

Share Your Piece of the Puzzle

I sometimes feel ashamed to express my interest in subjectivity when many theorists today push for a new kind of ideology. Of what use could the subject be to the development of radical leftist politics? Perhaps None. Ideology does not need “subjects,” it needs “believers.” Everyday politics—the kind that happen on the street or in the marketplace—can disguise themselves as a form of poetic thinking that is both highly emotional and imaginative. After all, what we value about the poetic is that it does not need to insist on its relevance.

Yet even in art, historically a field of poetic freedom and self-expression, the Self gets bad press. The recourse to selfhood in artistic practices or art writing is perceived too subjective, self-indulgent, narcissistic, and confessional. In an *Art Forum* review of Frances Stark’s show at Marc Foxx Gallery in 2014, writer Travis Diehl goes further and suggests that Stark’s work is “so subjective... that it’s hard to identify any specific claims—only associations, only interests, only reference.”¹ Self-exposure in art, writing, or pop-culture, is often easily dismissed as apolitical, ineffective, and fundamentally narcissistic. I wonder if this is always the case, or if other readings are possible.

Admittedly, there is good reason to be pessimistic about the way the Self has taken to the stage of art. Very often self-exposure in art mimes and mirrors the world we live in offering rather superficial diagnoses of our culture; art that illustrates the ways

commodity culture and new technology has altered our affective experience is widely accepted. Yet there’s something frankly exhausting, if not altogether confusing, about being forced to inhabit someone else’s life.

Self-exposure, no matter how charming and witty, can be easily perceived as an imposition. It is unquestionable that we often overdose on each other, yet it is equally true that collectivizing feelings, on and offline, is a way of sharing a piece of your life’s puzzle with others.

Despite the fact that Neoliberal societies that exploit the technologically mediated Self have accelerated the rate at which people produce and share, the desire to do so is hardly new: In the early ‘80s Michael Foucault focused his research on Greco-Roman “techniques of living,” including letter writing, in order to demonstrate how modern culture transformed the individual’s relation to themselves. Letter writing was common among philosophers and political leaders; very often their correspondences recounted daily activities and quotidian observations in detail—not unlike snapping a lunchtime selfie tweeted with the hashtags #Foodie and #Feelinggreat.

The point of writing a letter to a friend, Foucault observed, was not to inform others of an important event that might have marked that particular day to record. On the contrary, the letter testifies to the quality of a mode of being: I did so and I thought so, and this makes me who I am. More importantly, the fact of sharing intimate experiences and subjective

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impressions with friends or simple acquaintances was not understood as a form of confession, but as therapy. It was not about revealing a truth about oneself, but a way of attending to one's caring for the intellectual, psychic, and physical well being of oneself and others. Letter writing relied on the ability of language to put us in another's place, extending our experience and enabling us to see from another's point of view. Letters functioned as an existential manual of sorts: reading about someone's reaction to a moment of sadness or depression, helped the recipient of the letter to learn how to possibly deal with a similar experience when it occurred. Personal correspondence enabled participants to share knowledge about how to live better.

Now, I wonder if it would be possible to understand contemporary art practices that address the self in these terms: as ways of caring for oneself and for others. In other words, can we conceive of the personal not as a mirror of one's own personality, but as a mode in which bodies produce resonances? By bodies here I mean flesh and bone, but also texts, artworks, images, words, technologies, inanimate things and all their attendant meanings and affect. There are artworks that speak in unexpected and uncanny ways, shedding light on the deeper corners of dreams, desires, and intuitions. There are artworks that capture what it means to be transformed by the multivalent realities we create and inhabit.

Take as example Francis Stark's iconic work *My Best Thing* (2011). By exposing her personal life and emotions, Francis Stark discusses the ways in which intimacy, love, desire, and identity are created, enacted, and negotiated in the era of dating apps and virtual chat rooms. In this feature-length computer-animated

film, which premiered at the 2011 Venice Biennale, Stark created a Playmobil-like avatar who engages in a virtual intimate relationship with an unknown man. In the video, intimacy is not so much sexual as it is conversational, and pleasure is not necessarily seductive, but rather relational: it's the pleasure of communicating with someone. Discussion drifts from politics to love, professional ambitions, and personal biography. The most intimate moments in the video are the ones that address existential and universally shared matters: the way we seek each other's attention, how we perceive ourselves, how other see us, and the fragility of our social lives. As the dialogue unfolds, it becomes clear that even though they come from different parts of the world, the two characters—the artist and the anonymous man she converses with—share an unexpected existential bond. Despite the intimate tone of the conversation, the video does not feel cornered as the artist's story that the viewer passively sits and watches; the dialogue is also *our* story. The video opens up spaces of resonance between the artist, the anonymous man, and the viewer, who are exposed to each other feelings, personal stories, experiences, and knowledge. *My Best Thing* never simply mirrors the reality of our mediated relationships, identities, and affective life (as post-internet art often literally does), but rather puts the viewer in the position of having to reckon with awkward moments and odd situations, desires, feelings, projections, misunderstandings, moments of despair and of mutual recognition. It's hard not to identify with the characters and the situation in the video, despite its unlikely circumstances.

Self-exposure might be understood as form of narcissism, but this won't get us beyond the obvious.



(Namely that to some extent we—human beings—are vain.) Or, we can think of the act of sharing intimate experiences as a way of creating a potential space of political action, where, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, “I appear to others as others appear to me”²; of learning from each other’s moods, desires, traumas, obsessions or intuitions. This tactic of sharing may be sometimes boring, exhausting, annoying, or irritating; it is not easy. But, fostering and keeping the collective together rarely is.

1

Frances Stark, *My Best Thing* (2011). Digital video. Image courtesy of the artist and Marc Foxx, Los Angeles.

2

Frances Stark, *Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write* (2008). Vinyl, paint, rice paper & fabric on casein on canvas, 55 × 34 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Marc Foxx, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

2. Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.



Why should you
not be able
to assemble
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write?