regard to neuroscience clear:

Despite the scientific zeal to atomize experience, to break it down into comprehensible bits and pieces, this approach often results in a frozen view of reality. In recent years, parts of the scientific community have been influenced by the phenomenology of Husserl, and,

more important, by Merleau-Ponty, to challenge a paralyzed, purely third-person view of perception. (2012: 348)

Hustvedt's aim, in the multiple genres she writes, goads neuroscience into accounting for first-person subjectivity. Her term "paralyzed" could be adapted to describe the portraits of her more nefarious artists, the ones who atomize or freeze the experience of their subjects.

Unlike Burden, Siri Hustvedt does not mask herself with pseudonyms when she publishes articles in peer-reviewed science journals – a highly unusual practice for a contemporary novelist – or engages in public discussion with world-renowned neuroscientists and philosophers like Antonio Damásio, Jaak Panksepp, and Ned Block. Instead, she creates new frames for her ideas about relationships between mind, body, self, and art. To date, Hustvedt has published three collections of essays. She has also published three articles in three peer-reviewed neuroscience journals: "Three Emotional Stories" in *Neuropsychanalysis*, "Philosophy Matters in Brain Matters" in *Seizure*, and "I Wept for Four Years and When I Stopped I Was Blind" in *Clinical Neurophysiology*. She published a book-length essay, *The Shaking Woman, or, A History of My Nerves*, documenting her own neurological anomalies. She has lectured at numerous conferences devoted to neuroscience and philosophy, she has made public appearances in dialogue with neuroscientists like Damásio and Panksepp, and she engaged in debate with philosopher turned cognitive scientist Ned Block in *The New York Times*. In her essays and lectures, Hustvedt translates her narrative preoccupations into arguments – and in the process creates new relations between art and science. She also establishes new contexts for the ideas she explores in fiction, creating for herself an unprecedented position as a novelist who makes direct contributions to debates in theoretical neuroscience.

Hustvedt articulates her roving investigations of these questions in terms of frames in *The Shaking Woman*:

Who are we, anyway? What do I actually know about myself? My symptom has taken me from the Greeks to the present day, in and out of theories and thoughts that are built on various ways of seeing the world. What is body and what is mind? Is each of us a singular being or a plural one? How do we remember things and how do we forget them? Tracking my pathology turns out to be an adventure in the history of experience and perception. How do we read a symptom or an illness? How do we frame what we observe? What is inside the frame and what falls outside it? (2010: 69)

If the self is a moving target in Hustvedt's work, she inventories some of its movements in her extended essay on her own convulsions and migraines. To know herself, Hustvedt traces the history of medicine, neuroscientific theory,

philosophy, and the representation of gender. The implication is that the self cannot be contained within a single frame.

In an essay published in the journal *Neuropsychanalysis*, Hustvedt rehearses yet another set of frames – disciplinary ones. She proposes a hypothetical novelist, psychoanalyst, and neuroscientist and ventriloquizes their respective explanations of the relationship between memory and imagination. For the novelist, "The story does all the work"; "the novel develops an internal logic of its own, guided by my feelings"; for the psychoanalyst, memories, fantasies, and dreams "exist in a dialogical atmosphere and an abstract conceptual framework. [...] What is created between the analyst and patient is not necessarily a story that represents historical fact, but one that reconstructs a past into a narrative that makes sense of troubling emotions"; for the neuroscientist, "subjective memory and creative acts [are] objective categories, which she or he hopes will unveil the neurobiological realities of a self that remembers and imagines" (2011: 188). If we want to understand phenomena as complex as imagination, memory, creativity, or self, we need multiple frames to do it.

At the end of "Three Emotional Stories," Hustvedt makes an elegant argument about her craft: "Writing fiction, creating an imaginary world, is, it seems, rather like remembering what never happened" (195). Publishing memories of what never happened is a potentially powerful thing to do. That is where ethics come in. By making a career of mixing genres and disciplines, she refuses the methodological or epistemological assumptions that tend to be associated with the novelist, the psychoanalyst, or the neuroscientist. As Marks argues, "Hustvedt [...] promotes a responsibility of the artist in the way in which he or she represents the object" (2014: 100). Quoting Hustvedt, she observes that "[a] good photographer thus does not simply objectify and control her subject, but 'recognizes all that remains unseen'" (101). If Hustvedt's position is a moving target, it is because she emulates that good photographer. She dramatizes "all that remains unseen" in her novels, but she also engages with contemporary neuroscience and neuroscientists in order to encourage them into recognizing the vitality of the unseen in their methods. When the object is the brain, it quickly becomes the self too. So Hustvedt delivers lessons in Merleau-Ponty to the world of neuroscience (and the reading public).

Hustvedt's friend and sometimes collaborator Antonio Damásio argues that the feelings of selfhood involve a kind of constant vacillation and mixing of the "self-as-subject" and "self-as-object." Of course, *mixing* is Hustvedt's term, but it is an apt description of the concept. The self-as-object is "the material me," a "dynamic collection of integrated neural processes, centered on the representation of the living body, that finds expression in a dynamic collection of integrated mental processes" (Damásio 2010: 9; emphasis original). The self-as-subject is

a more elusive presence, far less collected in mental or biological terms than the me, more dispersed, often dissolved in the stream of consciousness, at times so annoyingly subtle that it is there but almost not there. The self-as-knower is more difficult to capture than the plain me, unquestionably. But that does not diminish its significance for consciousness. The self-as-subject-and-knower is not only a very real presence but a turning point in biological evolution. We can imagine that the self-as-subject-and-knower is stacked, so to speak, on top of the self-as-object, as a new layer of neural processes giving rise to yet another layer of mental processing. There is no dichotomy between self-as-object and self-as-knower; there is, rather, a continuity and a progression. The self-as-knower is grounded on the self-as-object. (79)

In the world of Hustvedt's novels, an ethical portrait is one that provides an aesthetic home for the subject-object dynamic that makes the relational self.

Ironically, the self-as-subject becomes 'there' through its relations – which inevitably involves objectification, as we see in the relationships that ensue from the portraits Hustvedt's artists create. In the opening of her essay entitled "Outside the Mirror," Hustvedt describes herself in terms that recall the frenzied dance Iris does for George in order to illustrate the role of the witness in the making of identity:

It is a peculiar truth that I see far less of myself than other people do. I can see my fingers typing when I look down at them. I can examine my shoes, the details of a shirt cuff, or admire a pair of new tights on my legs while I am sitting down, but the mirror is the only place where I am whole to myself. Only then do I see my body as others see it. But does my mirror-self really represent my persona in the world? Is that woman who gives herself the once-over, who checks for parsley in incisors to avoid a green smile, who leans close to study new wrinkles or the red blotches that sometimes appear on her rapidly aging countenance a reasonable approximation of what others see? I do not witness myself as I talk and gesture emphatically to make absolutely sure my point has been made. I do not see myself as I stride down the street, dance, or stumble, nor do I know what I look like when I laugh, grimace, cry, or sneer. (2012: 52)

Hustvedt sees herself in the frame and wonders, "does my mirror-self really represent my persona in the world?" She makes an object of herself, but it is not the object others make of her. She studies new wrinkles and red blotches on her face, like Dorian Gray gazing at his portrait. She can never witness the dancing, stumbling, laughing, or grimacing others see. If, like Dorian Gray, she were to sit for a portrait, she would see the inexorable flux of her identity fixed at a particular moment, as seen from the particular point of view of the artist. She would see a portrait that objectifies her, but also one that gives aesthetic form to her relationship with the artist and viewers' relationships with the portrait. She would see a fixed representation haunted by the elusive and dense relations that make identity.

4. Final Frame

"I have come home to die, but dying is not so simple in this our twenty-first-century world. It takes a team."

– Harriet Burden, *The Blazing World*

Sweet Autumn Pinkney, the new age metaphysical dualist, has the last word in *The Blazing World* – and her last word frames Hustvedt's preoccupation with mixing in a voice that is unlike any other to appear in her fiction:

Auras are like magnets. They pick up all kinds of crap, and mine was getting mucky from the vibrations and negative energies. I was running my hands through my hair all the time and washing up, washing up. Sometimes I'd go outside and walk and let the wind from the water blow over me and clean me. (Hustvedt 2014: 97)

The gesture is not ironic. Harriet is dying, and Sweet Autumn Pinkney's arrival – new age philosophies and all – provides the solace she cannot seem to find from anybody else on the team that marshals her death. With Sweet Autumn Pinkney, Hustvedt adds yet another frame to her exploration of self. If the novelist finds it in story, the psychoanalyst in memory, and the neurobiologist in physiology, Sweet Autumn Pinkney finds it everywhere. She uses new age language to express an idea that suffuses Hustvedt's fiction, from *The Blindfold* to *The Blazing World*: Identity is relational, but its relations can be dangerous. Her artists are measured by their ethical responses to the danger. In the hands of a George or a Teddy Giles or a Rune, subjects become objects with little recourse to the dynamic relationship between objectivity and subjectivity necessary for a person to thrive. In the hands of a Harriet Burden, we all become subjects on the verge of abjection. But in the hands of a Sweet Autumn Pinkney, we are magnets. In each case, it takes a team – not just to die, but to live. Relationships constitute identity. How they do it has everything to do with the ethics of those involved. In Siri Hustvedt's works, portraits are vehicles for exploring the dynamics of objectification involved in being human, and frames become symbols for the ethical choices confronted by an artist attuned to those dynamics.

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Klaus Lösch and Heike Paul

Dimensions of Tacit Knowledge and the Art(s) of Explication in Siri Hustvedt's Work

1. Introduction

Siri Hustvedt's fictional and non-fictional works circle around the themes of (female) subjectivity and creativity as they are of central relevance to art and aesthetic experience, psychoanalysis, history, and memory. Exploring these broad and complex topics, Hustvedt eclectically engages with texts from a large (and rather male-dominated) canon of Western philosophy and literature in order to point out argumentative fault lines, ambiguities, and (gender) biases along the way and to create new stories in the interstices opened up by these maneuvers. Her (re)formulations of old but still pertinent questions relate to notions of the (autonomous) self, the workings of the psyche, the problem of intersubjectivity, and the role of the imagination. This essay seeks to identify dimensions of tacit knowledge in Hustvedt's writings in order to analyze her work in the wider multidisciplinary framework of critical approaches to knowledge production, and, in turn, to probe the gender-specific aspect of tacit knowledge which appears to be often neglected in recent scholarship. We will single out three different texts in order to focus on three different ways in which the tacit dimension (to use the title of Michael Polanyi's well-known work [1966]) of knowing is 'presentified' in her writings.¹ 'Presentifying' here means to make the tacit/implicit partially explicit and thus to make it tentatively accessible (but not easily graspable or comprehensible) in language; the concept of the tacit dimension of knowing thus allows for the discussion of divergent topics and effects of such implicitness. First, in her non-fictional account *The Shaking Woman, or, A History of My Nerves* (2009), which may be classified as life writing and has been called a "neuro-memoir" (Boyers 2014) and in some of her personal essays collected in *Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012), Siri Hustvedt looks at conceptualizations of subjectivity and the embodied subject specifically in terms of 'saneness' vs. pathol-

¹ The Erlanger research program on "presence and tacit knowledge" funded by the German research foundation is the institutional context for this essay. The program is dedicated to analyses of (culturally specific) phenomena of presence and their interdependency with forms of tacit knowledge. The latter is understood in light of a repertoire of theories and perspectives in the sociology of knowledge and the philosophy of knowledge ranging from Gilbert Ryle, Karl Mannheim, and Michael Polanyi to Alexis Shotwell and Alva Noë.