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THE POLITICS OF “ATOPIA OF THE INTIMATE” IN CONTEMPORARY ART

THE VIEW FROM LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS (Response to Gérard Wajcman)

Introduction: Three Lacanian Paradigms of “the Intimate”

In his remarkable paper on “the intimate” in contemporary art, “Intimate Extorted, Intimate Exposed,” Gérard Wajcman assumes an opposition between a Lacanian and a Freudian notion of “the intimate.” In the period of Lacan’s return to Freud (retour à Freud), Lacanians were fond of identifying with Freud—as Lacan himself did. Lately, however, it has become more decent to oppose Lacan to Freud, an opposition which finally boils down to the opposition between what can be called “the first Lacan”—who initially, in the fifties, did indeed explicitly return to Freud—and a “second Lacan”—who later, in the sixties, more or less explicitly pretended to go beyond Freud. “The first Lacan” was all about language, or the signifier, in the unconscious, while in “the second Lacan” there was much more ado about enjoyment, or the object of enjoyment, in the fantasy.

Following Jacques-Alain Miller’s elaborations of this opposition, I will take a closer look at “the Lacan of language” and “the Lacan of enjoyment.” In the process I will show that, although Lacan himself scarcely mentions the notion of “the intimate” as such, it is in fact possible to construct and substantiate two different Lacanian versions of it: the first would indeed be the unconscious as a regulation of our relationship with language or the signifier; the second being the fantasy as a regulation of our relationship with enjoyment or, the object.

But then I will have to introduce “a third Lacan.” Indeed, in the final period of his teaching he developed a radically new perspective on the symptom, to the point of
renaming it “the sinthome.” For now I will just say that this sinthome is our relation with an act, or what we have to invent in order to gear our unconscious and our fantasy to our ego. My point will be that this concept of the sinthome should allow us to infer yet another version of the “intimate,” which probably is the most relevant one today, for the future.

Three periods in Lacan’s teaching can be summed up as three possible versions of the “intimate”: the unconscious, the fantasy, the sinthome. I will try to show in each case how and why it is already in itself impossible to fix “the intimate” as such. The unconscious, fantasy and sinthome are three successive ways of conceptualizing the impossibility of grasping our intimacy, which is the atopia hinted at by my title. Initially this atopia is valid for the subject itself, or the “speakbeing” (parlêtre), as Lacan later on renamed it: we cannot grasp what is most “intimate” to ourselves. Moreover, this is why the Other cannot grasp our “intimate” either. Unfortunately, neither the subject nor the Other are conscious of this.

And this is where art comes in. In conjunction with Wacjman’s fundamental idea of art as an “exposition” of “the intimate,” I would like to show how this exposition of what I call the atopia of the three Lacanian versions of the “intimate” must assume three different forms, in order to convince both parties that “it” really is beyond any grasp. The plastic arts formerly used to stage the atopia of the “intimate” of the unconscious, of our relation with language; today, the contemporary plastic arts continue to occupy themselves with extimizing the atopia of the intimate of the fantasy, of our relation with the object of enjoyment; meanwhile the most interesting forms of the plastic arts, for the future, are starting to monstrate the atopia of “the intimate” of the sinthome. I will explain in due course what I mean with this classical Freudian concept of staging (as a translation of the German Darstellung), and these neologisms of extimization (which I derive from Lacan’s French neologism extimité) and monstration (monstration).

The First Lacan: Language, Signifier, Unconscious

Let’s push off with “the first Lacan”—in search of our first notion of “the intimate,” our first form of the impossibility of grasping “the intimate.”

A structural concept of the unconscious

I mentioned how Lacan initially returned to Freud. In the fifties, with the help of linguistic notions borrowed from Jakobson, Saussure, Peirce and even Greek stoicism, he forged a solid structural concept out of Freud’s sometimes confused notion of the “unconscious.” For “the first Lacan,” the unconscious is our affair with language. Or more precisely: it is a solution to the problem language confronts us with, a problem

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1 I translate parlêtre as speakbeing to signal its strange, neologistic quality in French as well. Although often translated as speakingbeing, this latter should be reserved for être parlant.
which Lacan in the end formulated as our parasitization by language. One could say that the unconscious is the standard reaction of immunization against a language, also defined, by William S. Burroughs, as "a virus from outer space."

The key formulas of "the first Lacan" are well known: "The unconscious is structured like a language," "In the unconscious the signifier represents the subject for another signifier," "The subject of the unconscious is divided between two signifiers," and so on.

Lacan’s linguistic conceptualization of the unconscious had important clinical repercussions: the unconscious began to speak again; it reopened itself to psychoanalysis. For under the reign of ego-psychology, with its dogged struggle against imaginary resistances and reality-directed education, the unconscious had completely shut down.

**Atopia = ambiguity of the unconscious**

This is not the place to go into the details of "the first Lacan." What matters, however, is that his structural concept of the unconscious produces a first, symbolic explanation of the impossibility of grasping "the intimate." At this stage, the atopia of "the intimate" translates itself as the irreducible ambiguity, or double meaning, of speech—not only in relation to ourselves, but also in relation to the Other. Given (an allusion to Duchamp’s *étant donné*) the unconscious, it is impossible to speak about ourselves in an unambiguous way; given the unconscious, it is impossible to say something that has the same meaning for everybody, something that everybody can understand unambiguously. This unconscious-based ambiguity riddles all of our common speech, mostly without our noticing it.

Now, Freud invented a trick with the explicit purpose of confronting us as much as possible, in a controlled, experimental way, with the unconscious ambiguity of speech. "Free association"—because that is what I am driving at—is not an aim in itself, but only a trick intended to seduce hysterics into producing automatically all kinds of "formations of the unconscious" (*Bildungen des Unbewussten*). "Speak of anything you can think of and you will end up saying things you never thought of"—you will end up telling dreams, making more or less witty slips of the tongue. This is the Freudian trinity of the dream/parapraxis/wit, all of which, according to Freud, come about as the result of a game of condensations (*Verdichtung*) and displacements (*Verschiebung*) of images, that Lacan conceptualizes linguistically as metaphors (*métaphore*) and metonymies (*métonymie*) of signifiers.

In any case, free association is intended to produce as many unconscious formations, or metonymies and metaphors, as possible, which confront the subject or speakbeing directly with the uncontrollable and irreducible ambiguity of speech.

At this point, let me avoid any misunderstanding: dreams, slips, witticisms do not completely let out or betray our deepest "intimate." Anyone who has done analysis should at least have gotten rid of this illusion, this fear. Indeed, one often recognizes
such people by the sheer quirk that they no longer seem to worry about their slips of the tongue, producing them one after the other, accumulating them even to the point of seeming to enjoy making them, as if they were consciously-produced witticisms. In fact, they have experienced how formations of the unconscious do not unambiguously betray their “deepest feelings” to the Other; they have experienced how the Other cannot have any hold over them via their unconscious. On the contrary. Unconscious formations do not betray that someone is, for instance, “aggressive” towards the Other, that one has a sneaking death wish; the only thing their irreducible ambiguity betrays is our radical division by the signifier, by the signifiers of the Other. And this is what analysants (Lacan explicitly distinguishes the “active” analysante from the more passive “analysand”), at a particular point in their analysis, start to rub into the Other, by their joyful—I nearly said their Joycean—accumulation of more or less witty slips of the tongue.

**Phallic double meaning**

Nevertheless, this irreducible double meaning of speech as such, and, *a fortiori*, of the interspersed unconscious formations, does not mean that speech is completely adrift, that unconscious formations are open to just any meaning. There really is some anchorage or quilting point—namely, the signifier of the phallus: at least, every unconscious ambiguity has a phallic meaning. Space does not permit me to develop this point either, but suffice it to say that this phallocentrism of the unconscious is the heritage of the confrontation with the difference between the sexes in early childhood, at a moment when all we could fall back on was this “visual advantage” of man. In any event, this key position of the phallic signifier implies that the ambiguous intimate of the unconscious is always in a sense masculine. Which also, incidentally, is the reason for qualifying this first kind of “the intimate” as hysteric.

**Staging of “the Intimate” of the Unconscious in “Hysterical” Art: the Case of Surrealism**

Now, we should ask ourselves what kind of art might correspond to this symbolic, phallic or hysterical ambiguity of “the intimate” of the unconscious. Which plastic art assumes the defense of this particular strategic point of our “intimate,” by exposing it in a way that confronts ourselves, but also the Other, with its atopia, with our utter impossibility of grasping it, that is, both of getting hold of it and, of having a hold over it?

I cannot think of any better example than surrealism, surrealism in the vein of Salvador Dali, with its creations of dream worlds, worlds made up of visual puns. Coming immediately to the point, one can say that this kind of surrealism pushes through where hysteria reaches its limits, loses courage. At the point where ordinary hysterics, like ourselves, can no longer manage to produce our ambiguous unconscious formations—in the form of bodily conversion symptoms—surrealism
takes over, creating sublime unconscious formations. But in the process, in this process of sublimation, the unconscious has also switched stages. Insofar as it is subject to what Freud called considerations of representability (Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit), the unconscious is always inscribed on some stage; it should always be possible to represent the unconscious on what Fechner, before Freud, already called the Other stage (anderer Schauplatz). In cases of hysterical conversion symptoms, this stage is the body—not the anatomical body, but the dreamt-of body. You could say that surrealism makes this hysterical body expand, stretching it over the entire visible world, broadening the stage of the unconscious to the field of reality itself.

It is well known that, with its end of populating the whole of reality with its sublime versions of the unconscious, surrealism frequently explicitly exploited psychoanalytic knowledge. But for a start, it is already noteworthy that surrealism had to borrow Freud’s same trick to get hysteric’s to produce the unconscious automatically. In order to endlessly pile on its sublime unconscious formations, surrealism also had to surrender to the automaton of the symbolic system—think, for example, of écriture automatique, automatic writing.

For obvious reasons, psychoanalysis never felt surrealism posed it much of a problem: it felt all too familiar. A classic paradigm for the interpretation of this kind of “unconscious art” was developed by the Viennese art historian, Ernst Gombrich, who died in 2001. In 1966, Gombrich could still propose a reading of the plastic arts based on Freud’s analysis of witticisms: “Verbal Wit as a Paradigm of Art.”

The Limits of Staging “the Intimate” of the Unconscious in “Hysterical” Art

I do not want to deal at length with this form of art here, which, as a matter of fact, seems to be becoming increasingly “outmoded.” Today, surrealism is perceived as anything but avant-garde. To some it no longer appears to have any relevance at all. In any case, we no longer seem to expect anything from it.

Perhaps this has to do with our feeling that today the unconscious, with its symbolic, phallic or hysteric ambiguity, no longer escapes the Other’s hold. Do we not fear that the ambiguity of the unconscious has become reducible in all its manifestations everywhere? Mind you, I am not implying that this is really the case: the clinic reveals that the ambiguity of the unconscious remains as irreducible as ever. Nevertheless, we no longer seem to be able to trust art to defend the atopia of our “intimate” by staging the ambiguity of the unconscious, of the signifier, all over our bodies, over the whole of reality.

Where does this “anticipatory anxiety” (Angsterwartung) come from? One can hardly deny that our general attitude, our general policy towards the signifier has changed.

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The ambiguity of the signifier has become politically incorrect, hunted down everywhere.

There was a time, not so long ago, in Freud’s lifetime, when not everything could be said. But at the same time, there was also a form of “tolerance,” even a kind of sympathy, for the ambiguity of the signifier as cultivated in art. Playing on the ambiguity of the signifier, art said half of what ought not have been said at all. This offered a relief, an “energy saving” to the public—according to Freud’s analysis of the technique of witticism. Thus art, surrealism in the first and last instance, was admired hysterically for its witty exposition of the phallic ambiguity of the unconscious.

Today, we need to recognize how this situation has changed radically. We can say everything today but with one absolute proviso: everything must be said in an unambiguous or unequivocal manner. All that we say is formatted in an unambiguous sign-language: we fill in questionnaires, we answer the questions of the Other in the Other’s own words. His formats have no latitude for unconscious formations, no play for dreams, slips, witticisms. The formatting of speech has become generalized policy. We are promised more and more formatting, and still we keep demanding more.

Oddly enough, this formatting of speech is being brought to a head in the so-called psychotherapeutic situation. Patients are told they must “say everything.” Of course this injunction has nothing whatsoever to do with the psychoanalytic rule of free association as a prerequisite for the production of the unconscious, with its irreducible ambiguity. For many of today’s psychotherapists, “saying everything” is only supposed to heal if all is told in unambiguous words, in words the psychotherapist himself can fully understand. On the contrary, “saying everything” only makes things worse, it has been said, when ambiguity is not reduced; and this is all the more true when ambiguity is stimulated, as unfortunately happens with psychoanalytic interpretation. Indeed, evaluators of the efficacy of psychotherapy put it bluntly that every patient basically suffers from ambiguity and that consequently the only remedy is unequivocality; psychoanalysis is condemned as a danger to mental health to the extent that it only fuels ambiguity, resulting in rampant “negative therapeutic reactions” which finally must become systematized in all kinds of “borderline disorders.” In short: today we are treated by the Other as if we were all “autistic,” expected not to be able to cope with the ambiguity of the signifier.

The injunction to “say everything” in the Other’s formats is supposed to completely dissolve the ambiguity of speech, its unconscious formations. Mind you, this is not an aim in itself. The ultimate aim is to make us forget that there is something that cannot be said. In fact, we no longer tolerate the ambiguities of the signifier, simply because we have come to realize that they revolve around something that it is impossible to say. Wacjman hinted at this point as l’impossible à dire du rapport sexuel, but this navel of Lacanian theory is beyond our current scope.

Let us rather return to art. I concluded that we no longer trust surrealism to defend “the intimate” by exposing the atopia of the unconscious, by staging unconscious
ambiguity. I also suggested that this is because we have begun to fear how ambient autistic ideology will ultimately oblige us to reduce this ambiguity, thus having a hold over us. Consequently art has to be modern, it has to be flexible, which means that it has to defend “the intimate” on another atopical front. It need no longer be defended on the front of the unconscious but, rather, on that of the fantasy—by exposing the irreducible ambiguity of our relationship with enjoyment, by extimizing the irreducible atopia of various objects of enjoyment. Therefore let us jump quickly to “the second Lacan.”

The Second Lacan: Enjoyment, Object, Fantasy

I indicated how Lacan first returned to Freud, with his structural concept of the unconscious based on the linguistic notion of the signifier—with the result that the unconscious began speaking again in its irreducibly ambiguous way. That was in the fifties. During the sixties, Lacan would make all kinds of attempts to push psychoanalysis beyond Freud. All of these have in some way to do with his conclusion that Freud, with his concept of the unconscious, did not really allow for an end to the psychoanalytic cure. As a result, preliminary to any possible conclusion of a psychoanalytic cure, Lacan first had to develop his own concept of enjoyment.

Four partial, asexual objects of enjoyment

To begin with, Lacan’s concept of enjoyment remained firmly rooted in Freud’s rather rudimentary notion of the Trieb—which can be translated in English as “drive,” or even as “drift,” following Lacan’s French translation as dérive, but it could also be translated with the neologism “pulsion,” following yet another of Lacan’s translations of Trieb as pulson. The point in Lacan’s conceptualization of enjoyment is that, unlike language in the unconscious, it does not entirely revolve around the phallus but is split up into several objects Freud calls “partial sexual” objects. To the extent that these do not take into account the phallic difference between the sexes, Lacan calls them “asexual.” From Lacan we know of four such objects of the drive, four objects of enjoyment: the breast, the faeces, the gaze and the voice. The first, the breast, did not have to wait for psychoanalysis to be discovered as an object of enjoyment. What Freud essentially discovered with regard to the object is that faeces can also function as such an object of enjoyment—incidentally Freud himself conceived of this discovery as one of the major scandals of psychoanalysis. Lacan would later add two more objects of enjoyment, the gaze as the object of scopic enjoyment, and the voice as the object of invocative enjoyment. If Freud unearthed the anal object as the pre-eminently modern, capitalist object, the gaze and voice could be said to be the typically post-modern objects constructed by Lacan.
The fantasy as topological solution for enjoyment

What is the problem with these four objects of enjoyment? Recall that, according to Lacan, language in itself is already a problem: he called it an intruder, a parasite, necessitating the unconscious as a reaction of immunization against it; the unconscious neutralizes language in a way by infusing it with phallic ambiguity. Now, enjoyment, surging from inside, from four different bodily openings—mouth, anus, eyes, ears—is even more disturbing, even more traumatic than language. But to this trauma, there’s also a standard answer: the fantasy. Whereas the unconscious protects against language, the fantasy protects against enjoyment, albeit in a completely different way. It does so by extracting the objects of enjoyment out of the body and projecting them somewhere into “outer space.”

Unfortunately (or fortunately) fantasy performs this operation in such a topologically complicated way that it cannot finally be decided where precisely these objects are to be localized: inside our body or outside, are they still stuck on a bodily orifice, or do they hide in some hole in the Other, in reality? As these objects lack a clearly demarcated space, one can easily understand that this constitutes another version of atopia. In other words: fantasy inaugurates our topological relationship with the objects of enjoyment, resulting in the impossibility of grasping them, of getting a hold on and over them—for the subject as well as for the Other.

Lacan displays his atopia of the object of enjoyment in the fantasy with the help of the topology of surfaces, in particular the Möbius-strip. One must imagine this Möbius-strip as the cutting line of the object, as the edge of the hole in the body resulting from the “extraction” of the object. But at the same time, seen from the other side, from the side of the subject, it also forms a kind of window upon the world wherein this object is “projected.” To sum up, one can say that the Möbius-strip constitutes the boundary or dividing line between body and world. Now, if one has a closer look, following the Möbius-strip with one’s finger, like Escher’s procession of ants, one will realize that it is not a boundary that unequivocally demarcates an outside from an inside, an Innenwelt from an Umwelt. So it cannot really be said that the object lies in the outside world, because there’s not really an outside, because there remains this weird topological continuity between inside and outside.

At one point in Seminar XIII, on “The object of psychoanalysis,” Lacan illustrates this topology of the fantasy with a surrealist painting by René Magritte, called “La Condition Humaine” (The Human Condition, 1933). This is a painting depicting a painting in a window, which precisely represents what otherwise could have been seen through this window. And this is indeed how one should conceive of the fantasy, as a painted screen, the screen of reality; but as it is mounted or stretched upon a framework structured like a Möbius-strip, it becomes impossible to decide on which side of the screen the invisible object of enjoyment lies: in front of it or behind

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it? I will not go any deeper into this fantasy topology, as I simply wanted to introduce a second, imaginary form of "the intimate": "the intimate" of the object of enjoyment in the fantasy.

Extimization of "the Intimate" of the Fantasy in "Perverse" Art

To my mind, post-modern art defends this "intimate" by exposing the particular atopia of the object of enjoyment, due to its impossibility of being localized. It does so in a way that can be called extimization. Extimization is my own neologism, derived from a neologism Lacan coined in Seminar VII, and that reappeared again some ten years later, in Seminar XVI.4 There Lacan dropped the signifier of extimité, defining this "extimity" as "this exteriority which is the most intimate to us, what is closest to us being all the same outside us" (cette extériorité qui nous est la plus intime, ce qui nous est le plus prochain tout en nous étant extérieur).

Gaze and voice

Against the Other’s desire to see and hear everything

Inside its own formats

Not surprisingly, the objects extimized are the voice and the gaze. In these are located art’s refusal of the post-modern obligation to say and show everything within the contours of the Other’s formats. In this sense, art presents itself as the exact opposite of talk shows and reality soaps, where everything really is told and shown in the formats of the Other.

How does art manage to produce this voice and gaze? It typically does so by giving in, in a completely exaggerated way, to the obligations just mentioned, by surpassing the Other’s wildest desires to hear and to see:

“You want me to say everything. Hear this within your formats, if you can!”

“You want me to show everything? See this within your formats, if you can!”

By showing and saying more than everything about oneself, something is made visible that cannot be seen and something is made audible that cannot be heard. In psychoanalytic terms we could call this “acting out.”

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Following my elaboration of the fantasy topology, one can be more precise: by giving in completely to the Other’s unbridled desire to see and to hear, art reveals the fantasy. Revealing the fantasy means that the Other is confronted with the impossibility of localizing the object of enjoyment. In front of the productions of post-modern art, the Other cannot decide whether the gaze is on its own side or on the side of the “exposed subject,” whether the voice is on the side of the “exposed subject” or on its, the Other’s, own side.

Gaze: Duchamp and Van Oost

We should probably not carry this parallelism between scopic and invocative enjoyment too far. First, let us have a closer look at the extimization of the gaze.

Dead phallus and living object the Black Woman of Van Oost

My starting point is an opposition Wacjman points out in the work of Nan Goldin. In his essay, he draws attention to the fact that the gaze frequently makes its appearance in marked contrast with the phallus—not the full-blown phallus, but the phallus in its misery, “l’heure du phallus fatigué,” in Wacjman’s beautiful expression, or the drooping prick, if I may put it my way. Recall that the phallus was the anchoring point for the first form of art: the art of sublime, unassailable formations of the unconscious, with the signifier in all its ambiguity. Now it seems that post-modern art only can hope to defend this other “intimate” of the fantasy by means of the revelation of the gaze, while simultaneously deflating the phallus. Once the phallus is deflated, the gaze can appear.

This change in the standing of the phallus reminds one of fetishism: at first the shoe is everything, the phallus come alive, but one flickering moment of supreme enjoyment later it has already been reduced to a disposable packaging. Post-modern art exhibits how it is no longer possible to make a phallic fetish out of just any old object whatsoever.

At this point I would like to share an intimate experience, which, for me at least, has acted as a breakthrough experience in my inconceivably private understanding of post-modern art. Back in 1998, I visited an exhibition in Paris, called “Fétiches et Fétishismes.” All kinds of fetishes were lying in a jumble: authentic anthropological fetishes and private sexual fetishes; religious fetishes, such as “a real nail of the real cross of the real Christ,” and artworks more or less explicitly inspired by fetishist iconography; there was even a psychoanalytic fetish, Lacan’s sofa . . . As I was trudging between these fetish heaps, I began feeling more and more morose, until I finally felt like a drooping dick. Kleinians would say that I was introjecting the morosity of all those fetishes. Indeed, all those fetishes exuded the same shabbiness.

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gave the same impression of having been consumed completely, exhibited the same
dearthliness of the deflated phallus, of the phallus in the hour after the supreme
moment of enjoyment. All but one. In the midst of this phallus muddle, lost
somewhere in a corner, on the ground, I suddenly spotted an irregularly-shaped black
blot—my first impression was of a huge ink blot. Getting nearer I discovered,
recoiling immediately in dismay, that it was in fact a sculpture of a woman lying face
downward, completely cloaked in black velvet, her long black hair scattered around
her. I had been confronted with an untitled “black woman” of Flemish artist Jan Van
Oost. And this encounter immediately stirred something up in me. I had felt attracted
to the inkblot, but on discovering the woman I had recoiled for a fraction of a second.
The weird thing is that my own movement of to-and-fro, my own moment of
staggering, was immediately transferred to the blot, to the sculpture. Indeed, from
then on, the “thing” seemed to be animated by a permanent, uncontrollable possibility
of reversibility between a two-dimensional inkblot and the three-dimensional
womansculpture. It was as if the thing started to pulsate. 2-D/3-D/2-D/3-D/2-D/3-
D/ . . . Finally the impression remained of a pulsation that could not be located
exactly, that constantly seemed to migrate from myself, from my own body, to the
outer world . . . Did I keep staggering to-and-fro? Or was there a constant reversal
between inkblot and womansculpture? I was moved.
Looking back, I realize that at that moment, feeling lost and losing myself in the
midst of all those dead phallusses, I had been confronted with something alive and
kicking, with the pulsation of the drive—my scopic drive—whereby it definitively
remained in abeyance what was object and what was source, whether this object-
source lay inside myself or somewhere out there. To me this encounter with the scopic drive, with the impossibility of locating the
scopic enjoyment, in the radical guise of Van Oost’s black woman, has become one of
my inconceivably private access roads to post-modern fantasmatic art.

Duchamp beyond “La Mariée” and the introduction of the gaze

Of course, for me just like for anyone else, the via regia to any possible
understanding of this kind of art remains a certain Marcel Duchamp. I think it’s hard
to say anything meaningful about post-modern fantasmatic art without passing
through Duchamp, without a thorough study of Duchamp’s “openings.” In my
opinion, it is only Duchamp who really introduced the gaze as the pre-eminent post-
modern object in art.

I refer to my study on the relationship, or rather the non-relationship, of Duchamp’s
ready-mades with his first magnum opus, “The bride stripped bare by her bachelors,

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6 This is what Lacan, in Seminar VII, called “the Thing” (la Chose, das Ding). Consequently,
one could call this a sublimation, in the sense of elevating an object “to the dignity of the
Thing” (élever un objet à la dignité de la chose). See Ethics, 112.
Today everybody knows at least one of these ready-mades, whether the tilted urinal or the Mona Lisa with the goatee. On the other hand, I am always surprised to find that “The Bride” did not become so widely known. Anyway, in my account I tried to show that Duchamp’s work of more than ten years on “The Bride” can be compared to an attempt at reconstructing a scopic fantasy by every available resource. I suspect it was probably his own fantasy that was at stake, after it had been brutally shaken by the marriage of his sister—but this is not really my point here. My point is that, in the process, Duchamp had to reach the conclusion that it was impossible to round off this reconstruction of the scopic fantasy; indeed, “The Bride” remained “definitely unfinished” in the words of Duchamp himself. He had tried to reconstruct a fantasy with all available resources, but again and again he was forced to discover that some “things” did not fit in it. It was Duchamp’s major artistic act not to foreclose those “things,” but to retain them, out of a particular form of indifference that Duchamp himself called “ironism of affirmation” (ironisme d’affirmation), and to baptize them “ready-mades.” For me, this impossibility of reconstructing the fantasy is one possible form of what Lacan once called “traversing the fantasy” (traversée du fantasme).

In any event, from that moment on, beyond “The Bride,” with one masterstroke, Duchamp had created two new openings for contemporary art. On the one hand, the ready-mades would become the principle of a new form of art, an art beyond fantasy. But on the other hand, he had also reached a condition of freedom in handling fantasy; he was no longer completely stuck inside it, in its enjoyment. Paraphrasing what Lacan said about the Name-of-the-Father, “we can do without the father, on the condition of using him” (on peut se passer du père, à condition de s’en servir), I would say that Duchamp taught us how to do without the fantasy, but only on condition of using it, of using it as a ready-made—a ready-made fantasy revealing the object of the gaze, in response to the Other’s desire to see everything in its own formats. In my analysis, this is what Duchamp finally realized with his second magnum opus “Given: 1° the waterfall, 2° the lighting gas” (Etant donnés: 1° la chute d’eau, 2° le gaz d’éclairage). Duchamp tinkered for nearly twenty years with this anticipation of the peepshow, which is even less well known than “The Bride.” Nonetheless, “Given” remains a major paradigm for post-modern art because, for the first time, fantasy is presented in a way that reveals the gaze in its impossibility of being localized, of being fixed, contained—the gaze in its extimacy or atopia. When first confronted with “Given,” for a fraction of a second one cannot localize the scopic drive. You cannot make up your mind whether you are looking or being looked at.

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Voice: Nauman’s Room

A comparable experience of this impossibility of deciding, of the permanent possibility of uncontrollable reversal characterizes the extimization of the voice as an object of enjoyment. An installation by Bruce Nauman, as recalled by Wacjman, is absolutely unrivalled in this respect. I consider it the invocative counterpart of Duchamp’s “room” in “Etant donnés.” You enter a dark and empty, soundproof room to gradually discover that the confused sound you initially heard actually is a voice, a voice whispering definitely “Get out of this room! Get out of my head!” I suspect that, in Nauman’s room, Wacjman must have been traversed for a fraction of a second by the same inconceivably private, almost bodily experience of pulsation as the one I just described before Van Oost’s inkblotwomansculpture. For a fraction of a second, he must have been divided by the same atopia, by the same experience of impossibility of locating this voice, in the walls or inside his own head. Was it the voice of the Other or his own?

I propose making Nauman’s room a compulsory passage in the formation of every psychotherapist. And later it should become their standard waiting room.

Shit: Nauman and Delvoye


Indeed, Nauman not only extimizes our fantasmatic relationship with the voice in a way that confronts us with the radical impossibility of getting a hold on it. I suspect we could also find plenty of examples of the extimization of the gaze in his work. However, I think it’s more interesting to note that he does not limit himself to these post-modern objects of enjoyment. Besides, Naumann has remained sensitive to the pre-eminent modern object of anal enjoyment—which for one reason or another always is fun when extimized. Whereas the gaze and the voice always produce some anxiety, with a tinge of disgust for the gaze and a tinge of disbelief for the voice, the extimization of shit mostly makes people laugh, just for a second, in relief.

A representative specimen of this anal object is Nauman’s “A cast of the space under my chair” (1965-1968), consisting of a granite block fitting exactly in the space under the seat and between the legs of a particular type of steel tube chair. A friend of mine, Marc De Kesel, has made an absolutely remarkable, and funny, analysis of this work, opposing it dialectically to Manzoni’s “Pedestal of the world” (Socle du monde, 1961) picture, revealing in passing the anal character of both minimalist works.⁹

Of course, in line with this modernist, anal tradition, we Belgians also have our own Wim Delvoye with his unsurpassed "Cloaca."10

The Third Lacan: Sinthome

It is, however, high time to say a word about "the third Lacan"―and the notion of "the intimate" that can be inferred from it―in our search for the form of art that can stand up for this "intimate" by exposing in a particular way its particular atopia, the particular form of its impossibility to be grasped.

Art of the future

As a matter of fact, there have been several indications lately that contemporary art is having a hard time guarding "the intimate" via the extimization of the fantasy that serves as the stronghold of our irreducibly topologically distorted relationship with the object of enjoyment―just like how, after World War II, it became difficult to guard "the intimate" in the way surrealism had done, that is via the staging of the unconscious as the stronghold of our relationship with the irreducible ambiguity of language.

Incidentally, it does not escape Wacjman either how fantasmatic art today also seems to have reached some kind of limit. This is implied in his remark that art no longer succeeds in creating scandals by what it shows. The only scandal left is what it costs; I cannot judge whether art has in this way been recuperated or whether it has become more subversive than ever, by becoming economically subversive.

However this may be, new forms of art have lately been gaining ground―new forms of art that are difficult to judge within prevailing views on art, within the fantasy paradigm. Consequently I believe we should fall back on "the third Lacan," in order to judge how these new art forms still manage to guard something "intimate."

10 The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York describes Delvoye’s "Cloaca" as "an elaborate, room-sized installation that replicates the human digestive system [. . .]. Built from an astonishing array of laboratory glassware, electric pumps, plastic tubing and computer monitors, this unique biotechnical installation was designed by Delvoye in collaboration with scientists at the University of Antwerp. Cloaca is fed a variety of nutritious meals twice daily. It then chews, swallows, digests, and eliminates. [. . .]. Cloaca’s mouth is an opening leading to a blending mechanism that chews the food before it begins the 27-hour-long digestive trajectory. Six glass vats connected by tubes, pipes, pumps and various electronic components are Cloaca’s stomach, pancreas and small and large intestines. The food is kept at constant temperature of 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit and each of Cloaca’s organs contains computer-monitored enzymes, bacteria, acids and bases such as pepsin, pancreatin, and hydrochloric acid. The product finally goes through a separator and the remaining solids are extruded on to a conveyor belt." <http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2002/01/25/29594.html> [accessed April 11, 2008].
No sinthome, no speakbeing

Lacan elaborated the unconscious in the fifties and the object of enjoyment in the sixties. From the seventies on, the crucial concept would become the sinthome. This is not merely a different way of spelling “symptom.” In fact, it is the ancient spelling of the word, but it also means a radicalization of the function of the symptom. The sinthome is the symptom insofar as no human being can do without it; it is the symptom as our most typical quality as a speakbeing, our essence, so to speak. No sinthome, no speakbeing. This sinthome is something everyone must invent, everybody must throw it together for him- or herself, with all one’s available resources. Consequently it always turns out to be an “inconceivably private joke,” to use the expression Lacan thought especially appropriate in the case of the particular sinthome James Joyce knocked together for himself.

In short: as speakbeings we cannot do without a sinthome, but we have to knock it together ourselves. This has to do with the fact that the ambiguity of the unconscious and the topology of the fantasy do not succeed in definitively arranging our relationship with language and enjoyment in an endurable way. The failure of the standard solutions of unconscious and fantasy have to be supplemented by the inconceivably private invention of the sinthome.

For Lacan, this sinthome seems to be our most radical form of the “intimate.” And once again, this means that the sinthome is also characterized by a particular form of atopia, by a radical impossibility of getting a hold on it, for the speakbeing as well as for the Other. And in a way, it’s even more impossible to get a hold on the sinthome than it is the unconscious and the fantasy.

The sinthome makes a Borromean knot

In order to understand this atopia of the sinthome, I must briefly touch on the topology of the Borromean knot. For clarity’s sake, we can distinguish between two types of topology, serving two different purposes. I already mentioned the topology of surfaces, with the Möbius-strip as the most important specimen for Lacan’s elaboration of his theory of the fantasy as our relationship with the objects of enjoyment. Quite a different matter is the topology of knots, with the Borromean knot as the most important specimen for Lacan’s elaboration of his theory of the sinthome.

The starting point for this topology of knots is the representation of the different constituents of the speakbeing as simple rings (see Figure 1). There is the symbolic ring of the unconscious, of our relationship with language; there is the real ring of our relationship with enjoyment, which by the way at this stage is no longer limited to the fantasy; and there is the imaginary ring of our body, of our bodily image as it came about in an identification with its mirror image.
Now, as the articulation between the symbolic, imaginary and real is not given, not ready-made, every *speakbeing* has to take care of it in his own, inconceivably private way. Everyone is free to dream about some perfect Borromean knotting. This would mean that the symbolic, real and imaginary are twined together in such a way that the third always passes above the upper and under the underlying two other rings. As a result, all three remain together without ever clicking together; and when one is cut, all of the three fall apart. This would be an ideal Borromean knotting.

Nevertheless this is but a theoretical dream. At the very basis of Lacan’s Borromean clinic lies the assumption that the *speakbeing* can never knot together symbolic, imaginary and real in a Borromean way without falling back on a fourth ring. This fourth is the *sinthome*.

*The origins of the sinthome*

Now, what is the stuff this *sinthome* is made of? I said it is knocked together with all available resources. These resources are threefold as, in my hypothesis, the *sinthome* has to be constructed by doubling one of the three registers or rings (see Figure 2).
The standard, neurotic *sinthome* consists of a doubling of the symbolic, under the
guise of the Name-of-the-Father. But the *speakbeing* can also invent its own, private
*sinthome* by doubling the real. This seems to be what some psychotics do, when they
extract an object of enjoyment from their own body. In the case of auto-mutilation,
this is done literally. Fortunately this can also take the form of some ready-made or
self-made thing. Whereas the old hysteric takes out her phallic, sausage-like dog for
walk, young psychotics rambling around with their inevitable walkman or plastic bag
may be conceived of as taking out, dangling on the leash, their extracted object of
enjoyment: voice or gaze, breast or shit. Last, the *sinthome* can also be "found" by
doubling the imaginary of the mirror-formed ego. This is what Lacan in Seminar
XXIII, on the *sinthome*, elaborates in the “case” of Joyce.

*Joyce’s sinthome*

According to Lacan, Joyce did not succeed in doubling the symbolic with the signifier
of the Name-of-the-Father; the Name-of-the-Father was foreclosed. In the absence of
this symbolic father, Joyce had to fabricate a fourth ring of his own. And this he
could only do by doubling the imaginary (see Figure 3).
In fact, the problem is that Joyce’s first panicky reaction to the absence of the father consisted of clicking together symbolic and real, just like two wedding rings. Symbolic and real got married, the unconscious and enjoyment were held firmly in each other’s grasp. Moreover, this is what constituted Joyce’s first problem, which can be called “psychotic,” namely, this feeling that speech was imposed or even enforced upon him. Initially, at the time of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the enjoyment of this imposed speech still had some aesthetic quality about it, which made it possible for Joyce to experience it as discrete moments of “epiphany.” As is well known, he borrowed this notion of “epiphany” from the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas, where it signals the manifestation of God; yet, for the heretic Joyce, it became a manifestation of the enjoyment of women inventing language while chitchatting among themselves. Finally, with *Finnegans Wake*, this feminine enjoyment in speech would put pressure on the aesthetic framework of the epiphany to the point of breaking it up.

The feeling of speech being imposed is the consequence of the clicking together of the symbolic of language and the real of enjoyment. But Joyce also manifested a second “psychotic” problem, which was the consequence of the imaginary of his bodily ego remaining unknotted with the odd couple of symbolic and real. He had this recurrent experience that his ego could slip away from him “as easily as a fruit is divested of its soft, ripe peel.” Consequently, he could never really bask in this common neurotic

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11 James Joyce, *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*, in *The Essential James Joyce*,
illusion that one can avail oneself of language as an instrument for the communication of the inner Self.

How did Joyce manage to solve this double-edged problem, of the siege by speech and the ego loss? He took the only road that remained open to him, by doubling the imaginary of the mirror ego. In his case, this ego-doubling had two peculiarities. First of all, he successively created three new egos for himself; and second, these new egos were no longer based on the mirror image but each was in its own way based on the materiality of the letter. His first ego was the literary character of "The Artist Stephen Daedalus." The next was, rather surprisingly, the body of his wife Nora, to the extent that he could seduce her into describing her "affair" with her own body in all of its obscene intimacies. The last but not least of Joyce's literary egos is the name he made as a writer, as The Writer, thanks to his completely new way of treating language. In his final "Work in Progress" on *Finnegans Wake*, in a desperate struggle to contain the devastating (feminine?) enjoyment caused by his being continuously besieged by imposed speech, Joyce would invent an inconceivably private way of treating language, consisting of what Lacan calls the "telescoping" of signifiers. By sliding several signifiers into each other, in ways which by the way are not unlike Borromean knottings, Joyce started to create an endless series of trans-linguistic enigmas. Lacan calls this kind of "authorship" Joyce's *sinthome*.

**Monstration of the atopia of the sinthome**

This *sinthome* made the name Joyce known all over the world, it enabled him to write literary history and it still makes literary critics of all kinds dig for hidden meanings inside and outside his life. Ironically, it is precisely this completely "public" *sinthome* that constitutes Joyce's utmost "intimate."

You could say that, in a way, the *sinthome* makes "the intimate" even more explicitly public than the unconscious and the fantasy do, and once again this is what a particular type of contemporary art only heightens. I argued that the atopia of the unconscious is revealed in its staging, and the atopia of the fantasy in its extimization. Now, the atopia of the *sinthome* is revealed in still another way, which we could call its monstration (*monstration*). This rather unusual term is a hapax in Lacan's teaching; he once dropped it when manipulating his Borromean knots before the eyes of his puzzled public: "I ended up with the *monstration* of this knot, although I was looking for a demonstration of the doing of the analytical discourse" (*j'ai été amené à la monstration de ce noeud, alors que je cherchais une démonstration du faire du discours analytique*). It is not completely clear what Lacan is aiming at, but the notion of monstration seems to imply that the Borromean knot, with its obligatory *sinthome*, is not in any case a representation, a staged representation, which actually is the case for unconscious formations (Freudian representations which Lacan renamed signifiers)—it is "the Thing" (*das Ding*)

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presenting itself—“the thing itself” which is the object mentioned above. We saw that, in the case of the extimization, this object presented itself as inside and outside at the same time, as being on the side of the subject and on the side of the Other at the same time. Now, in the monstration of “the Thing itself,” it is even more difficult to locate the object, to put one’s finger on it. It is true that the object is the spot where the four rings of the Borromean knot-with-sinthome are blocked up—or, with Lacan’s equivocal expression, which it is impossible to translate into English, at least for me: “the Borromean knot is of no use, but it blocks up” (il sert à rien, mais il serre). But on the other hand, it is also true that this blocked-up spot always migrates when the Borromean knot is being manipulated; it can never be fixed definitively. In short: the Borromean knot-with-sinthome monstrates the most radical form of atopia of “the thing itself” or the object.

However, this atopia holds equally for the sinthome. I showed how, in order to form a Borromean knot, the fourth ring of the sinthome should always be knotted together in a particular manner with the imaginary of the bodily ego, the symbolic of language and the real of enjoyment. All the same, the sinthome keeps a seemingly unrestricted freedom of movement, guaranteeing the same freedom to the symbolic, imaginary and real. For instance: one can pull all of the four rings in all directions, any one of them can take the place of all of the others. Each ring can be moved endlessly in relationship to the three others. In short: one can never really lay one’s finger on the precise spot where the sinthome links symbolic, imaginary and real in a Borromean knot; and one cannot even definitively decide which of those four rings is the sinthome.

*Atopia of Joyce’s sinthome*

What about the atopia of the object/thing and the sinthome in the case, the artistic case, of Joyce then? First of all, the atopia of his particular sinthome, his authorship, has everything to do with the fact that the name Joyce has become identified with a kind of writing which is utterly impossible to interpret. Indeed, Joyce himself explicitly counted on university hermeneutics of all kinds, including psychoanalytic ones, to ferret out over three hundred-plus years whatever he may have meant with his inconceivably private jokes. His witticisms cannot be interpreted, not even within the Freudian paradigm of witticism.

Moreover, their production never reaches an end. Joyce simply could not help making them. Most typically, he could not confine himself to simply correcting the proofs of *Finnegans Wake*, but felt compelled to add a whole mountain-torrent of original telescopings of signifiers. In short: the sinthome never comes to rest, it remains a “Work in Progress.”

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Finally, what seems to be the most fundamental characteristic of this "Intimacy in Progress" of the sinthome is only hinted at by Lacan in a casual remark. At least in the case of Joyce’s writing, of his writer ego, Lacan suggests that it has something feminine about it. The ambiguous “intimate” of unconscious signifiers was called masculine because of its phallocentrism; to the extent that “the intimate” of the enjoyment in the fantasy is not completely signified and localized by the phallus, it was called “perverse” by Freud and “asexual” by Lacan; now the “Intimacy in Progress” of the sinthome, knotting together language, body and enjoyment in this flexible Borromean way, would be feminine. One could say that, for Lacan, Joyce’s authorship at the level of Finnegans Wake corresponds to his inconceivably private version of the typically paranoid delusion of becoming a woman.

Monstration of the “the Intimate” of the Sinthome in “Psychotic” Art

Finally, we should ask ourselves where in the contemporary plastic arts the seeds of such sinthomic or Borromean art à la Joyce can be perceived? The immediate example that occurs to me is that of Flemish artist Jan De Cock. I have not yet had the opportunity to go into the details of his particular “Work in Progress,” nor do I intend to pronounce upon the potential “inconceivably private meaning” of it for De Cock himself as a speakbeing, but I definitely have the impression that it can be understood as “doing with space what Joyce did with language.” What Joyce did with the signifiers of the Other, of different languages, De Cock does with cubes and shapes borrowed from Donald Judd and Daniel Buren, amongst others: he telescopes them in all possible ways, he knots them together in all kinds of Borromean ways. Moreover, these cubist jokes also seem to “multicomplexify” themselves in the same unstoppable, rampant way as Joyce’s linguistic jokes, with comparable disruptive effects on “social space” as Joyce had on language. I just mentioned how Joyce’s editors got into trouble due to the impossibility of their protégé to put a stop to his “Work in Progress” on language. Now the rumor is that letting De Cock in for an installation poses the same kinds of problems. The most remarkable example in this respect is his highly publicized show at the Tate some years ago. After some lobbying, I suspect, he finally received permission to do “something” at the entrance of the Tate. But, as usual, his cubist telescopings proved unstoppable, and thus in no time he telescoped himself into the heart of the Tate—as much to the annoyance of the Tate as to the delight of the Flemish art public. But this strategy also works the other way around: when allowed to do something inside, De Cock always manages to telescope himself outside—creating a kind of cubist cancerous growth that produces metastases everywhere—as if the intestines of a building are turned inside out in a cancerous proliferation of telescoped cubes.
Conclusion

My sense is that many more examples of this supple, Borromean construction of an intimacy beyond any grasp can be found in contemporary plastic art practices. But it must be time to arrive at some kind of conclusion. Or rather: at a fundamental question raised by the logic of this “work in progress” of the discovery and conceptualization of the particular atopia of intimacy by psychoanalysis and its exposition by the plastic arts. To put it bluntly: should we be confident that psychoanalysis will survive long enough to discover and conceptualize yet another version of the intimate in time, a version of the intimate with which we are not yet familiar—and that some form of the plastic arts will once again be able to expose its atopia in a way that once more reveals the utter impossibility, for the subject as well as for the Other, of grasping it?