
THE STRANGER

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Straniero, étranger: the foreigner; also, the stranger. In ways, students are both: initially a stranger to the teacher, and perhaps a foreigner to ART, but also a stranger to their own content, traveling as a foreigner in this strange land. A metaphor I have found very useful in charting the course of my own content, which I also try to pass on to my students is that of "the foreigner from within" (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*),¹ or even more appealingly, *the stranger from within*. Being both simultaneously the self and the stranger gives one the opportunity to gaze at one's work from two perspectives. Being inside of the work during the process of making ensures that the art comes from an emotionally powerful place. Taking on the role of the stranger, however, allows one to step outside of the self into the gaze of a viewer. A dialogue can develop when one "greet[s] the stranger" and moves from emotional attachment to the world of language. As a teacher, I often try to act as the mirror, a way of modeling this process of looking at work from the stranger's perspective. Other students in the group provide additional mirrors. By *internalizing* this process, one is able to create "*the externalizing eye*," an internal mirror for examining the dialogue created within a work of art.

Kristeva writes:

Living with the other, the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other... Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking: the impetus of my culture.²

This activity of identifying the stranger within, of being both self and other, me and not me, suggests a doubling of the ego, a splitting of the personality. Humans first become aware that they can have a "double" when they first recognize their image in a mirror: it is a projection or reflection of the self. This awareness Lacan describes as the "mirror-phase." Like Alice's trip through the looking glass, "the mirror-phase" is a passageway between Lacan's two main stages in the development of consciousness: the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Imaginary involves a pre-linguistic stage of consciousness focused around the visual recognition of images (and here I would posit...*and the emotional associations* they carry). The Symbolic concerns the subject's entry into, and formation by, the world of language.³ The creation, and subsequent viewing, of artwork involves a similar two-part development: access through emotion (the pre-verbal) and access through language.

The two routes of entry into content in the input and output phase simply underlines my belief that the primary motivation behind artmaking is the *desire to communicate*. Whether it is desire to communicate one-on-one, desire to identify with a community, or libidinous desire, desire drives artmaking.

Desire can also signal a splitting of the self, love representing a total identification with the other, to the point that during sexual interactions it is possible to realize such a loss of ego boundaries that two identities merge and you can experience *being inside of another person's body*. This doubling mechanism of projection and mirroring can not only be the drive behind the creation of content, it can serve in the analysis of it. By identifying with the role of the viewer, one can envision possible interpretations from a third point perspective. There is no prescriptive sensibility here, as it would never be possible or even desirable to predict a viewer's interaction with your work. That is the wonderful wild card in all of this. However, simply by presenting an external perspective and acting as the "mirror" for the work, I can, as a teacher, model the internal process that an artist can undertake in order to examine their own work from a point of view a bit outside of their own subjectivity. It can be extremely humanizing to try and imagine how another might interpret a scenario, an event, or a work of art. It can really pay to "walk a mile in my shoes."

What you make as an artist is inseparable from what you feel, what you think, and what has happened to you. By privileging a student's personal history, I can champion that stance that the better they know themselves the better art they can make. It takes a certain force of will to believe in what you are doing enough to pursue that relentlessly, especially in the studio. I, first of all, believe in them. Soon, they believe in themselves. In one student's case, the growth of content in his work spawned a simultaneous *construction of identity*. This construction of identity involved the need to create a private and complete cosmology, a world of gender transference, where men could strap on a "mother-maker" to experience the exclusive pleasure of nursing an infant.

An interesting shift in the perception of one's identity has occurred between the generation of artists that were my teachers and the generation of artists that are now my students. When there was a smoother homogeneity to the visible population of artists (I am thinking of course of the recent decades of American art history that were most exclusively composed of white male artists: Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, and later, early Neo-Expressionism) identity was a given, something you were born with. Even a second-generation immigrant, whose family's cultural affiliations were perhaps different from their grandparents, still had a built-in set of associations of a cultural identity of origin.

Most young artists that are students now are far enough removed from the traditions of and identification with a culture of origin that, in some respects, there is more of a sense of a *blank screen*, of a personal history waiting to be written. As one student recently remarked to me that her guiding force of identification, and therefore world view, ultimately manifested in the

content of her work, is MTV. This is clearly a *chosen* identity, manufactured to an extent by pop media, which is rapidly becoming a global community of identification. David Robbins writes, "Pop culture and info dreck convey the kernel of an idea of community based upon concept and taste — a chosen community as opposed to the old world's idea of a tribal community based on blood and heritage."⁴

My championing of identity in art making is most likely a reaction to the *invisibility* of the maker — particularly the female maker — in my early training. In attempting to help students explore and embrace their identity, I began to re-evaluate my own personal history. What I arrived at was that, different from the inherited identity of an earlier generation, my personal circumstances were such that I was left to construct my identity.

How does one meet the stranger within? In the absence of known truths, one can construct fictions which stand as real — as plausible as family history which is handed down. Why not? If you don't know the answer, you can make something up.

There are scant known facts about my mother's secret adoption at birth. The irretrievable invisibility of my matriarchal ancestry had a simple framework: 12 children, born in an unidentified European country, Catholic, the mother was an opera singer, three of the sisters adopted as infants into the United States. Within that open frame, one could become anything — it was as yet an unwritten page.

The pages began to be written for me at age 20 when I married an Italian cowboy and changed my name. I chose to be Italian, and upon changing my name, have embraced the *possibility* as fervently as one does religious conversion. It's as good a guess as any, and the simpatico was there, lending credence to the intuition.

It's taken me years to get over the secret panic that would set in when someone would ask me about my family background, my ancestry. There was always a sense of embarrassment or shame, of something hidden for a good reason, in the stiff New England family my mother was adopted into. It was not to be talked about. What I did not realize until later was the incredible liberation their silence gave me — I could be anything I wanted to.

The missing elements of my own personal history has made itself manifest in my work in the large areas of void punctuated by specific historical references. These references are ellisions from Italian paintings, suggesting an incomplete narrative, and historical markers, found published text fragments concerning beliefs. I originally related the desire to crop out gestures as signification of the missing stories of recorded history, and my own participation in the creation of quote "fact" in scientific illustration, and they are this too. But now I can more fully understand them in that they also reference the unknowns in my own identity.

This sense of having constructed my own identity has given me insight into this sensibility which I find prevalent in my students. It seems as if to them, the creative members of their generation, that there is indeed a blank space to fill, which they actively respond to by constructing an identity. (This

sense of the void is often misguidedly used as a symptom for categorizing individuals as members of "generation X" or "today's lost youth.") The best of the students I have encountered openly identify with this sense of vagueness, but rather than feeling it as a loss, they mostly view it as an opportunity. The family identity, for students of marginalized communities of personal choice, does not lie with biological family so much as it does with family, or community, of choice.

The discovery of the self's true identity can occur through the process of making art. The growth of the work means moving through a naturalized awareness of self to actualizing self-identity. At this point, the personal can expand to include the social, the connection of the self to an outer cultural, political or ideological framework.

As a teacher, I avoid any reference to myself as "mentor", with its load of academic baggage, implied hierarchical relationship, and suggestion of the closed-society passing of a garlanded baton. I prefer to think of myself instead as an "un-mentor," an accomplice. For amusement, I like to think of the students as Houdinis in a cabinet, with shackles which may have been placed by the self or the society.⁵ Bess was Houdini's accomplice, secretly passing him the key. I prefer to act as Bess, a willing accomplice participating in the creation of the illusion. This behind-the-scenes activity is more collusive and collaborative than the traditional teacher-student model. The success of the "escape," the illusion, is fully dependent on this collusion with Bess. Of course, Houdini always first had to give Bess the key.

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NOTES

1. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (NY: Columbia University Press), p. 14.
2. Ibid., p. 13.
3. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I," *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992) p. 609.
4. David Robbins, "The Rise of Systems Man," *Art Issues*, Summer 1995, p. 31.
5. Christopher Milbourne, *Houdini: The Untold Story*, (NY: Crowell, 1969).