

# Towards the Other

Art, Ethics and the boundaries of the Self



Aldobranti





*The question of how the self encounters the Other—how it recognises, resists, or transforms in relation to that strangeness—has become ever more pressing. What once may have seemed an abstract or philosophical preoccupation now lies exposed across the structures of daily life, where political frontiers grow rigid, and conversation falters across lines of difference. The shrinking space for disagreement, for unfamiliarity, for difference itself, is symptomatic of a broader ethical contraction—a retreat into sameness. At stake is the refusal of encounter, and with it, the foreclosure of relation.*

*This book begins with a desire to explore such refusals—not only at the level of policy or politics, but within the very fibres of perception and practice. Beginning with the philosophical questions raised by Mill and the problem of other minds, we trace a strand of ethical thought that has shaped the moral imagination of the West. Alongside this, we turn to artists—those who have laboured in the space between self and Other, who have rendered the distance visible or unbearable, ranging from Francis Bacon to Lorna Simpson and Frida Kahlo. Their works open wounds, or windows.*

*We extended this investigation further. Through an open call, we asked artists working today to respond to this theme—not in abstraction, but as it plays out in their ethical sensibility, in their personal engagements with alterity, vulnerability, and relational truth. The contributions gathered here are not illustrations of a theory, but movements toward, gestures across—each work its own reckoning with the Other, and what it means to be with.*



# Towards the Other

Art, Ethics, and the Boundaries of the Self

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# Artists of the Space Between the Self and the Other

At the core of this discussion is the relationship between the Self and the Other—a concept that has shaped philosophy and art for centuries. Thinkers from Hobbes and Mill to Kant, Hegel, and Sartre have explored how we define ourselves in relation to others. Are we independent individuals, or do our identities form through connection, conflict, and recognition? The question is not just theoretical; it plays out in daily life. We encounter others in moments of empathy, desire, misunderstanding, and resistance. Some relationships deepen our sense of self, while others challenge it. In art, this dynamic is explored through presence and absence, power and vulnerability, care and neglect. This discussion must necessarily justify the involvement of artists over years, to understand motivations and methods, if you like the ‘why’ first and then the ‘how’...

I recall, for instance, John Stuart Mill’s celebration of individual liberty and the recognition of each person as a bearer of unique, unshareable experiences, a sentiment that lays the groundwork for the understanding of other minds as irreducibly separate while still engaging in mutual dialogue. Yet, this very individuality, as Mill extols it, is not so much an isolated event as it is part of an intricate social tapestry, where the recognition of another’s interiority is both a right and a responsibility—a notion that is further complicated by Thomas Hobbes’s darker view of human nature, where the Other is seen as a potential threat, an adversary whose passions and ambitions might undermine the fragile fabric of societal order. Immanuel Kant, with his rigorous ethics and the categorical imperative, insists upon the moral duty to treat others as ends in themselves, not as mere means to our own subjective ends—a call that resonates deeply in the realm of artistic creation, where the Other’s dignity demands a representation that acknowledges their full humanity. G. W. F. Hegel, in his dialectic of master and slave, reveals how the Self attains self-consciousness precisely through its encounter with the Other, an encounter that is fraught with both conflict and mutual recognition, a historical unfolding of spirit that simultaneously constructs and deconstructs individual identity. Then, turning to the existential realm, Søren Kierkegaard lays bare the anxiety of individuality, the lonely burden of subjectivity, while Jean-Paul Sartre, in his exploration of “the look,” posits that the presence of the Other both constricts and liberates us—rendering our very being an arena of conflict and possibility, where the Other becomes both a mirror and a mystery. Finally, Levinas following Kant emphasises a steady focus on the ‘face of the other’ — a full and immutable presence — which Jacques Derrida, in his playful yet

profound deconstruction challenges the binary oppositions between self and other, exposing the inherent instability of any fixed identity and inviting us to embrace the fluidity and endless deferral of meaning.

Thus, as we begin this inquiry, I am compelled by this history of thought to recognize that the Other, in their very presence, imposes an ethical demand upon us—an obligation to acknowledge that which lies beyond the self. This ethical charge compels the artist, in turn, to reckon with the limitations of language and representation, to face the inherent impossibility of fully capturing another's essence without reducing them to a mere mirror of their own projections. In this sense, the act of artistic creation becomes an endless negotiation between the desire to know and the impossibility of fully knowing—a tension that is both the curse and the wonder of human creativity, an eternal echo of the philosophical journey through which we are all compelled to wander.

In considering Derrida's addition to Levinas' conception of the face-to-face ethical encounter, I am struck by the profound implications of what Derrida terms the "third" – that inevitable, disruptive intermediary which destabilizes any notion of a pristine, unmediated relationship between the Self and the Other. Levinas famously posits that the mere presence of the Other, as revealed in their face, imposes upon us an ethical demand, a call to acknowledge that which escapes our totalizing grasp—the impulse to reduce the Other to a fixed category or subsume them within our predefined framework of understanding; yet, Derrida reminds us that such immediacy is always already mediated by a network of linguistic, cultural, and symbolic forces that resist being fully subsumed by either side of the binary. For Derrida, the ideal of an unadulterated ethical relation—a direct, unencumbered meeting of the self and the other—is nothing more than a comforting illusion, one that neglects the inexorable presence of a "third" element that both disrupts and enriches the encounter.

This "third" operates as an ever-present reminder that every attempt at communication or representation is inherently provisional and fraught with discontinuity. It is the residue of all the absent voices, the forgotten histories, and the unspoken meanings that invariably seep into our interactions, rendering any ethical commitment as much a negotiation with absence as with presence. In the realm of art, this notion of the third challenges the artist to reckon not only with the visible or the tangible, but also with those spectral traces that hover at the margins of representation.

## Cameron Lings

Created during lockdown restrictions during the Coronavirus Pandemic, this digital illustration consists of thousands of intertwined evenly spaced lines that refuse to come into direct contact with another. This was a process driven from the new normal of emphasizing the importance of maintaining distance between each and every individual. I personally found this to be of interest when considering how outdoor and public spaces became challenged in a manner where human interaction is suddenly discouraged, now leaving the general public to divert around one another. In some instances, this act of avoidance was almost a poetic in its performance and execution, demonstrating an act of mutual respect between strangers. During the realization of this artwork, It allowed me to consider how chance interactions with others govern our direction through day-to-day life. Throughout the drawing, minor fluctuations in negative space and the realm between drawn forms, allows for variations in orchestrated density and visual depth.



e: [cml1998@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:cml1998@hotmail.co.uk)

<http://cameronlingsart.co.uk>

@cameron\_lings\_



## Deborah Richards

During the early Covid lockdown times I lived in Finchdean, a small village within the South Downs National Park. Finally, we were allowed to meet one other at a distance. A friend and I seized the opportunity to meet and sketch at Old Idsworth, a favourite place nearby. It felt wonderful to be out for more than just a fast walk with my husband, peacefully drawing alongside a herd of black heifers and my friend - at more than six feet distance! Memorably, one black heifer was standing away from the herd and this resonated strongly with my solitary lockdown experience. But when I came to create monotypes from the sketches I subconsciously created a second 'ghost' heifer closely juxtaposed with the lone black one. I came to realise that this reflected my solo self's desire to be with others. It also echoed my uncertainty and unease at the time about being out and about with another person during the very tenuous first lifting of restrictions. During the lockdowns I was allowed to print at a studio some 15 miles away, but always alone and the empty rural roads re-enforced the strangeness of those times. This dual image has given me much to think about towards creating future work





e: richardsdj@btinternet.com

<http://www.deborahrichards.co.uk>

@deborahrichards8700



The Other, in this light, is never entirely accessible or fully representable; rather, any portrayal is irrevocably colored by an array of deferrals—a multiplicity of echoes that continually thwart the possibility of a complete or transparent encounter.

Derrida's intervention thus invites us to reimagine Levinas's ethical imperative: instead of perceiving the Other as a pristine, unmediated call to responsibility, we must understand that the act of ethical recognition is perpetually interwoven with the traces of the third—a space where mediation, ambiguity, and even miscommunication are inescapable. For the artist, this translates into a continual process of negotiation, wherein the desire to capture or convey the essence of the Other is inextricably bound up with the recognition that every act of creation is already an act of translation, a transformation imbued with the mark of what is lost, deferred, or always already other. It is in this space—this liminal territory where self, other, and third coalesce—that the true challenge of ethical artistic engagement is to be found.

Moreover, Derrida's critique dismantles the notion that the ethical demand of the Other can be met by a simple, like-for-like mirroring of their face or essence, for such mirroring inevitably risks reducing the Other to a mere reflection of the self's own desires and preconceptions. Instead, the presence of the third necessitates a kind of openness—a willingness to be disrupted by that which escapes capture, a readiness to accept that every representation is an act of both inclusion and exclusion. The third is, therefore, not only a source of destabilization but also a potential site of ethical possibility: it compels the artist to remain ever vigilant, to acknowledge the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that animate the space between self and other, and to resist the temptation to claim finality or totality in representation.

In my own thinking on the interplay of these forces, I find that Derrida's challenge to Levinas enriches our understanding of artistic creation as a deeply ethical act—one that is continually in flux, marked by the tension between the desire for an authentic encounter and the inescapable reality of mediation. The "third" thus emerges as a critical concept, inviting us to embrace the inherent incompleteness of our engagements with the Other and to see in that very incompleteness the possibility of endless renewal, reinterpretation, and, ultimately, ethical transformation. Levinas speaks of the Other as an ethical summons, a call that arrives not as a demand but as a presence that cannot be ignored without



consequence. Yet in the interpretive haze that often gathers around his work, there is a tendency—perhaps born of the habits of moral philosophy—to render the Other as a figure of lack, as if they appear before us only in need, as if our engagement is a condescension rather than an encounter. This is a failure of perception, a distortion of the terms of relation. The Other is neither supplicant nor spectacle. They are not a site for the projection of our pity, nor a problem to be solved, nor a void to be filled with our generosity. They do not approach in hunger, awaiting our hand.

The Other does not stand before me as an object of pity, nor as a subject defined by need. To pity is to assume a position above, to cast the gaze downward as though the one I encounter were lacking, awaiting my intervention. But the Other does not come to me in supplication. Even in suffering, they are not reducible to that suffering. To see only need is to flatten the depth of their presence, to make of them an object, a hollow form into which I project my own sense of generosity. The ethical relation is not charity, not a transaction in which I am the benefactor and they the recipient. It is the recognition that my very selfhood is shaped in the meeting, that in the presence of the Other, I am called into question.

The Other does not seek anything more than contact. And in that contact, I am not simply the giver, not the one who bestows attention as though distributing favours. I, too, receive. The encounter is reciprocal, though not in the sense of balance or exchange. It is something deeper, more unsettling: I see myself differently in the gaze of the Other, feel the limits of my understanding shift. This is not an erasure of difference, not an absorption into sameness, but a disturbance, an opening. The illusion of my completeness is unsettled. In the presence of the Other, I am no longer what I was a moment before.

If I refuse this encounter, if I harden my heart, I do not merely turn away from the Other—I diminish myself. At first, this hardness feels like protection, as if in closing myself off I preserve some inner core, some integrity untouched by intrusion. But this hardness is not strength; it is fragility. It is a rigidity that resists change and, in doing so, ceases to grow. The self that refuses relation calcifies. It becomes a fixed form, enclosed, unable to move beyond itself. To ignore the Other is to ignore the conditions of my own becoming. I am not self-contained; I do not exist in isolation. If I refuse to acknowledge the Other, if I insist on a world in which I need not be troubled by difference, what I am really refusing is awareness itself.

## Johannes Christopher Gerard

The work "You Get So Alone At Times That It Just Makes Sense" is a self-portrait with autobiographical elements. Autobiographical elements that reflect my inner self and my view of the world and the social environment around me have been prominent in my work since 2023. However, my work reflects these elements in a metaphorical and symbolic style. The work contains more than one interpretation. First, how I see myself if I were sitting in front of myself. A stone, without emotions, without charisma, without giving anything back, immobile ... and yet this stone can be unpredictable, a projectile, a weapon against myself, others or the world. The second interpretation is how I see others or, better, how I am connected to the "other" in a broader sense. Regardless of social aspects and the connection with other people or dimensions that are spiritual or touch the soul. For many years I have been struggling with my mental and social disorders. In addition to this, there is hearing damage and tinnitus. Since childhood, I have found it difficult to establish or maintain social contacts or to communicate my thoughts and feelings well. Part of the "other" has become loneliness over time. For me, however, being alone is not always painful, but it can be complex and challenging. I may be in a phase of longing for company and change, but I also have to ask myself whether the process of longing and belonging to a social environment has



e: [info@johannesgerard.com](mailto:info@johannesgerard.com)

<https://www.johannesgerard.com>

@johannes.gerard.3



## ekabo donyi

Surrender, created for Plato's Rave: Eat Your Shadow, responds to the first stage of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where shadows cast by puppets are mistaken for truth.

Here, we reimagine the puppet's role as a symbol of surrender, drawing inspiration from the white flag. This convergence becomes a gesture of release, a quiet upheaval, and the beginning of an ongoing body of work that dismantles human-centric, dualistic epistemologies to embrace our transient Otherness.

Drawing from Indic philosophies such as Anattā (no-self), alongside contemporary post-anthropocentric and post-humanist discourses, Surrender imagines identity not as fixed, but as porous and transitional. Its form is derived from a UV map of a human head; an unfolded cartography of the self, an opened vessel releasing embedded constructs of what it means to be human.

We embed ourself into the material: aluminium, chosen for its extractive colonial history, industrial application and its paradoxical qualities of structure and softness. Made by transfers between digital, physical, and imaginary realities, the work lingers as cast and shell. A bindi, rendered as a void on the forehead, marks a point of potential, a site that prompts creation, a puncture that invites transformation.



e: houseofdonyi@gmail.com

@house\_of\_donyi

<https://readymag.website/u3419552289/4461601/>



And this is no mere ignorance—it is a denial, an active suppression of what is always already there. The self that turns away from the Other folds in on itself, repeats its own shape without variation, ceases to expand. And what does not expand, withers.

But the encounter is never just between two. There is always the Third. Derrida's Third enters the scene not as a mere observer but as a presence that disturbs the singularity of my ethical relation with the Other. The Third is not an individual, not simply another face among many, but a force, a complication, the trace of justice. If Levinas calls me to responsibility in the face of the Other, Derrida reminds me that this responsibility is never simple, never isolated. The moment I respond to one, I have already, implicitly, responded to the many. Every act of recognition, every ethical engagement, is haunted by the unseen, the unheard, the ones who also call out but whom I do not, cannot, face in that moment.

I am never only responding to a single presence. There is the Third, there are the others, the structures within which we meet, the histories that shape this encounter. And so, the ethical is never pure. It is never an absolute moment of recognition between two beings in perfect reciprocity. There is always mediation, always another question, another claim upon me. My responsibility is infinite, but it is also divided, shared, interrupted. And this is not a failure; it is the condition of ethics itself. The self does not meet the Other in a vacuum. The very relation that calls me into question also places me within a broader horizon, where my obligation is never simple, never singular.

And yet, if the Third complicates, it also enables. It reminds me that I do not carry this alone. That my response, though always incomplete, is part of something larger. That ethics is not about purity, not about a perfect moral stance, but about remaining open to the interruption, to the demand that comes from beyond myself. The Third does not resolve; it unsettles. But in that unsettling, I am reminded that I am not closed, not finished. The ethical relation does not end; it continues, endlessly deferred, always already in motion. And it is in that motion, in that ceaseless becoming, that I find my own transformation.

Moving deeper into the inquiry, I turn my attention to the “how” of this investigation—the ways in which artists have ventured, through their chosen media and practices, to map the nebulous territory

between the Self and the Other. Here I must refer to the works of Francis Bacon, Gillian Wearing, Cindy Sherman, Adrian Piper, Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, and Lorna Simpson—a selection that, upon reflection, reveals an intriguing preponderance of female artists and those whose practices lean toward performance and body art. Is it mere happenstance that these voices, often marginalized by traditional academic canons, emerge so forcefully when it comes to probing the spaces of identity, embodiment, and relational ethics? Or might it be that the lived experience of being both a subject and a spectator in a world laden with the weight of historical, cultural, and personal trauma compels these artists to articulate a language that defies the conventional demarcations between self and other? In their works, we encounter a deliberate engagement with the difficulties of representation—the infinite regress of self-portraiture and the unsettling question of who, in the final reading of the work, emerges as the subject: is it the artist, the work itself, or the viewer’s interpretation, a spectral presence that reconfigures meaning with every gaze?

The challenge of representing the Self without succumbing to an endless loop of self-referentiality is not a trivial one. It is a problem that these artists have faced head-on, each in their distinctive manner. Bacon’s canvases, with their visceral distortions and anguished anatomies, confront the viewer with a presence that is simultaneously too real and too fragmented—a body in flux that resists any final reading. Meanwhile, Cindy Sherman’s elaborate constructions of identity, where she embodies a plethora of female archetypes, seem to dissolve the boundary between the self she projects and the audience that sees only an image, a signifier devoid of a stable referent. Similarly, Gillian Wearing’s installations and photographic works, which often enlist the participation of strangers in revealing, unscripted moments, pose the risk of reducing the Other to a series of prescriptive roles, thereby reinforcing the very boundaries the work seeks to question. Adrian Piper’s interventions, too, wrestle with the politics of representation by deliberately adopting a stance that refuses to claim complete authority over the depiction of marginalized identities, instead inviting the Other to articulate their own narratives. Frida Kahlo, with her tormented self-portraits and symbolic dualities, lays bare the internal schisms that both isolate and connect, while Ana Mendieta’s fragile imprints in soil evoke a haunting dialogue between presence and absence. Lorna Simpson’s layered, text-inflected images further complicate the terrain by merging the historical with the personal, the public with the secret, in a manner that unsettles traditional notions of identity and difference. Within these explorations, several recurring themes and ethical dilemmas emerge.

## Edgington

Living with complex, long term mental health problems with their roots in childhood trauma, Edgington can often struggle with relations between the self, society and other humans

The space between the other and the self is a barrier, a self made barrier constructed for safety and survival. I make art to survive. By using my body it can blur this. Putting paint on my body makes me feel like the canvas or paper for a period of time, as if I am the barrier protecting myself. Photography is something less explored in my work than painting and drawing and using photography from time to time can make me feel refreshed in my work, in my barrier





e: [joshuaedgington@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:joshuaedgington@hotmail.co.uk)

<https://edgington.website>

@edgingtonisart



## Priyanka Hutschenreiter

The main character of the painting is a Hindu woman at a puja in urban Bangladesh. She is the only person in the painting whose face is visible and detailed. The other characters in the painting are either involved in the same puja, at a mosque or at Biswa Ijtema (an annual Muslim pilgrimage site and meeting in Tongi, north of Dhaka). The only exception is one figure facing away from the viewer, contemplating beyond the confines of the painting.

In July 2024, Bangladesh experienced radical political upheaval leading to the ousting of the quasi-dictatorial government under the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hassina. Due to the shared political and religious history of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India as former colonial territories, political shifts always raise questions and concerns over the status and safety of the various Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian religious communities, amongst many other minority religious groups. How the state and religious communities and people relate to one another is now again a theme of renewed concern in Bangladesh.

The painting reflects the distance between not only religious communities but between individual believers also. The woman in the foreground faces the viewer, looking out towards something or someone definitive, poised in mid action. She is purposeful in her offering. The figure with their back turned to us is similarly fixed in contemplation. Their back is straight, the hands are clasped – they are paying attention. A woman balances on a boat in prayer. Everyone is involved in their own mode of prayer, show of faith, or lack thereof. The painting ponders the individuality, otherness and togetherness of the characters across the painting, separated by space that epitomises potential yet unknown religious, political, ethnic, and personal differences. These spaces are not insurmountable and they ask for collective being.



e: [priyanka.hutschenreiter@gmail.com](mailto:priyanka.hutschenreiter@gmail.com)

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@[priyanka.hutsch](https://www.instagram.com/priyanka.hutsch)



First is the peril of infinite regress—a concern that any attempt to represent the Self may inevitably circle back upon itself, leaving us trapped in a labyrinth of mirrors where the subject is perpetually deferred. How, then, can an artist capture the Other without reducing them to a mere extension of themselves, or worse, a negation of their alterity? Here lies the risk of “othering,” a process whereby the Other is rendered as fundamentally separate, exoticized, or even dehumanized in order to reinforce the boundaries that the Self has set up to protect its integrity. Instead, some artists strive to create an image of the Other that neither reinforces nor erases these boundaries, but rather opens up a space of dialogue and shared vulnerability—an ethical engagement that acknowledges the Other’s autonomy and the impossibility of total representation.

Ethical responsibility in this realm thus becomes paramount: how does one make space for the Other without speaking for them, without subsuming their voice into one’s own narrative of creation? It is a delicate balance, a tightrope walk between empathy and appropriation, one that calls for a constant self-awareness and a refusal to claim absolute authority over another’s experience. In the abstract quality of the Other, in their very elusiveness and the persistent void of what remains unsaid, the artist is confronted with the problem of absence—a silence that speaks as loudly as any articulated word. How can one deal with this absence, this distance, without inadvertently collapsing it into a neatened form that betrays its inherent complexity? And perhaps, in the final analysis, can any representation truly bridge the gap between the Self and the Other, or does it, by its very nature, risk widening the distance, leaving us with a chasm that is ever more inscrutable?

This tension finds a particularly poignant expression in the work of Francis Bacon—a painter whose canvases offer a brutal yet compelling account of the struggle to represent the self without succumbing to the limitations of physicality and form. Bacon’s view of the Self, as rendered through his violently distorted figures, is one marked by an acute awareness of its own instability: the body, the mind, the very essence of identity, is in constant flux, subject to forces both internal and external that conspire to render it transient, almost ephemeral. In his portraits, the subject is never wholly coherent or recognisable, but rather a palimpsest of raw emotion, existential dread, and the relentless dissolution of flesh into abstract horror. This is not a representation so much as an evocation—a summons to confront the very idea of the Self as something that is continually unmaking itself, a process that echoes the existential concerns of modern thought.

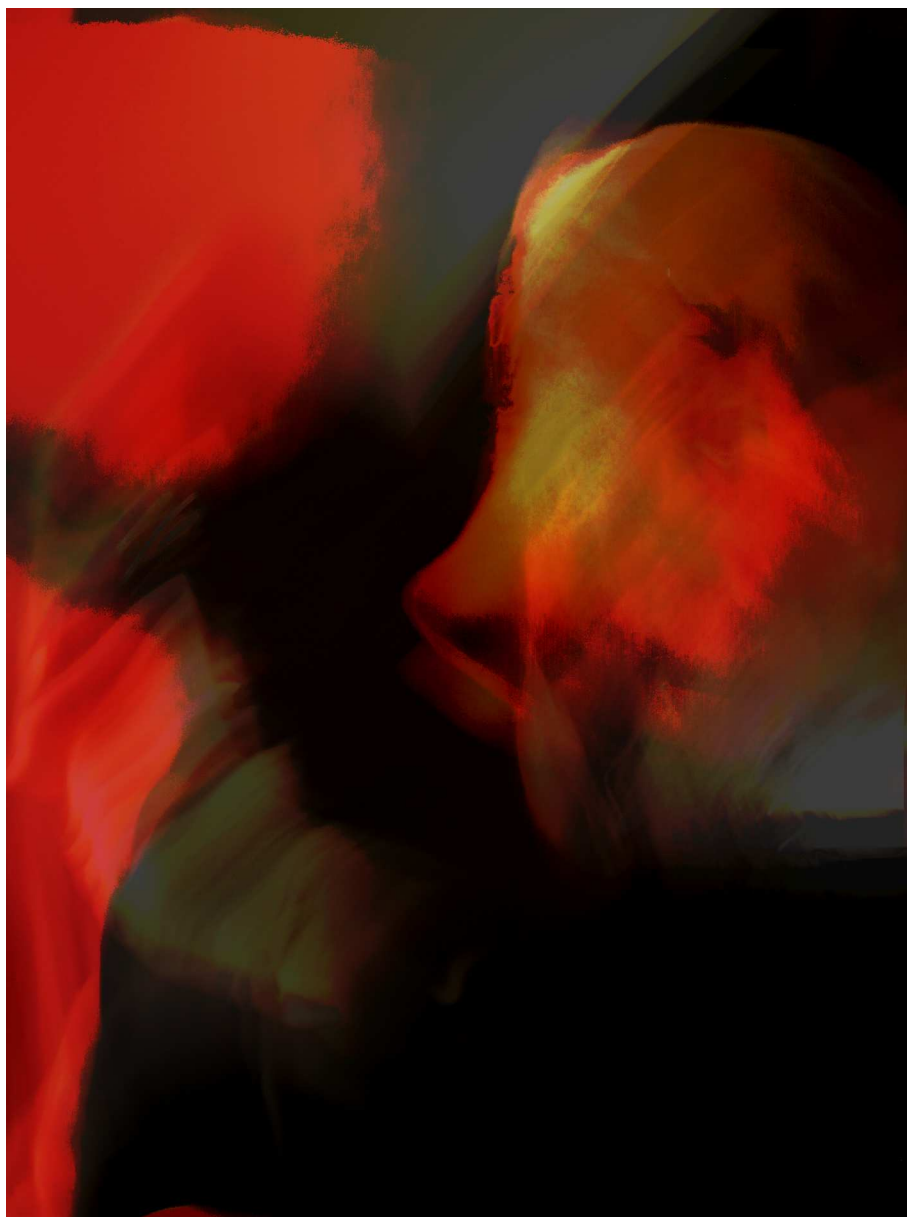
However, Bacon's representation of the Other is no less fraught with difficulty. His figures, often isolated and agonised, seem to inhabit a space where the distance between self and other is maximized—a void in which the body, as both subject and object, is caught in a relentless tension between presence and dissolution. In his canvases, the violence inflicted upon the body is not merely physical, but emblematic of a deeper, post-structuralist conception of identity: a state of perpetual uncertainty, forever suspended between being and non-being. It is a vision of the human condition that resonates with despair, yet simultaneously invites us to consider the transformative potential inherent in the very act of witnessing. When contrasted with the hyper-detailed portraits of Lucian Freud or the hyper-embodied images of Jenny Saville, Bacon's work stands as a counterpoint—a meditation on the failing flesh and the inescapable gulf that separates the observer from the observed, the self from the other.

While Bacon's canvases operate primarily within the realm of static, painted representation, the performance artist occupies a different yet equally fraught territory—a realm where the means of recording, often through lens-based media, afford a further advantage in mediating the space between self and other. In this context, the notion of the “third” becomes indispensable—a mediating presence that functions as both provocation and invitation, an element that challenges the conventional dynamics of representation. Drawing on Levinas's insistence on the ethical demand imposed by the Other, performance artists such as Adrian Piper, Tehching Hsieh, and Santiago Sierra have harnessed the potential of the “third” to create encounters that question the very possibility of consent and the authenticity of interaction. In the delicate interplay of mediation and provocation, the performance artist is tasked with navigating the treacherous terrain of manipulation and consent—an endeavor that forces us to ask: is the Other fully aware of their role within the constructed scenario? And if not, to what extent does the artist's intervention risk coercing or instrumentalizing their presence?

Consider, for instance, Sophie Calle's hotel-based works, where the boundaries between public and private, between art and life, are deliberately blurred, or the practices of the East German Stasi, whose invasive photographic documentation of personal spaces reduced individuals to mere data points within a vast surveillance apparatus. In contrast, the participatory works of Yoko Ono, which invite audience interaction, underscore the possibility that harm can be done when prescriptive limits are imposed upon the Other, transforming a genuine encounter into an exploitative act.

## ken clarry

The Shadow of Conflict is a series of mixed media Self-Images made using digital, computer and mobile phone cameras. I see this way of working as a kind of estrangement, as Edward Said explained, the unhealable rift (Said, 2001). Said's estrangement appears from a politically driven manoeuvre that creates a rupture, between human beings and their homelands. Self and Other become indistinguishable, both ultimately need the other to exist. The estrangement or alienation, Said refers to, produces on the one hand an unbearable sorrow, and on the other hand, a rage at the injustice. As part of communities in conflict, artists often are thought of as societal sounding boards, living vessels through which societal grief and anger pour. Many artists corporally 'feel' or 'sense' the pain of others, and this sensory pain is expressed as an anxiety or non-violent resistance. My work, and the image shown, engage with societal anxieties, the image is a kind of 'spectral simulacra', a societal anxiety and symptom of the Spectacle overload shown on the TV and Internet. Being isolated and joined in a false consciousness, we can never be certain of who, or what we are. The Self drifts between two realities, the real and the virtual.



e: [kcart155@gmail.com](mailto:kcart155@gmail.com) <https://kenclarry.co.uk>



## Holly L Tomlinson

To grow up in a military family on military bases is to be separated from other people. Propaganda infiltrates the life of the military child and surrounds them in its persuasive influence to further the agenda of recruitment and comfortability with war. Like a combat carrier pigeon playing the role of a songbird, it whispers into the ears of vulnerable outcasts-- the others, the 'fish out of water'-- to join the military to achieve a sense of community they long for with the goal of dying for their country and dying for their women. However, after being conditioned to seek the valour of a soldier due to propaganda preying on the lonely and meek, in the reality of war they instead are caught exposed and unawares as if their pants were pulled down.

Propaganda is well known for its previous appearance as posters with Uncle Sam or Rosie the Riveter whose persuasive words of encouragement inspire those who feel separated from the mainstream; however in a contemporary world driven by social media, are we truly immune to the propaganda that surrounds u

'Proper Gander' is a satirical painting which displays a salmon soldier caught with their pants down, an English carrier pigeon is held up to their ear as a maiden sprawled across the floor holds up a dagger that transforms into a snake pointed at the exposed thighs of the soldier. 'Proper Gander' highlights the absurdity of growing up in a life separated from the outside world inside the bubble of military propaganda. It maintains a humorous commentary on this surreal existence, yet inspires a deeper exploration on how propaganda continues to prey upon the outsiders of society through media exposure today.





e: hollytomlinson28@gmail.com

@seemsevergreen

<https://hollytomlinson28.wixsite.com/hollytomlinson>



But, there is also a countervailing impulse—a striving toward an ethical use of the third—that seeks to maintain an open-ended space of engagement, one in which the power dynamics are continually rendered visible and open to critique. This is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Tania Bruguera or Marina Abramović’s later performances, where the artist, far from asserting unilateral control, leaves ample room for the Other’s own agency, inviting them to contribute actively to the unfolding narrative. In a further extension of this inquiry, I find that the device of the “third” is not confined solely to performance art but is equally at work within the domain of static visual arts. Frida Kahlo’s seminal work, *The Two Fridas*, serves as a vivid illustration of this principle, wherein the surreal double self becomes both an externalized internal conflict and an evocation of an absent Other—an echo of identity that reverberates beyond the confines of the self. Similarly, the soft focus in Gerhard Richter’s paintings, such as *Uncle Rudi* or the denied gaze in *Betty*, subverts the viewer’s demand for clarity and information, compelling each observer to navigate the image in a uniquely subjective manner. Kara Walker’s haunting silhouettes further deny the possibility of easy identification, positioning the viewer before a tableau of historical pain that resists any simplistic reading.

Yet, the mediation of the “third” in static works is not solely a matter of aesthetic strategy—it is also an exploration of absence, loss, and the enduring traces of memory. Ana Mendieta’s ephemeral imprints in the earth evoke the lingering presence of a body now gone, while Doris Salcedo’s monumental installation in the Tate Turbine Hall—a gaping void in the form of a fissure—serves as a stark reminder of historical trauma and the spaces left behind by those who have suffered. In these works, the visible trace of what is missing becomes a powerful testament to the persistence of absence, enabling a latter-day re-reading that refuses to close the gap between the self and the other.

The interplay of representation and the viewer’s own contribution to meaning is another essential aspect of this ongoing dialogue. Wearing’s *Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say* exemplifies the phenomenon by which the viewer is invited not only to witness but to participate in the creation of the work’s significance, effectively adding a “plus one” to the invitation of interpretation. In much the same way, Magritte’s enigmatic images—where a countryside seems to expand from the confines of the easel itself—underscore the notion that representation, far from being a mere mirror of reality, is itself a mediating third, a prism through which the multiplicity of experience is refracted and reassembled.

Thus, in summing up this inquiry into the space between the Self and the Other, I am confronted with the paradox that, while performance artists may harness the third to induce behavior and provoke direct interaction, in the realm of static visual art the third remains an inherently conceptual presence—one that shapes interpretation, complicates relational dynamics, and introduces a deliberate gap for the viewer to navigate. It is a gap that is both a site of vulnerability and a space of possibility, a reminder that the very act of representation is as much about what is left unsaid, unseen, or ungraspable as it is about the articulate declaration of identity.

In my own thinking on this subject, I have come to see that the investigation of the space between the Self and the Other is not merely an aesthetic or intellectual exercise, but a profoundly ethical one—a call to acknowledge the infinite complexity of human existence and the myriad ways in which we are interconnected. The works of these seven, in their diverse approaches to embodying this gap, offer not only a critique of conventional modes of representation but also an invitation to reimagine the possibilities of ethical encounter. They compel us to ask whether true engagement is possible when the very tools of representation—be they the brush, the camera, or the performative gesture—are inextricably bound up with the power dynamics of self-expression and cultural hegemony.

Perhaps the ultimate question that haunts this inquiry is whether any act of representation can ever truly bridge the chasm between the Self and the Other, or whether it, of itself, perpetually reifies the distance it seeks to close. In the end, I remain convinced that the value of these artistic endeavors lies not in their capacity to provide definitive answers, but in their power to illuminate the profound uncertainties that animate our existence—to expose, in a messy, fractured glory, the truths that reside in the interstices of identity, memory, and desire. In embracing the perpetual ambiguity of this space, we may come to see that the gap is not an impassable void, but a dynamic field of possibility, one that invites us to continually renegotiate the boundaries of who we are and who we might become.

Thus, as I conclude this inquiry, I recognize that the pursuit of the space between the Self and the Other is, in its very essence, an ethical act—a commitment to holding in tension the multiple, often conflicting, voices that compose the human experience. It is an endeavour that calls for both humility and audacity, for an acknowledgment of our own limitations even as we reach toward a more expansive understanding of what it means to be in relation to others.

# Wilde

What matters most to me is this world?

Two years of travelling after the death of my parents and my brother, I came back to home to England, while cleaning, unpacking and tidying my apartment. I wondered, I questioned myself, what do I do next? Do I climb the next big mountain? Do I ski the length of Norway? Perhaps prepare a cold bath, a nice meal, how much of it is enjoyable? Does it nourish my soul? What matters to me most in this world? That was a question I asked myself, seated on my sofa, gently folding sheets, towels, and uncreasing pillowcases from the dryer.

Grief is an indicator that we've lost something that anchored our experience to the world, and we're struggling to figure out how to continue in light of that loss. Grief makes the loss visible. A wide range of events can prompt grief. While my work focuses on grief related to death, I believe we can also grieve breakups, divorces, and even retirement.

Grief is an emotional state that knocks you off your feet, grieving is what happens as we adapt to the world, carrying the absence of them with us. No one approaches grief expecting it to change them, yet grief is transformative, it is unusually emotionally rich.

The fact that grief tends to be such an emotionally rich experience indicates how it can be informative to us. Our emotions tell us what we care about; through grief and loss, I have been broken in many places, bits and pieces that don't quite fit. It has reshaped my worldview, revealing values and depth of self-knowledge, a profound revelation, yet questions of life and the things that truly matter.



e: agobaefe@live.com

@wilde\_growth



And in this spirit, I leave the reader with a quiet invitation: to wander, perhaps even lose yourself, in that infinite landscape of unspoken connections, where every image, every gesture, every trace is a reminder that in the space between the Self and the Other, the possibility of transformation is ever-present, waiting to be awakened by those willing to engage deeply with the mystery of being.

## Ethical Encounters in Art and Space

For my greater understanding of this as a problem area I made an open call <sup>1</sup> to a wider society of artists, an invitation to “explore the interface of the self and the other”. I collected more than 200 responses, from which I could draw a dozen or so to help illustrate this study. These artists in the contemporary bear comparison with the historical figures of the previous section and fitted naturally in an arc of narrative, a community of artists sharing the concerns of the project. In this company it seems natural to employ the collective ‘we’, rather than any editorial plural. I am immensely grateful for their support, however any inaccuracies or misrepresentations are entirely my fault.

To talk of the ‘space between’ opens a door to metaphorical language, the emotional becoming spatial. Respondents might in their searching for this borderland, trace the edges of their own selves, mapping the contours of what they can never fully touch. The submissions in many cases were reflective of the Self—the most frequent keyword found being ‘identity’, and themes of self-perception and personal growth were again prominent. More outwardly looking we found welcome interest in exploration of themes of nationalism, propaganda, social critique, and rebellion, often challenging societal norms. This category includes reflections on war, beauty standards, media influence, and systemic oppression, using art as a tool for resistance, activism, and societal reflection.

Practice for any artist becomes an opportunity for reflection upon their psychological and emotional well-being. We read of internal struggles, trauma, grief, and resilience. Submissions examined mental health, isolation, vulnerability, and the ways people cope with loss, aging, and mortality. Many works identified deeply personal emotions and psychological challenges that shaped individual and collective experiences. We do not belittle any of these hurts, rather we hope, as we write this in the full

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.curatorspace.com/opportunities/detail/exploring-the-interface-of-the-other-and-the-self/8871>, also via JiscMail and Art4All

expectation of spring growth and summer warmth to thaw any ancient pain in a journey across the metaphorical space. The Other remains elusive, always a step beyond, yet it is in the act of reaching that we redefine who we are. The distance, like the pause between breaths, holds the tension of all that remains unsaid, all that is both known and unknowable.

After submissions centred on Identity and the Mind we then find respondents who want to talk of relationships and boundaries, with understanding of the tensions between self and other. Statements addressed themes of intimacy, alienation, companionship, and estrangement, exploring the emotional and psychological boundaries that define relationships, personal space, and the negotiation of closeness. The concerns raised seem more multi-dimensional, with connections and boundaries figuring large among artist's statements, suggestive of awareness of tensions between intimacy and distance. Adding to this multi-dimensionality, considerations of intimacy coincided with vulnerability—perhaps an understanding that relationships are shaped by both closeness and boundaries, acknowledging that intimacy often comes with vulnerability.

But to sharpen up our selection process we chose to focus on how art creates *ethical* encounters—how these dozen artists use their work to explore themes of responsibility, visibility, care, and disruption in their dealings with the outside world<sup>2</sup>. The narrative follows three interconnected movements, each dealing with a different dimension of ethical engagement. First in a section, entitled '**witnessing & presence**' we will learn from respondent artists to reaffirm the Other as a part of life. The myth of Narcissus tells of a youth so blinded by his reflection that he could not hear the voice of one who wanted to be his, to love him. We must, as Levinas reminds us, engage with the Other, to see their face, and acknowledge the ethics of engagement. In a second part '**interruption & resistance**', we will reflect on artists' whose work challenges and disrupts norms of behaviour, confronting the fragility of connection in the face of isolation, estrangement, and loss. Whether through intimate gestures or public reckonings, they expose the fault lines that separate us. These works force us to ask: What does it mean to bear witness? To be truly present in another's life?.

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<sup>2</sup>Bearing in mind that as an observer I will inevitably see intention in an artwork that exceeds the artist's own. Barthes[1967] tells us as much, Novalis[1798] wrote "Der wahre Leser muß der erweiterte Autor sein"

## Nadia Thompson

A reflection in the drain. Who is she?

A person I have seen before in many forms; an external shell ever-changing and never still. Is she still the same person as time goes by? The body sags, the face changes - within, some reflections remain the same... but others alter.

Do I recognise the person reflected back at me, the body that floats in the water - sometimes lush, sometimes toned. Sometimes the bath feels spacious, at other times crowded. Am I still the same person within? I'm not sure.

This painting was a very introspective piece for me - the past decade has been wholly transformative as I have met motherhood, grief and illness over and over again. My body has very much taken the brunt of all these changes. Sitting in the bath, staring at my reflection in the over-flow I couldn't help but wonder at the body reflected back, at the person changed within and how much of it all I actually recognised after all this time.





e: [nadia@artbynoo.com](mailto:nadia@artbynoo.com) <http://www.artbynoo.com>

@nadiathompson too



Lastly under the heading ‘**sustaining & transforming**’ we consider contributions that enrich relationships through reciprocity and care, rejecting erasure, insisting on visibility, on the slow, deliberate work of remembering, rebuilding, and resisting. In a world where power seeks to make some lives disposable, these works reclaim space—for grief, for joy, for the quiet insistence of survival.

## witnessing & presence

The first movement focuses on how artists bear witness to human presence, whether through acts of recognition, the preservation of memory, or the ethics of looking at others. In the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, human presence took on new ethical weight. Fear snatched attention from mobile phone screens, physical distance became a moral obligation, yet it also exposed deep social fractures. Who was seen, who was ignored, and who disappeared entirely from public life?

For months, our interactions were defined by separation—a 2m gap even on the town park walk, a masked glance from a stranger, the absence of touch. Witnessing became an act of care, but also of limitation. We saw one another through screens, from doorsteps, from care home windows, but rarely in proximity, in full presence.

As restrictions lifted, paradoxes emerged: what ‘normal’ could we return to when it was the old normal that got us here. How do we return to shared spaces without losing the ethical awareness that distance instilled in us? This first part explores artists who examine the ethics of looking, remembering, and acknowledging—whether through fleeting urban encounters, meditations on isolation, or the quiet weight of absence.

In these artists’ work, we see presence as an ethical act: a decision to notice, to remember, to hold space for another—whether across a room or through time itself. **Cameron Lings** [*p.4*] reminds us of the unnoticed encounters in public space, the dances of dithering and deference—‘No! No! After you’—as we met in narrow places. This work is of fleeting human interactions in urban environments. It asks ethical questions about who is seen, who is ignored, and whether simply observing others changes the nature of human connection.

For many city based families the days of social distancing trapped in high-rise buildings, unable to use the lifts were purgatory. Some others were more fortunate that access to green space was available.

For **Deborah Richards** [p.6] serendipity, a happy accident in printmaking found a companion of sorts in a farmyard beast that was never there, a grey heifer came to embody the sense of isolation during lockdown, to reflect how humans and animals share space without fully connecting. I see in this work opportunities to look at the ethical implications of solitude and companionship in uncertain times. But for many, an unexpected event such as this can carry a sense of the *unheimlich*, the uncanny. The familiar, glimpsed just beyond our full grasp, becomes charged with unease, as if it's not quite of this world, yet undeniably present. Thrown off balance a human tendency is to retreat to the safe and familiar, in an aversion to the strange and to strangers.

But this is the space of the Other, existing in the periphery of our gaze, just out of reach, always shaping the contours of our Self without ever being fully grasped. It's in the space where the Self reaches outward and encounters what it cannot control, nor fully know. A challenge for us making our art in the comfort of the same, the enveloping warmth of the like—and so it begins to seem—has left many of the respondents to our project strangely mute on the subject of the Other. We may have come to the point where contemporary discourse leaves no space for alterity.

**Johannes Christopher Gerard** [p.10] explores the fragmentation of self in modern society, particularly regarding social alienation. Aversion to strangeness and fascination with following of the same, likeness and 'likes' will lead to challenges for contemporary ethics of connection pitted against individualism—how do we navigate relationships in an era of disconnection. Gérard rises to this challenge in befriending a stone in a world that increasingly isolates individuals: he explores how bodies exist in relation to one another, particularly in contexts of migration and displacement. We as spectators should learn these central questions of ethics but Gérard's stone may remain an enigma.

Indeed, the seductive pull of the Self, particularly in our age of self-reflection and narcissism, does risk pushing the Other further into the distance, obscuring their presence in the very act of looking inward. Byung-Chul Han's idea of the expulsion of the Other resonates here—our modern day, neo-liberal obsession with self-optimization, self-expression, and endless reflection, often reduces the Other to a distant abstraction or, worse, a mere extension of our own desires and needs. In this narrowing gaze, we risk losing touch with the true alterity of the Other, whose existence is not to serve us, but to challenge and transform us. The space beyond our self becomes not a space of dialogue, but a solipsistic echo chamber. Yet, perhaps it is precisely in recognizing this expulsion that we might begin to reawaken the Other, to make space once more for their disruptive, unknowable presence.

## Iffah Raheel

“The Party Must Go On” captures a surreal and melancholic gathering, where three figures - two human and one canine sit at a table with distorted, exaggerated faces that express a disconnect between presence and belonging. I intend for the festive hats and floral wallpaper to contrast with the figures' detachment, evoking a sense of forced celebration. The dog, both companion and witness mirrors the quiet, uneasy estrangement between a family who once knew, and perhaps loved each other...

Through this painting, I invite you to explore the paradox of togetherness - where connection feels performative, and loneliness often lingers like a parasite beneath the surface.





e: iffahraheel2000@gmail.com

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@whyiamnotapainter



## interruption & resistance

Next, we engage with artists who challenge dominant structures, question power relations, and create moments of disruption. From at least the 1863 Salon des Refusés art has served as a tool for questioning authority, disrupting dominant narratives, and making power visible—especially when those in control seek to render it invisible. The artists in this movement engage in acts of resistance, challenging hegemonic structures, interrogating social hierarchies, and exposing systems of control that shape both personal and collective experience while distorting ethical relationships .

Following through from the previous section, **ekabo donyi** [p.12] intervene at the intersection of identity, visibility, and post-colonial critique. Inverting the symbolism of the white flag, ekabo donyi reclaim surrender as a moment of conscious refusal—of imposed categories, of the violence of colonial inheritance, and of rigid notions of the human. Using aluminium shaped by a UV map of the artist’s own head, the work becomes a site of speculative transformation. It rejects extractive histories and reframes creation as a dialogue with material and memory. Here, resistance is not spectacle, but a slow undoing—an act of becoming otherwise.

Do we perceive others as they are, or as we expect them to be? The rapprochement to the Other discussed above, as we said, brings a challenge and an opportunity for transformation—simply there is always a price to pay for this relationality, it is certain that each of us is Other in relation to another player, from their perspective it is we who are the Other. In this moment we need the disruptive efforts of the artists of this section who will variously challenge the politics of the gaze—who is seen, who is overlooked, and who controls visibility. They will reclaim bodily autonomy and spatial power, and language and representation—to redefine how movement, presence, and restriction shape agency, or to loosen the suffocating weight of ideology on words, symbols, and images.

To disrupt is not merely to critique but to intervene—to force a pause, a rupture, a moment where the expected gives way to the possible. These artists create spaces that fracture the smooth surface of consensus, refusing to let history, identity, or lived experience be flattened—by others— into a single, unquestioned story. **Edgington** [p.16] makes work to stage an act of defiance, “I’m still here” where the artist’s body, voice, or image becomes a site of resistance. Painting onto himself he gives witness to the crimes against him, he calls out the unethical behaviour against him, the abuse of power in those who

could not, would not recognize him as a fellow human. When does interaction become domination? When does structure become constraint?

Some works make power felt—through material constraints, imposed silences, or spatial enclosures that replicate real-world oppression. In all cases, these practices demand that viewers shift from passive spectators to critical witnesses, complicit in the systems they encounter. In a time when power seeks to disguise itself—whether through digital surveillance, historical revisionism, or market-friendly neutrality—disruptive art refuses to let us look away. It asks: What happens when we resist? What fractures appear when we refuse to comply?

We found the image [p.18] by **Priyanka Hutschenreiter** relevant at this point. Hutschenreiter's work captures the rich diversity of people engaged in acts of private devotion. Yet, even in these intimate moments of faith, the intrusive weight of social structures is felt—structures that transform personal spirituality into rigid religious practice. Orthodoxy dictates: this is the proper way to pray, this is how belief must be displayed. Those who deviate become the other—unbelievers, marked for divine wrath, often delivered by human hands in the name of expediency. Through these perspectives, Hutschenreiter challenges the ethics of visibility for us, interrogating who is compelled to be seen and who controls the gaze. Her work resonates with contemporary debates on surveillance, privacy, and the fundamental right to remain unseen.

Marx having offered the dictum “Religion is the opium of the people<sup>3</sup>” did not live to see the synthetic opioids of the modern age in the form of the mobile phone and social media. The news cycle brings little cheer—performative politics, clowning as news, and the illusion of impartiality—disruptive art must refuse complacency. It asks: What unfolds when we resist? What do we risk beyond our own constraints? In every case, these submissions challenge viewers to move beyond passive consumption, compelling them to become critical witnesses, implicated in the very systems under scrutiny. **Ken Clarry** [p.22] brings a timely reminder and cites Guy Debord on the artificiality of this age. Lifting the stones reveals what is included and excluded from history, that we must raise our concerns about silencing, erasure, and memory. Can we ethically engage with the past without reinforcing the same injustices?

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<sup>3</sup>Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

## **Aldobranti**

Texting is so easy—words without weight.  
Just pick up a phone—let me hear your voice.  
Meet me face to face—see the meaning unspoken.  
Look me in the eye—know the truth without words.  
Let me hear it from you—your breath shaping the moment.  
Feel the weight of my hand—connection made real.  
Stand with me in silence—nothing left to prove.





e: [aldobranti@gmail.com](mailto:aldobranti@gmail.com)

<https://aldobranti.org>

## sustaining & transforming

The final movement centres on care, reciprocity, and the transformation of ethical relationships. Sometimes when seeking a direction we are reminded of the paradoxical in the reply “if you want to get to such-and-such, I shouldn’t start from here”. It is hard to locate the ethical in the military as a whole and **Holly Thomlinson**’s [p.24] strong, satirical engagement with themes of separation, identity, and power, with clear viewer engagement and conceptual depth in work highlights the absurdity of growing up in a life separated from the outside world inside the bubble of military encampment. However to build on from the previous discussion of faith and belief we look to the desire to raise future generations in peace as a human commonality, and the military role is frequently described as peace-keeping. To be fair, the central ethical tenet of a military group is of group solidarity, trust and interdependence; to look out for comrades and provide covering fire. For Tomlinson to step outside of this group culture which is innate, built-in down to the family level leads the way for our exploration of estrangement and future possibilities.

In another way **Wilde** [p.28] experiences a loss of connection, an emotional rupture to experience bereavement as transformation. The artist situates grief not merely as personal loss but as a process of reorientation, where the absence of loved ones reshapes one’s relationship to the world. By describing everyday acts—folding sheets, preparing a meal, considering grand adventures—Wilde subtly illustrates how grief manifests in the mundane, making it a continuous negotiation between presence and absence. Ethically, Wilde’s statement engages with grief as a form of witnessing—not just of loss, but of the values that loss reveals. The assertion that grief is “unusually emotionally rich” suggests that rather than being an experience to overcome, it is a process of knowing: knowing oneself, knowing what matters, and recognizing how grief reshapes our commitments. The mention of workforce retirement, breakups, and other forms of transition expands this inquiry beyond individual bereavement, positioning grief as a universal condition tied to change and attachment. In this way, Wilde’s work functions within an ethical framework of care and attentiveness. It resists the cultural impulse to rush through mourning, instead insisting on grief’s transformative potential—as something that fractures, reconfigures, and ultimately demands a renewed ethical engagement with life itself.

While we are among this latter group of artists we are becoming aware of the uncompromising flow of time, Wilde can no more prolong life than can **Nadia Thompson** [p.32] delay aging—we are all in this

together. We noted the convex mirroring in this painting from the bath drain and thought of the mirror Van Eyck placed at the Arnolfini wedding to capture his own likeness. Now that we are older we will more often catch a memory of a parent in a reflection of our face. We come to understand our own image over time, aging and self-perception become ethical processes of self-forgiveness, to instruct acceptance of change in other people. For Thompson, the key perception involves the bath—*sometimes feeling spacious, sometimes crowded*—suggests that identity is not fixed but contextual, shifting with time, circumstance, and physical experience. **Iffah Raheel**'s painting "The Party Must Go On" [p.36] seems to show the terminal collapse of a nuclear family, where love ran out the door a long time ago. Estrangement in families is an unnamed, unspoken attack on the mythic constructs of family. Stand Alone, a UK charity that supports people who are estranged from relatives, suggests that estrangement affects at least one in five British families. The dog however is the beacon of hope in this family, unlike the exaggerated human figures, the dog does not perform; it simply exists in constancy, making it a counterpoint to the forced celebration. But when the latch lifts it will offer no recriminations, it will give up its seat at the table in exchange for a lap to sit in, and the hat for a scratch of that place behind the ears.

Across the preceding discussions, we have seen artists interrogate the fragile boundaries between self and other, the tensions of intimacy and distance, and the ethical demands embedded in human relationships. **Aldobranti** [p.40] begins to explore presence, recognition, and communication beyond mere words. Byung-Chul Han[2, ch.12] critiques contemporary communication as increasingly one-directional and transactional, reduced to an exchange of signals rather than a mutual act of listening. He argues that digital interaction, especially text-based communication, strips conversation of its full richness—the pauses, the tone, the weight of silence, the unspoken that shapes meaning.

True dialogue, for Han, requires an openness to the unknown, an attentiveness to the other that resists immediate consumption or closure. Neatly, this work references the full richness of conversation in the pauses, the tone, the weight of silence, the unspoken that shapes meaning.

## **Ghada Ben Hassan**

L'Amore Non Conosce Confini (Love Knows No Boundaries) delves into the intricate interplay between self and other, exploring themes of identity, alterity, and the fluid boundaries that shape human connection. Love, in its essence, is both a unifying force and a site of tension—blurring distinctions while simultaneously defining them. In a world increasingly polarized by digital narratives and ideological divides, this piece questions the ethical complexities of intimacy: Where do we end, and where does the other begin?

Through fluid, intertwined figures, I sought to depict the tension between intimacy and separation, between the longing for connection and the fear of exposure. Their embrace represents both openness and uncertainty, embodying the courage it takes to love fully despite the ever-present risk of heartache.

The fig tree's presence underscores that true connection is both rooted in depth and exposed to the wind. This duality mirrors the ways in which love both binds and isolates, offering the possibility of unity while confronting the inevitability of difference.

In a society where social media distorts authenticity and amplifies division, it's important to reconsider how we construct and navigate relationships. Do we truly engage with others, or merely with projections of ourselves? Can love still transcend the invisible borders imposed by fear, ideology, and technology? This work serves as an invitation to embrace the complexities of connection, to recognize the self within the other, and to reflect on the ways we navigate love in a polarized, hyper-connected world.



e: elysian2001@icloud.com

<https://ghadabenhassan.mystrikingly.com/>

@bibidi\_bobidi\_



**Ghada Ben Hassan** [p.44] submits this central symbol of the fig tree, it sets its slow growing roots into a temporality that contrasts with the rapid, transactional nature of digital interactions—it is rooted in history, yet exposed to change. The tree’s presence speaks to the endurance of love across time, but also to its fragility, as it is vulnerable to external forces. The tension between rootedness and exposure, authenticity of the self and engagement in the world, suggests that love is not a static state but an ongoing process shaped by historical, social, and technological contexts. Ghada Ben Hassan’s question of where oneself ends and the other begins is not simply spatial, but temporal—relationships evolve, boundaries shift, and intimacy is always in flux. Ghada Ben Hassan disrupts simplistic narratives of love as either pure connection or inevitable division. Instead, Hassan sets love within a contemporary landscape of digital mediation, ideological division, and the erosion of authentic engagement. In doing so, the piece invites viewers to reflect on their own relationships—how they are shaped by time, technology, and the ongoing negotiation of self and other.

Throughout this section, the artists have grappled with the fragility of human connection, questioning how we hold on to one another across time, distance, and loss. Presence and absence emerge as intertwined forces—one always defining the other. A family sits together, yet their estrangement is palpable (Raheel). Loved ones are gone, yet their absence reshapes the world of those left behind (Wilde). A reflection stares back, familiar and unfamiliar at once, reminding us of time’s quiet, relentless transformation (Thompson). There is a tension between intimacy and distance, between longing for connection and the walls—both visible and invisible—that divide us. Some artists explore this through personal grief, others through social and ideological barriers (Hassan). We witness love as both a binding force and a site of conflict, a space where selves dissolve and reassert their boundaries.

Yet even within estrangement, there is an echo of belonging, a persistent memory of connection. Whether through rituals of grief, distorted reflections, or silent witnesses, these works insist that absence is never empty—it is full of meaning, full of echoes, full of the weight of what was and what still lingers. In a world increasingly fractured, they ask: What does it mean to truly see another? To remember? To remain?

## conclusion: ethics as an ongoing encounter

At the heart of these works lies a shared ethical inquiry: how do we see one another—not just as passing figures, but as beings shaped by histories, power, and vulnerability? Across vastly different mediums and themes, these artists refuse to let us remain passive observers. They ask us to witness, to interrogate, and to sustain meaningful connections despite the forces that fragment us.

In *witnessing & presence*, the act of seeing became an ethical gesture. To witness is not merely to observe but to recognize—to acknowledge the other in their fullness, even when discomfort arises. Some works capture fleeting encounters: a reflection in water, a familiar face distorted by time. Others highlight the absence left by loss or estrangement, forcing us to consider what remains unseen. In all cases, presence is complicated, layered with memory, distance, and the weight of recognition.

The section *interruption & resistance* explores how structures—whether social, political, or architectural—shape and often constrain our relationships. These artists reveal how control operates, from imposed silences to spatial enclosures that mirror real-world oppression. Some works recreate the suffocating weight of power; others carve out spaces for defiance, where the act of refusal itself becomes resistance. What happens when we break the frame, disrupt the norm, or push back against imposed limits? These works challenge the idea that power is neutral, insisting instead that we examine where it is held and how it is wielded.

Finally, under the heading *sustaining & transforming*, the focus shifts from rupture to endurance. If interruption exposes fractures, care seeks to repair—not as a return to an ideal past, but as an ongoing, ethical labour of relationship-building. Here, care is neither sentimental nor easy. It requires attention, patience, and the willingness to exist in uncertainty. Whether through personal grief, shared rituals, or the simple act of tending to memory, these works remind us that sustaining connection is itself a radical act.

These artists do not present fixed moral truths, nor do they promise resolution. Instead, they create moments of ethical questioning, opening space for us to reconsider how we encounter others—whether in a glance, a disruption, or a shared act of care.

**Aldobranti**

Hampshire, April 2025

## Reading Suggestions

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- [2] BC Han. *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*. Trans. by W Hoban. Polity Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781509523092.
- [3] B Hooks. *All About Love: New Visions*. Love Song to the Nation. HarperCollins, 2018. ISBN: 9780062862174.
- [4] D McGarvey. *The Social Distance Between Us: How Remote Politics Wrecked Britain*. Ebury Publishing, 2022. ISBN: 9781473566811.
- [5] C Rankine, ed. *On Whiteness*. London, England: Self Publish, Be Happy, May 2022. ISBN: 978-1-91604128-8.
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*How do we meet the Other—across boundaries of language, likeness, or belief? As political and personal borders harden, this collection brings together artists and thinkers exploring the ethics of encounter. From Mill's "other minds" to Levinas and Derrida, and through the contemporary work of such as Bacon or Lorna Simpson, the book asks what it means to be transformed by difference. Contemporary artists respond with image and reflection—each a gesture toward the Other, and a refusal of retreat into sameness.*

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