KISSING THE TOAD:
Marlene Dumas and Autobiography

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ABSTRACT

The work of South African born painter Marlene Dumas has frequently been described as “intimate”, “conversational” and filled with “desire”. Though her work is fiercely material and painterly, and though the majority of her subjects derive from universal mass-media images or art history, a preoccupation with Dumas’ biographical self persists in most interpretations of her work. This thesis considers why this is so. I assert that Dumas’ work engages in a highly self-reflexive mode of authorial presence that is marked by a reference to its own artificiality or contrivance. I argue that, while understandable, simplistic biographical or intentional readings of Dumas’ work are unhelpful, and that Dumas’ authorial presence, more interestingly, questions the nature of authentic communication through art. This argument also suggests that the visual arts require a more nuanced understanding of the authorial self in art than has been evident to date. To demonstrate better critical engagement with the author, I refer to theories from contemporary autobiographical studies that provide a rich language of authorial presence.

The visual arts have had an uneasy relationship with the author since the twentieth century, when political, academic and critical shifts lost the Romantic belief in the author as god of the work of art. Having done so, the visual arts have sought to either dispel or politicize the author’s presence in a work of art. These approaches to the author, however, fail to acknowledge what Michel Foucault calls ‘the author function’: a concept of authorship that recognises the specificity of an author while maintaining a critical stance and avoiding historical traps of intentionality. This approach to authorship is the basis for contemporary autobiographical studies, which require a specific author for the definition of the genre, but also acknowledge the fluid nature of human subjectivity and the opacity of language. Consequently, autobiographical studies provide insightful thematic and structural means by which to address the role of the author in Dumas’ work, a connection that has not previously been made.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis, entitled 'Kissing The Toad: Marlene Dumas and Autobiography', has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)____________________________
Julie Fragar
28 February 2013
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PREFACE

This paper was inspired by my own studio practice, which is concerned with human subjects and their relationship with material representation, primarily in painting. While my work has frequently been described as autobiographical, for me it has never been that simple. Making work from personal referents and ‘turning’ them into material things is a necessarily self-reflexive undertaking. In that process, one subjects personal referents to the specific material imperatives of medium and also to contextual, idiosyncratic and ideological forces of discourse. One makes a fabricated and dialogical object of one’s self. I am not interested in transcribing a diaristic account of life through painting but in testing out the relationship between human subjects—artistic and other—and the material stuff with which we imagine to communicate ourselves.

A thesis-based approach has enabled me to learn a great deal from Marlene Dumas about painterly language and about the how and why of her critical authorial presence. I do so for my own knowledge as an artist and also to propose a more nuanced approach to the author in visual-arts criticism. Importantly, having focused on Dumas’ work rather than on my own, I have consciously avoided the problem of arriving at a stultifying formula for what I do; something I am sure would have crippled my practice, especially since its focus is directly on authorial performance. At the same time, Dumas’ work has offered an intense critique of my own practice. When Dumas self-reflexively turns on herself as author, she is also turning on my own position as artist.

The research project therefore consists of two distinct but closely related parts, both of which address the role of authorial presence in art (primarily in painting). The written component of research comprises the following thesis. The studio research component consists of more than 150 works of art, including paintings, sculptures and videos produced and exhibited during the period of candidature. A small recent selection of these will be shown in the final exhibition at Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney in May 2013. A short statement concerning the parallel studio practice as well as a written and visual account of work completed can be found in the Appendix.
INTRODUCTION

We find the author (perceive, understand, sense, and feel him) in any work of art. For example, in a painting we always feel its author (artist), but we never see him in the way we see the images depicted. We feel him in everything as a pure depicting origin (depicting subject), but not as a depicted (visible) image.

Mikhail Bakhtin

It’s as if I can make people think they are so close to me that they believe I have addressed the painting directly to them. I give them a false sense of intimacy. I think the work invites you to have a conversation with it.

Marlene Dumas

When the private diary of emotions is transcribed into the artwork, the question raised is not whether this has been done with sincerity (or with authenticity for that matter), but rather, what purpose is served by this projection of the artist’s persona?

Dominic van den Boogerd

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In February 2002, I saw Marlene Dumas’ *Name No Names* exhibition at the New Museum in New York. For me, the most significant of her works was a small, roughly drafted drawing of a figure, pointing two index fingers as guns, with text that read "The over-rated artist strikes again. BANG BANG." While the drawing was understated—ink and pencil on paper—it gave a fantastic shock. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, I experienced a moment of "suddenly", where the "laws of normal law-abiding temporal sequence" were ruptured; in this case, by a palpable authorial presence that seemed to be talking directly to me.\(^4\)

\(^4\) The drawing is noted as one of five drawings entitled *The Artist Is* (1987) in the catalogue to the exhibition, *Marlene Dumas: Name No Names*. (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2001), 71. This, however, was not its original incarnation and was developed in a series of twenty others that were published in the book *No Interviews Please* under that title: this drawing is numbered 8/20, mixed media on paper, 32 x 25 cm. The drawing now resides at the Museu Serralves in Porto, but is also now stored under another name. Dumas explains: ""The Over-Rated Artist Strikes Again... belongs to Serralves now, as one of 20 drawings from the 80’s that they have of mine. It was not meant as a set series to start with. Although Serralves now use the same title for this ”group” in Porto, as that of my ”drawing book” in 1987, because they are of the same period". Marlene Dumas in an e-mail to the author, 17 July 2012.

As the opening quotation from Bakhtin suggests, all artworks carry with them an author, a "depicting origin", but Dumas’ author is more than an ambient authorial presence. Dumas’ mode of authoring is conscious, self-reflexive and self-critical. As a result, her authorial presence is more present than most. The purpose of this research is to understand how and why this is the case; as Yve-Alain Bois puts it, "I [also] want to understand why; that is why I write about it". Returning to the drawing for a moment, which I will refer to as the "over-rated artist" drawing, it is possible, in a brief analysis, to identify two important authorial modes at work: the authentic and the self-reflexive. By authentic, I refer to a combination of dictionary and existentialist definitions of authenticity that supposes expression without conscious deception. It is not my aim, however, to say that Dumas’ work is or is not "authentic" by any definition; rather that she fabricates an author we perceive to be authentic—and also critiques that perception. By self-reflexive, I mean a mode of authorship that is "marked by or making reference to its own artificiality or contrivance". Addressing the latter, Dumas has created an authentic effect in this drawing by using the following: a naïve and gestural writing and drawing style; modest scale and materials; depicting an awkward half-naked figure; and by using seemingly self-deprecating subject matter. When one thinks more critically about the work, however, we can see acute self-reflexivity and ambiguity at play that undermine its earnestness. Is the text a reference to Dumas’ own possible insecurities as an artist, to past criticism of her work, or to other artists she considers "over-rated"? With what is the artist striking? Is she "striking" with the authenticity of the naked female figure or the macho professionalism of the shooter? (Of course, as a female painter, Dumas is required by artistic discourse to possess both qualities.) The most-self-reflexive aspect of this work, however, given its


7 I use “authentic” to draw on the history of “authentic” authorship that Dumas both proposes and critiques. My definition of “authentic” for the purposes of this research rests between a dictionary definition—"of undisputed origin and not a copy: genuine" (http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/authentic)—and an existential definition of authenticity that describes the efforts of an inner self to self-consciously live or express itself. The first definition plays to an autobiographical account of authenticity: the person we perceive is real, what they are saying is true (not consciously deceptive) and the work they are presenting has come from that same person. The second aspect of the definition is necessary especially when we are referring to the self-expressive fields of visual arts and autobiography. To authentically express one’s self has been a central concern of artistic (and autobiographical) expression since the Renaissance. In art, existentialist authenticity translates to an authentic character becoming “visible” through the work; evidencing that way of being. Therefore, an author is “authentic” if they are “openly” expressing themselves and a work is authentic if it appears to embody that expression. The authentic author to whom I refer then is a perception; to judge something as authentic is only to say that one has perceived something or someone as being authentic. That perception can also include knowing that perception is contingent and constructed. For existentialist authenticity, see Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).


9 In reference to Dumas’ earliest drawing, Selma Klein Essink refers to the use of sticky tape, handwriting and feeble materials as producing a “vulnerable effect”. Selma Klein Essink, Miss Interpreted, ed. Arlette Brouwers, Marlene Dumas and Selma Klein Essink (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1992), 11.
context within the New Museum show, is the way it seemed to speak to the entirety of the show’s achievement. The "BANG BANG" might just as well have been replaced with "HA HA" as Dumas underscores the fact that her modest—some might say over-rated—drawing is part of a major museum retrospective. 10 This is one of many examples in Dumas’ oeuvre where authentic and self-reflexive modes of authorship are pitted against one another to considerable experiential and critical affect.

Of course, I am not alone in noticing Dumas’ authorial presence. In “Watercolours and Physiognomies” (2003), Tilman Osterwald asks “where is the artist standing in this interplay of planes and references?” 11 In “Less Dead” (2008), Richard Shiff describes Dumas as a “me” in conversation in the work, 12 giving an anthropomorphic characterisation of “presence” to Dumas’ “line”. In “The Binding Factor: The Maternal Gaze of Marlene Dumas” (2008), Lisa Gabrielle-Mark writes “one is bathed in the work’s ‘traces’ ... a binding factor that connects mother and child, artists and subject...”. 13 These writers—and many more to whom I owe considerable debt and on whom I will elaborate in Chapter One—all note Dumas’ authorial presence. However, to date, no writers have linked the self-reflexive mode of authoring that Dumas performs—primarily through painting and short prose—with the self-reflexive author as discussed in contemporary autobiography studies; a link that stands to theoretically frame Dumas’ authorial presence.

While I will return to the value of autobiography shortly, it is first necessary to consider how the visual arts have historically conceived of the author and therefore what theories of autobiography may offer to analyses of Dumas’ work. In visual-arts criticism, the role of the author has historically fallen under several key models, all of which are of limited value in understanding Dumas’ approach. The author in a work of art has been regarded simplistically, either as “transparent mirroring” or “narcissistic self-absorption”, 14 as an element to be parodied or jettisoned from a work, or as a means of performing political critique.

10 It is also interesting to note a second layer of self-reflexivity in the series from which the drawing derived entitled No Interviews Please (1980). In that title, Dumas pre-empts, names and blocks the usual tendency for viewers to go to the “depicting origin” for the definitive meaning of the work.
11 Tilman Osterwald, “‘Watercolours as Physiognomies’”, in Marlene Dumas Wet Dreams: Watercolours, exh. cat. (Ravensburg: Städtische Galerie Ravensburg, 2003), 20.
The “transparent mirroring” model sees the relationship between the work and the artist as mutually explicatory. Also known as biographism,¹⁵ this is an outmoded but persistent method of criticism that reached its pinnacle in interpretations of Abstract Expressionism by critics such as Harold Rosenberg, and that, as Griselda Pollock has explained, imagines “a transparent screen through which you only have to look to see the artist as a psychologically coherent subject originating the meanings the work so perfectly reflects”;¹⁶ It is important to state from the outset that I am opposed to this form of criticism and it is in contradiction to my use of autobiography, as I will soon explain. As Mieke Bal writes, biographism “wrongly props itself up against the artist’s statements and stories, producing narratives that sidestep or even ignore what is most characteristic of the artist’s work: its visual nature.”¹⁷ To that I would add that biographism also ignores material, contextual and interpretative elements. I will return to the recurring tendency for art writers to give biographic accounts of Dumas’ work in Chapter One.

This imagined transparency between work and author has also had the affect of tainting authorial referencing and presence as naïve, solipsistic or narcissistic;¹⁸ an attitude that ignores critical and self-reflexive possibilities of the author’s role. Many artists and critics have consequently sought to distance the work from the author or at the very least to fictionalise or disperse the author’s presence. These anti-authorial approaches that have proliferated since Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain (1917) and his subsequent “readymades”

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¹⁵ In the visual arts, biographism has roots its roots in Georgio Vasari’s mythologised Lives of Most Excellent Painters and Architects (1550) and in the profound influence of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis and the publication of his The Interpretations of Dreams (1899). Freud’s influence in particular can be cited across a range of artists and “movements” such as German Expressionism, Primitivism, Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. For the historical overview of authorial relationships to artwork and references to Vasari’s influences, see Rudolf Wittkower, “Genius: Individualism in Art and Artists,” Journal of the History of Ideas 22, no. 3 (July–September 1961): 291–302. For an account of the relationship between psychoanalysis and art, see the following references in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh’s Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism (New York Thames and Hudson, 2004): Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams and the birth of Expressionism painting in Vienna through the practices of Gustave Klimt, Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka (52–56); the relationship between psychoanalysis and the development of German Expressionism and English Vorticism, including artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Egon Schiele, Ludwig Kirchner, and Franz Marc (85–89); Primitivism in relation to the practices of Paul Gauguin, Andre Derain, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Ludwig Kirchner (64–69); Surrealism and Psychoanalysis (190–195); the formation of Abstract Expressionism and key concerns pertaining to “authenticity” espoused by critics such as Harold Rosenberg and artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell (348–354). Also, Marcel Vos, in “Making and Meaning: In the Margins of Miss Interpretation” in Miss Interpretation (102), makes a clear and insightful distinction between biographic approaches that he calls interpretation and understanding.

¹⁶ Griselda Pollock, Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories (New York: Routledge, 1999), 98.


can be historically identified in practices as diverse as Dadaist works;\textsuperscript{19} kinetic works by artists such as Victor Vasarely;\textsuperscript{20} many collaborative and instruction-based works from Fluxus artists;\textsuperscript{21} Minimalist works by Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and many others;\textsuperscript{22} Pop art practices lead by Andy Warhol and mimicked by Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst;\textsuperscript{23} photographically referential practices by artists such as Louise Lawler and Cindy Sherman, identified by Douglas Crimp in his famous "Pictures" (1977);\textsuperscript{24} postmodernist appropriation by artists such as David Salle and Julian Schnabl;\textsuperscript{25} fictional plays on authorial biography by artists such as Christian Boltanski, Eleanor Antin and Joseph Beuys;\textsuperscript{26} and, most recently, interactive and relational practices by artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Rirkrit Tiravanija, championed by Nicholas Bourriaud.\textsuperscript{27} Other art practices and criticism have justified the inclusion of the author in art by establishing the authorial self as a device for political critique—the personal made political. This last approach features heavily in feminist practices from the 1970s to the present and has been attributed—quite justifiably—to Dumas’ work.\textsuperscript{28} While Dumas’ work engages in the politics of representation, in racial and gender politics and in the debunking of authorial primacy (which will feature in my analysis presented in Chapters Four to Seven), Dumas is also more profoundly involved in an investigation of authorial communication. Dumas’ work asks how human subjects exist and communicate through problematic language systems that both facilitate and frustrate our desire for authentic communication.

\textsuperscript{19} Dada artists include Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters and George Grosz who, according to Arp, sought to work “against the bombast of the gods of painting (expressionists),” cited in Foster et al. \textit{Art Since 1900}, \textit{184}.

\textsuperscript{20} Vasarely and other kinetic artists, such as Pol Bury, Yaacov Agam, and Jean Tinguely were all “eager to pursue Duchamp’s critique of the subjective authority of the artist as God-like creator” Ibid., \textit{380–81}.

\textsuperscript{21} Such works included Alison Knowels’ \textit{Identical Lunch} (1968), which removed artists from the creative pedestal; for an overview of the Fluxus group, see \textit{Art Since 1900}, \textit{456–63}.

\textsuperscript{22} Their work, which emphasised industrial production and the position of the viewer, sought to eliminate authorial presence. See ibid., \textit{492–95}.

\textsuperscript{23} Pop art treated the artwork as consumerist fetish item and artist as “celebrity” (rather than authentic self), headed by Andy Warhol and mimicked by Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. See ibid., \textit{600–604}.

\textsuperscript{24} These artists, including Louise Lawler, Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, questioned the possibility of “originality” demonstrated through photographic reproduction. See ibid., \textit{580–83}; See also Douglas Crimp’s seminal essay concerning the use of “second-hand” references, “Pictures” (New York: Artists Space, 1977), republished in X-TRA 8, no. 1 (Fall 2005):\textit{17–30}.

\textsuperscript{25} For neo-conservative postmodern appropriation of historical works, mass-media images and readymade “style” by artists such as Julian Schnabel and David Salle, see \textit{Art Since 1900}, \textit{596–99}.

\textsuperscript{26} For fictional plays of authorship, see Joseph Beuys, Christian Boltanski and Eleanor Antin. For numerous other examples, see Barbara Steiner and Ying Yang, \textit{Artworks Autobiography} (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004),\textit{11–27}.

\textsuperscript{27} See artists, such as Felix Gonzalez-Torrez, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick and Thomas Hirschhorn that include and commune with the viewer dispersing the author as autonomous self. Foster et al., \textit{Art Since 1900}, \textit{664–69}. For an in-depth account, see Nicolas Bourriaud’s seminal text \textit{Relational Aesthetics} (Dijon: Les Presses du reel, 2004).

\textsuperscript{28} Other artists, such as Orlan, Laura Aguilar, Hannah Wilke, Mary Kelly, Kara Walker, Lorna Simpson, and Blondell Cummings, are all addressed in Smith and Watson’s \textit{Interfaces}. For a politically oriented reading of Dumas’ work, see Cornelia Butler “Painter As Witness,” in \textit{Measuring Your Own Grave}, \textit{254}.
A central characteristic concern of contemporary autobiographical studies—which originated as a field of interest in American university literary departments during the 1970s—is the “dilemma”, as autobiographical theorist Lisa Anderson writes, between the “authentic” authorial self (the supposed imperative of traditional autobiography) on the one hand, and the problem that “all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language and tropes,” on the other. That is, how can one communicate “authentic” autobiographical truth through the quagmire of figuration? As I have suggested, the sense of the authentic author is so important in Dumas’s authorial presence, and thus, the autobiographical conundrum is a useful tool with which to analyse her work.

To a significant extent, the visual arts have dealt with many of the same issues as autobiography apropos the author. Both have had to address the relationship between author and Modernist questions of form; both have been influenced by post-structuralist criticism and Roland Barthes’ famous “Death of the Author” (1967) essay (to which I will soon return); both have used the author as a political entity to expose the contingent nature of human subjectivities; and both, importantly, have concluded that the authentic author is an impossible proposition, consequently seeking to explode the mythology of the unique author-god. The significant difference on this last point, however, is that autobiographical studies have persisted with the authentic author as the central point of focus and as a source of critical value. As Paul De Man writes, autobiography has chosen to remain “caught in a revolving door” of desire for and impossibility of the authentic author. Indeed, autobiography requires that author for its very definition. As Philippe Lejeune argues, autobiography occurs where there is an authentic shared identity “between the author, and the narrator, and the protagonist.” As a matter of definition, therefore, autobiography must attend to such foundational questions as: What is the relationship between the author and their representation? To what extent is an “authentic self” communicable? And how is that self formed and deformed by the process of articulation in autobiography or art? How and why do viewers and readers desire the authorial self? Therefore, in focusing on these key questions, autobiography provides a

30 Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades” and Ernest Hemingway’s The Movable Feast (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964) are two respective and influential examples.
31 In autobiography, the post-structuralist viewpoint was asserted most forcefully by Paul de Man in “Autobiography as De-Facement”, in Modern Language Notes, no. 94 (1979): 919–30.
33 Anderson, Autobiography, 2.
rich source for understanding how Dumas’ authorial presence and how her work might be intimate and authentic yet not transparently biographical.

For this reason, the most significant influences on my research have been autobiographical theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson whose work in autobiographical studies crosses over from literary studies to include the visual arts.\(^{35}\) Smith and Watson’s interdisciplinary approach provides precedence for the use of an ostensibly literary field of study in analysis of visual art. I agree with their acknowledgement that “there are separate conventions in visual and verbal media”. They also argue for “localized engagements with the potential, the politics, and the privileges of the ‘autobiographical’ as a mode of self-representation … in women’s visual and performing art”. \(^{36}\) This approach draws on the richness of the autobiographic field while also taking into account the specificity of a work’s form.\(^{37}\) In *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/ Image/Performance* (2002), Smith and Watson, along with collaborators,\(^{38}\) use the “autobiographical” and autobiographical subjects developed in literary autobiography as a framework to relate to visual works by those such as Louise Bourgeois, Hanna Wilke, Jo Spence, Cindy Sherman, Carolee Schneeman, Annette Messager, Audrey Flack, and others. These essays offer a new lens through which to consider the work of visual and performing artists and materially demonstrate the expanded nature of autobiographical studies.\(^{39}\)

Indeed, such is the expanded nature of autobiographical studies that many theorists, including Smith and Watson, have produced alternate terminology around autobiography, not only to sidestep conventional assumptions relating to autobiography (such as truth and transparency) but also to include the specificity of new performative subjects and mediums. For example, Smith and Watson use the interdisciplinary term “life narrative”\(^{40}\) in order to refer to the many incarnations of self-representation where women “have

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\(^{35}\) In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson state: “While we normally think about autobiography as an extended narrative in written form, it is possible to enact self-presentation in any media.” Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 74.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{37}\) “To read these multimedia texts we need to develop familiarity with the narrative and generic conventions of visual compositions.” Ibid., 76.

\(^{38}\) Smith and Watson’s collaborators are Jo Anna Isaak, Amelia Jones, Linda S. Kauffman, Mieke Bal, Lesley Ferris, Jennifer Drake, Marianne Hirsch, Georgiana MM Colvile, Irene Gammel, Mimi Y. Yang, Jessica Prinz, Laura Laffrado and Renee Riese Hubert.


\(^{40}\) Smith and Watson write: “While we often use the adjective ‘autobiographical’ to describe women’s self-representation in various visual and performance modes, we prefer to think of works not as ‘autobiography’, but as enacted life narrations.” Smith and Watson, *Interfaces*, 9.
inscribed themselves visually, textually or performatively”. These tangential terms—of which there are many—demonstrate the breadth of autobiography’s aims, manifestations, and affects. I, however, use “autobiography” because it refers to the generality of that complex field that is fundamentally concerned with the evocation of an authentic autobiographical subject and its difficulties. Writing from the position of an artist therefore, my use of autobiography can be understood as tangential to the term “self-portraiture”. Just as the term autobiography proved too limiting for the autobiographical theorists, self-portraiture, which connotes the presence of a physical body or, at the very least, emphasis on the artist’s life or personality, is too limited a term for what needs to be said about Dumas; and indeed about the author and painting. Therefore, I borrow autobiography to extend the critical possibilities of self-portraiture.

Through this research, I have found that a way to develop (much-needed) more considered ideas of the role of the author in painting is through the critical framework offered by autobiographical studies. This framework turns our attention to the problematic make-up of the authorial self in art, and confronts those problems directly. In combination with other necessary discussions of form, materiality, context and discourse, autobiography enables recognition of authorial presence that does not detract from the specificity of the work in front of us. The research has also confirms the hypothesis that Dumas’ work needs to be reconsidered in terms of the most foundational aspects of author/viewer relations. When the critic Mario Naves derogatively described Dumas’

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41 Ibid., 8.
42 Autotopography: Jennifer A. Gonzalez used “Autotopographies” as a spatial, local and situational “writing” of the self’s life in visual art. In Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies, ed. Gabriel Brahm and Mark Driscoll (Boulder and San Fransisco: West view Press, 1995), 133–50. Although this seems the most applicable to Dumas’ work I do not argue that Dumas is portraying her “life” through her work, rather she is performing an “authentic” authorial presence that pertains to the autobiographical pact of Lejeune; Autography: Jeanne Perreault used this term to refer to the “I” of feminist autobiography that becomes a part of the collective “we” of feminist communities. See Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 186; (auto)graphy; Sidonie Smith suggests that Jenny Saville’s painting Branded (1991) is an (auto)graphy in the sense of cultural critique through self-referential display. See Smith, “Bodies of Evidence: Jenny Saville, Faith Ringgold and Janine Antoni Weigh” in Interfaces, 132-159; autopathography: Thomas G Couser uses this terms to refer to autobiographical narratives of illness and disability. See Couser, Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Autogynography: Donna C Stanton used this term to suggest “that the centrality of gendered subjectivity” to the production of literary self-referential acts. See Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 187; Photobiography: Gilles Mora used this term to refer to a “person’s biography as revealed through photographs”. See Gilles Mora and Claude Nori, “Photographs in Autobiographies: Identities in Progress”, in Skepsi 1 (2008): 50; Autoethnography: Mary Louise Pratt used this term to indicate that “colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms”. See Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London: Routledge, 1992), 7; Autothanatography: Nancy K Miller refers to autobiographical texts that “confront illness or death by performing a life at a limit of its own, or another’s undoing.” See Smith and Watson, Interfaces, 188, and Miller, “Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography” in Differences 6, no 1 (1994): 1–27.
paintings as “ghostly and self-conscious”, he was absolutely correct. The self-consciousness he detects is the author as formal component; making choices between this way or that way, making the viewer conscious—and desirous—of a multi-faceted authorial presence. The scope of this thesis does not allow for anything like a full account of the extensive fields of painting, autobiography or Dumas’ work. I consider, therefore, that the connections I present in the following pages constitute just one starting point for considering Dumas’ work in relation to autobiography. To my current knowledge, this link between Dumas’ work and autobiography has not been made before. It is my ambition therefore that this research constitutes an original and valuable contribution to both the discourse on Dumas and autobiographical discourse. For Dumas I have established a theoretical framework by which to more concretely understand the “authenticity” so frequently referred to in critical writing on her work. For autobiography I have demonstrated that Dumas is another artist—along with others outlined in Smith and Watson’s Interfaces—whose work can benefit significantly from the rich understanding of the authentic author central to autobiographical studies.

The thesis is structured in the following way. Chapter One establishes what has been written about Dumas, what that writing indicates about the significance of authorial presence in her work, and how her work deals with that presence self-reflexively. I argue against biographic readings but suggest that the frequency of such readings demonstrates the potency of Dumas’ authorial strategies, whether or not they are ultimately misinterpreted. I give a brief overview of Dumas’ work since 1997 through the lens of self-reflexivity in her practice and also acknowledge other key issues, such as racial and gender politics that are often addressed in her work. This chapter asserts that the author in Dumas’ work—though often cited directly and indirectly—has not received the critical rigour it deserves. For this reason, I argue, we ought to consider autobiography as a valid conceptual framework with which to re-imagine it.

Chapter Two builds the historical foundation for considering Dumas’ work in relation to autobiography. To do this I focus directly on autobiography studies providing a brief history of the field and outlining the correlated shifts in thinking around autobiographical subjecthood that have occurred. Most importantly, I establish that for contemporary autobiography studies—influenced heavily by the critical and political shifts of the 1960s and 1970s—it is not so much the reality of an authentic author that is at stake for the autobiographical subject so much as the human desire for that author, or the

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autobiographical fantasy. This fantasy of the authentic author provides the key connection between autobiography studies and Dumas’ authorial presence and enables further structural and thematic links to be made.

In Chapter Three I explore some of these links, identifying one structural mechanism and several thematic concerns from autobiography that are pertinent to Dumas’ work. The structural mechanism I refer to is borrowed from Smith and Watson and their Lejeunian concept of the four authorial ‘I’s. These ‘I’s divide the author into different and often divergent characters that theorise the multi-faceted nature of the autobiographical author. The thematic concerns I raise in this chapter stem from that necessary divided idea of authorship, and include: the problem of split subjectivity both in autobiography and in human ontology; the role of the proper name; the ideological and dialogical nature of the languages all subjects must use and inhabit; and the ideological nature of embodiment, both human and artistic. These concerns constitute some of the most profound problems of autobiography, but also provide a fertile territory for considering human communication through art. Using the autobiographical foundation established in Chapter Two, this chapter identifies in more concrete ways, how autobiography is useful for Dumas’ work in both structural and thematic ways.

Chapters Four to Seven comprise case studies of Dumas’ work that materially demonstrate the autobiographical fantasy, the four authorial ‘I’s, and the thematic concerns indicated above, as well as referring to broader political, art-historical and material aspects of Dumas’ work. These analyses position the material work at the centre of the discussion and give meaning to the preceding theoretical discussion. Of course, Dumas’ authorial presence is the focus of my work, but in these analyses that author must be read in conjunction with material, historical and ideological forces also at play. This analysis provides proof of the value and relevance of autobiographic theory in relation to Dumas’ work by demonstrating a model for using autobiographical theory in the context of art criticism, which so frequently refers to the author with little substantiation. Chapter Four analyses Don’t Talk to Strangers (1977), focusing on the authentic communicative trope of the letter, the interplay between communicative desire and material work, and the dialogical nature of Dumas’ autobiographical self. Chapter Five addresses Dumas’ self-portrait Drunk (1997), with particular focus on the desire for authenticity around self-portraiture and the history of the female nude in Western painting. Chapter Six considers Pregnant Image (1988–90), addressing the maternal body as the ultimate dialogical body (the self contains the other) and the direct biographical link Dumas inserts in this work between her life and this painting. Finally, in Chapter Seven, Likeness 1 and 2 (2002) are
discussed in relation to painting as a life-preserving act, the death of painting, and the
dialogical interplay between Dumas and other artist/authors (in this case Hans Holbein).

To be clear, I am not claiming that Dumas intends to make work in the genre of
autobiography—she is not an autobiographer. Rather, I argue that her work can be more
meaningfully understood by referring to autobiography’s rich account of authorship. As I
will show, so many writers have already noted, in direct and indirect ways, Dumas’
authorial self, and thus this aspect of her work deserves closer attention. The authorial self
is of course not the only means by which one should consider Dumas’ work; indeed, I
argue that the work, as opposed to the author, must remain at the centre of art criticism.
Dumas’ work does, however, use the languages of painting and short prose, as well as her
performance as a public figure, to conjure an authorial self, one that self-reflexively
critiques the divide between the “internal” author and the one constructed from a material
work of art.
CHAPTER ONE

No, They’re Not All Self-Portraits:
Critical Approaches to Dumas’ Work

The wish to understand a painting is, I think, different from the need to interpret painting. He who wants to understand a particular painting will never lose sight of its object.

Marcel Vos

So between my (frequently irrelevant) intention and your (mostly veiled) intention, there’s the intention of the artwork. But if the artwork remains too silent, then I’ll just have to refer you back to my former statement from 1993. They say you can’t judge a book by its cover You can’t judge a woman by her lover But paintings have to be judged by their covers and their lovers.

Marlene Dumas

Marlene Dumas is a white, South African born artist who lives in Amsterdam. She makes paintings and, to a lesser extent, writes poetry. Her paintings are generally large-scale, flat and gestural renderings of newspaper images or personal photographs of human subjects; sometimes these people are known to Dumas in her lived experience, others are known only as images. Her poetry refers to her paintings, to her political views and to her life. Her works achieve the highest price of any living female artist in the world. She has a daughter, Helena, who often features in her work. Dumas left South Africa at the age of twenty-four, partly because of politics, partly because of its lack of serious art, but also because she was in love with two men and could not reconcile her dilemma. All of these biographical details are addressed in her work: living as a white woman in South Africa (The Blonde, The Brunette and the Black Woman, 1992, Figure 24); being a painter (The Painter, 1994 Figure 25); being a female painter (Women and Painting, 1993); being a well-paid artist (postcard to her mother in Love Letters, 1985, Figure 28); being famous (Give the People What they Want, 1992, Figure 2); her daughter (Helena, 1992, Figure 26); and being in love (Couples, 1978, Figure

44 Vos, Miss Interpreted, 102.
46 In an interview with Barbara Bloom, Dumas said “At art school, I remember my professor told me “You’re a born painter”, I replied that I considered painting old fashioned. All the smart artists were doing other kinds of work, so I wanted to do something else, but he said, “my poor girl, what else could you do?”. Bloom, “Interview with Marlene Dumas,” Marlene Dumas, 8.
On this basis, her work can and has been described, somewhat simplistically, as autobiographical. In an interview with Dumas, Barbara Bloom says: “[critics] think the work is direct and naïve. That if Marlene Dumas fell down, she’d make a painting about falling down?”, to which Dumas replied, “Yes, that it’s primarily autobiographical.”

The problem with biographism in relation to Dumas’ work is not that autobiographical connections are meaningless; as Bal writes, the auto “should not be thrown out with the bath water”. Rather, if these connections are made between the work and Dumas’ life—and, as I demonstrated, those connections exist—they must be made in conjunction with critical analysis of the material work. We must also ask why and how Dumas’ presence has been elicited through the work rather than simply stating that it is. We must ask why we are talking about the author in the first place. This is all the more necessary in Dumas’ case, given the fact that her authorial voice is referred to far more than that of other comparable artists, including Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans, and Richard Hamilton. When we ask such questions we see (quite literally) that Dumas’ authorial presence is not simply a matter of authentic biographical expression but is evinced also by a performative investigation of the problems of communicating through art; most particularly what imaginary relationships, meanings and presences painting has the capacity to incite by smearing pigment on a surface in particular ways.

I want here to consider the significant body of criticism on Dumas’ work pertaining to her authorial presence, including simplistic biographic or intentional approaches; more critical references to her self-reflexivity; and also indirect references to her authorial presence by the use of descriptive terms, such as intimacy, desire and relation. This chapter seeks to establish that Dumas’ work evokes an authorial self, a fact already evidenced by the frequent direct and indirect references to that presence in writing about her work, however simplistic, insightful or unconscious those references might be. The gap between the proportion of authorial references or allusions to Dumas’ authorial presence and the paucity of deep consideration of that author in criticism on her work, therefore, also indicates the necessity of this thesis.

Biographism in Critical Writing on Dumas

Many writers find Dumas’ biography too great a temptation. As Jordan Kantor writes, “the hermeneutic possibilities of the story of a woman raised in Apartheid South Africa tackling issues of race in her art are almost irresistible (if essentializing)”, and biographism—what Bal has called “criticism’s intellectual laziness”—can be found even in some of the best writing on Dumas’ work. By biographism, I mean not only references to the author’s

49 Bloom, “Interview with Marlene Dumas,” 12.
life as a means of explaining a work but the deduction of authorial intention supported by references to Dumas’ written work or statements; a habit that William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley refer to in literature as the “Intentional Fallacy”.53 It would be wrong to argue that these straightforward readings—biographical and intentional—dominate criticism on Dumas’ work; they do not. Rather, biographism frequently infects broader critical analyses of her work via casual, throwaway remarks that passively cast the author as lead meaning-maker. This casting of the author both obfuscates more interesting critical possibilities—around the relationship between author, subject, viewer and material work—and reinforces ill-conceived concepts of the author as god. With the persistence of such simplistic authorial framing—at least so far as references to perceptibly “authentic” authorship are concerned—it is no wonder that art criticism has become bored with the author, preferring instead the anti-authorial approaches outlined in my Introduction. Simplistic references to Dumas’ authorial self could fill a chapter of their own (see below for an indicative list);54 however, in order to concretely demonstrate what critical opportunities they overlook, I will limit my examples here to three writers: Emma Bedford, Ilaria Bonacossa and Yuko Hasegawa. All are accomplished writers on Dumas’ work, yet all have also been seduced by casual biographism at the cost of more interesting engagements with Dumas’ authorial presence and painting.


For example, Bedford\textsuperscript{55} writes of the painting *Give the People What They Want* (1992) “Dumas was clearly thinking about the founding notions of democracy and the relationship between the state and its people.”\textsuperscript{56} This statement imagines a straightforward illustrative link between the contents of the work and Dumas’ intention, based on Dumas’ South African heritage. Although it is possible to consider the work politically and biographically, if we also think about the painting—the information we have in front us—might “the people” to whom the title refers also be the viewers standing in front of the picture? It is, after all, to the viewer that the female subject reveals herself and to the viewer that Dumas has “given” the painting. The girl and her opened towel (seeming to mimic an unstretched canvas) are analogous to the way we look at and think about painting as though we might find the “true meaning” somewhere “beneath” the surface of the work, perhaps in the author's life. The girl’s exposure somewhat ironically therefore, points directly to Bedford’s own desire for the artist’s biography; Dumas is giving Bedford “what she wants”, only to deliver, however, another oily surface of paint. In one of Dumas’ most potent statements she writes:

\textsuperscript{55} Like Bonacossa, Bedford’s assessment of Dumas’ work is an inconsistent combination of critical insight and biographic slippages. Although as I have said, biographical references can contribute to meaning, the way in which Bedford makes transparent links between the authors biography and the work momentarily suspend the importance of the work itself. In her introduction to *Intimate Relations* for example, Bedford promisingly draws attention the complex relationship between the role of author and the viewer in *Snow White and the Broken Arm* (1988). She then however goes on to addresses *Genetic Longing* (1984), writing that the title “alludes to the artist’s displacement in her adopted country and to her longing for familial or related connectedness”. Bedford, “Questions of Intimacy and Relations”, *Marlene Dumas: Intimate Relations*, 37.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 39.
They’re looking for Meaning as if it were a Thing. As if it were a girl, required to take her panty off, as if she would want to do so as soon as the true interpreter comes along. As if there were something to take off.\textsuperscript{57}

Such is the specificity of Dumas’ primary medium—she is the quintessential painter—that to overlook her concerns in relation to painting in any of her work is to miss the point altogether.\textsuperscript{58} Any biographical or intentional references to Dumas must also factor in her self-reflexive account not only of authorship but of painting. As van den Boogerd writes, “The sincerity of her intentions is impossible to assess, because the intentions of the painter are distinguishable only in the form of a painting.”\textsuperscript{59}

Bonacossa similarly denigrates the communicative value of the actual paintings in “Further than the I Can See” (2009),\textsuperscript{60} arguing that the exhibition title All Is Fair in Love and War can be understood by looking to the artist’s writing; “Dumas’ unpublished notes offer a key to the exhibition’s title” (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{61} Further, she argues that “(h)er titles and the texts that always accompany (her shows) are key to understanding her work”.\textsuperscript{62} I disagree. Dumas’ textual works—published or unpublished—if they surface in artistic discourse are part of her creative output and authorial strategy and can therefore be compared with her painting but not used as evidence of its meaning.\textsuperscript{63} Bonacossa’s approach is not dissimilar to that of Selma Klein Essink, who, in her introductory essay to Miss Interpreted (1992), aims to limit misinterpretation by offering commentary “based on the author’s own remarks”.\textsuperscript{64} Titles and written works do contribute significantly to our perception of Dumas’ paintings and to this thesis, but they are not ”keys”; they do not reside beneath the ”panty”. Bonacossa’s, and to a lesser extent Essink’s, desire to “unlock” meaning through “written instruction” from the artist does however reveal that Dumas’ corpus of written works, which almost always use first-person pronouns, is a strategy that ensures her authorial voice (often misread as intention) is rarely far from the work. It is

\textsuperscript{57} Marlene Dumas, Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts (Amsterdam: Galerie Paul Andriesse and Uitgeverij de Balie, 1998), 58.
\textsuperscript{58} Another of Dumas’ paintings from this time. Empty Handed (1991), shows a girl sitting on the floor staring at her empty hands. This painting bears an interesting comparison to Give the People What They Want, both of which foreground the surface of the painting as devoid of meaning ”behind” the surface. Similarly, The Prophet (2004) depicts a man opening his coat to reveal nothing but the flat white plane of his underclothing.
\textsuperscript{59} Boogerd, Marlene Dumas, 62.
\textsuperscript{60} In this essay, Bonacossa points to Dumas’ self-reflexive strategies but also undermines her own insights. Bonacossa is not a biographer. She writes, for example, that “the biographical aspect is just the spark for her reflection on the use of images in contemporary society. How can sadness be represented?” (Bonacossa, “Further Than the ‘I’ Can See”, in Marlene Dumas, 206). Later, she writes “there is always a gap between her emotions and her production”, ibid.,163.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 173.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{63} For a series of assertions about the role of writing in her work, see Dumas’ poem “Why Do I Write About Art,” in Marlene Dumas: Suspect, curated by Gianni Romano (Ginevra-Milano: Skira, 1998), 91.
\textsuperscript{64} Essink, Miss Interpreted, 8.
important to note, however, that Dumas frequently shifts and changes her point of view—“I don’t decide to represent anything except myself” and “no, they’re not all self-portraits”—which undermines the possibility of one consistent autonomous author telling a “true” life story.

A third example of biographism and missed critical opportunity can be found in Hasegawa’s *Broken White* (2007), where he writes:

> Her works are often as not autobiographical. Particularly when she deals with such extremely primal emotions as anxiety, violence, and sensuality, her method of perceiving and experiencing her world primally, in the first person, is reflected. (emphasis added)

Hasegawa’s use of autobiography here seems a direct equivalent to the biographic reading by Griselda Pollock of Abstract Expressionism, to which I referred in the Introduction—imagining the authentic expression of the work as “a transparent screen”. Dumas’ work is gestural and expressive and, as a trope, this method of working suggests an openness or rawness of movement that Hasegawa has fully accepted as authentic. I would agree this method of working is integral to the sense of authenticity in Dumas’ authorial presence (as noted in the New Museum drawing). But this is not to say that painting can ever constitute a psychic reflection, only that we can read an emotion from the nature of a mark.

Hasegawa omits Dumas’ self-conscious engagement with painting as a material language system. I would argue that Dumas’ portrayal of “primal emotions” exists not as the “reflection” of her inner psyche but as a performative exercise—painting’s capacity to materially embody human feelings such as “anxiety, violence and sensuality”. As Bakhtin argues, all languages—“any communication system employing signs that are ordered in a particular manner”—have behind them a “voice”, a “speaking personality, a speaking consciousness … (with) will or desire behind it, its own timbre and overtones”.

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65 “Against the Wall: Letter to David (Zwirner)”, February 25, 2010. Published Marlene Dumas official website, accessed June 4, 2012, http://www.marlenedumas.nl/; “Give the people what they want”, 1993, *Intimate Relations*, 93. Another example of such a contradiction can be found by comparing her statement “I’d like my paintings to be very bare. To be as minimal as possible without being dead,” with her assertion in *Immaculate* that she paints the “deadness of death, through a medium declared dead.”


67 Ibid.

68 Dumas’ work is not made entirely of personal references when compared with artists such as Tracey Emin or Elke Krystufek, for example.

69 I will borrow—as Bakhtin does—Jurij Lotman’s definition of language in *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977): “any communication system employing signs that are ordered in a particular manner”. This includes painting (signs of a flat surface, paint, brush marks, the history of painting), photography (paper,
The consciousness we detect in Dumas’ work is not only her voice—an idiosyncratic language system in itself—but also the voice of painting.

In the quotation by Hasegawa he seems to directly refer to one of Dumas’ most quoted statements: “I deal with second-hand images and first-hand experiences.” But Dumas’ use of the word “deal” underscores the point that Hasegawa avoids. To deal with images or first-hand emotions through the language of painting is to materially intervene and construct rather than “reflect”; both with one’s own creative strategies and with the “voice” of painting. To say that Dumas’ work is autobiographical because it reflects her experience both forgets the material imperative of painting with which Dumas so heavily engages and banally asserts that Dumas work—like almost all art work—is autobiographical because it derives from her life. As I have already elucidated, this is the most reductive and uninteresting way to use the term “autobiographical” and such use hinders more nuanced considerations of the role of the author.

These three writers demonstrate the tendency toward biographism in writing on Dumas’ work. In these cases, I would argue that the biographism doesn’t result from “laziness” as Bal says—these writers are intelligently engaged with Dumas’ work—but from the identification (if simplistically) of the writer with the potent authorial presence that Dumas instigates; they are not making references to Dumas out of thin air; they are being coaxed by her to do so. As Dumas writes “partly it’s my own fault for feeding people clichés”; a statement that, in itself, self-reflexively foregrounds her authorial performance. It is precisely because of the naturalness of so many writers turning back to the belief in Dumas’ author-god that means, as Romano has said, “the suspicion we are asked (by Dumas) to harbour (in the title of her show ‘suspect’) must broaden” to include Dumas herself. Across her oeuvre, Dumas continually draws viewers back to the idea of Dumas-as-the-author-god, while keeping that author-god in tension with her fabricated, contingent and material incarnation in art. It is this second aspect that is often forgotten and that this discussion seeks to highlight.

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70 Bakhtin, The Dialogical Imagination, 434. What Bakhtin means here is that language is not transparent. Rather, it is “laden with the meaning of others”. He writes, “(w)e are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather, language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion.” Bakhtin et al., The Bakhtin Reader (London: Arnold, 1995), 75.
71 Cited in van den Boogerd, Marlene Dumas, 49.
72 Quotation from Dumas in interview with Bloom, Marlene Dumas, 14.
Consider a selected overview of Dumas’ visual work that spans more than thirty years. The following examples prove that Dumas’ treatment of the author extends past the biographic and the intentional logic that some of Bedford’s, Bonacossa’s and Hasegawa’s language asserts, and opens up the rich foundational questions of authorial communication through art. Although the following list is long, it is necessary at this point to establish that authorial and artistic self-reflexivity are central themes in Dumas’ work and should therefore not be ignored or undermined by more simplistic assessments. In her oeuvre, one can detect the underlying theme of authorial presence that is not at all straightforward; rather she is aggravated, noisy and self-critical and needs to be recognised as such.

Even in her earliest undergraduate works, Dumas works against herself as authorial entity. In published pages from her journal, written at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town, where she studied from 1972 to 1975, Dumas transcribed advice on her life and her work from friends and lecturers (see Figure 29).74 Those pages represent a central authorial character, but one that is made by the voices of others. This work points to the dialogical nature of authorial subjects (which I will soon address) and frustrates our desire for a singular and essential authorial self. In Identity, M Dumas and M Oblowitz (date unknown, Figure 3), also made around this time, Dumas shows passport photographs of herself and another person where their faces are scratched out; we cannot see who is who but why should it matter? The work is, after all, a surface; ink in the shape of human face or of a scribble. In a similar vein, in Self-Portrait (1973), Dumas writes the letter M repeatedly until the tiny M’s take on the look of grey paragraphs that tell us nothing. Her first initial—or signature—becomes meaningless. The proper name of the artist has been personalised by using the first initial only—Marlene Dumas becomes “our Marlene”—but at the same time, the scale of the letters in relation to the page and the repetition of the M’s diffuses the name’s value. “Marlene’s” identity is brought closer to us and then further

away by the abstraction of the surface and the morphing of her first-initial into the sound for unresolved (as she is) thinking: mmmmmmm (Figure 30).

In Dumas’ first solo exhibition—held at Galerie Annemarie de Kruyff, Paris, in 1979—Dumas exhibited works on paper that were intensely autobiographical (in the traditional sense) and yet obfuscated any actual biographical information. For example, in The Answer to a Marriage Proposal (1977–78), Dumas shows the nonsensical scribbles she made while listening to a marriage proposal over the phone, or so the story goes. In Don’t Talk to Strangers (1977), she provides the beginning and end of love letters and removes any central content (Figure 12). These works pose as personal artefacts but lack the gritty details of the experiences from which they derive. Some scribbles and fragments point to the existence of an author, but reveal nothing private about her, illustrating the reality of viewer/author relationships through a work of art.

In her most famous early portraits, The Eyes of the Night Creatures (1983–85), Dumas pits herself amid a series of other subjects, including the wife of Sigmund Freud, simultaneously shaping herself by her proximity to others and diffusing her authorial primacy by being but one of her numerous night creatures. The author for Dumas is interactive and dialogical, existing as a human subject (she is not God) and also as a representation and a painting among others. The title of her self-portrait in that series, Evil is Banal (1984), mocks her seemingly approachable façade with a “dirty” hand and a compromising title that counter any temptation the viewer might have to be seduced by her easy “authenticity” (Figure 4). She is a face and a façade, a surface upon which we project rather than a subject with a fixed preceding identity. This raises questions as to expectations surrounding self-portraiture, the way we read human faces, and the conscious decisions artists make about the way they represent themselves.

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75 Of course there is no way of knowing if this work was made under those circumstances or not and nor is it important that it was, only that the idea is suggested by the title. Van den Boogerd writes “Her ambivalent nature stands for the tragedy of the woman who loses everything for love, or, perhaps, for the woman who sacrifices all for art. The Answer to the Marriage Proposal (1977–78), furnished with scribbles made while listening to the marriage proposal, speaks volumes on this theme.” Van den Boogerd, “Hang-ups,” 35.
In *The Space Age* (1984), Dumas shows herself in close but divided proximity to her boyfriend (Figure 31). In this work, Dumas is one broken half of a whole couple. Again, Dumas establishes a version of herself as constituted in relation to others; both to her boyfriend and the viewer, who stands in a triangular relationship with the work. In a 1987 show at Galerie Paul Andriesse, entitled, *Private Versus the Public*, Dumas presented group portraits, such as *The Teacher* (Sub B)(1987, Figure 32) and *The Turkish Schoolgirls* (1987, Figure 33), which also aggravate a sense of complex intersubjective relationships. She writes of these works: “my people were all shot by the camera, framed before I painted them”.

Her use of “my people” describes the perfect tension in these works between Dumas being their “author” while also being excluded from the group, bonded by the time and space of the photograph. Here she makes herself other, included only by the painterly hand she offers the photographic referent. This has the double effect of positioning Dumas with the viewer “out here” rather than with her subjects “in there”; an intimacy with Dumas is created by a sense of shared exclusion.

In 1988, Dumas painted *Art Is a Story Told by Toads* that shows drips of “art” piss being excreted by a toad (Figure 34). Since Dumas is making the art, it is she who is the toad, and she, according to the fairytale, who needs kissing before she will tell you the truth; meaning then comes partly from Dumas but you have to meet her half way.

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77 The fairytale to which I refer—commonly known as *The Frog Prince*—tells the story of a prince trapped inside the body of a frog, released upon being kissed by a princess. The fairytale was originally known as *The Frog King: Or Iron Heinrich* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, first published in *Kinder-und-Haus-Märchen*, 1st ed. (Berlin, 1812/1815), v.1, no.1. In this early version of the German tale, the frog was not kissed but thrown against the wall. In a later 1876 translation by Edgar Taylor and Marian Edwardes however—one that has become more widely repeated—the title and the method of the prince’s reincarnation were changed. For a history of the tale see the Sur La Lune Fairytales website. http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/frogtkling/history.html
Dumas elicits a relational sense between author and viewer, poking fun at the idea that she has a “true” non-toad self “underneath” while reminding us that meaning occurs in the meeting—or kissing—of author, viewer and work. Dumas also extends her dialogical relationship to include other artists. In 1988 she made a series of female nudes, Defining the Negative, which saw her work begin to converse more explicitly with her male artistic counterparts. This series of nude drawings included text such as “I won’t pose for Mr Salle”, “I won’t be like a Balthus” or “I won’t be held upside down for Mr Baselitz” (Figure 35). These works, and others from the period, frame her works as one voice in dialogue with many other (primarily male) authorial voices, but one that insists (“I”) on the significance of her own timbre.

In the 1990s her work took a seemingly traditional autobiographical turn with the introduction of paintings of babies and pregnant women, such as Fear of Babies (1986, Figure 36), or After Life (1989, Figure 37). Dumas’ treatment of babies and of pregnancy, however, is not simplistic or sentimental; rather she renders her subjects absolutely alien. Her experience is one of fractured subjectivity, her babies (whether they really are her babies or not) are strange and other to herself. She is split from her creation(s) and the maternal bond between mother and child, artist and work, is metaphorically strained. In another work from the Name No Names exhibition, Archetype Baby Versus Prototype Baby (1989, Figure 5), Dumas writes in the top corner “Mother wants to be clever, baby don’t care, Mother want to confess stupidity, baby don’t care. Mother wants ——— baby don’t care”. What the relationship is between the made thing and the maker (art or baby) is presented in these works as strange and suspicious; questioning the common preconception that a close affinity between artist and work, mother and child is a natural, perhaps transparent, one.

Figure 5 Dumas, Archetype Baby Versus Prototype Baby, 1989, watercolour, crayon, and collage on paper, 49.9 x 65.2cm.
In 1992 and 1993 Dumas presented exhibitions entitled Miss Interpreted, Ask Me No Questions, I’ll tell You No Lies and Give the People What They Want, all of which similarly address the role of the artist in meaning making and “artistic integrity”. The titles of these shows frame everything within them in authorial and interpretive suspicion, which is supported by the fact Dumas has used—as she usually does—other people’s pictures for her own ends.

In the mid-1990s, Dumas intensifies the question of her use of other subjects for the purposes of her art. In watercolour multiples, such as Black Drawings (1991-2, Figure 38), Models (1994) and Rejects (1994–, Figure 39), she gathers together large numbers of mostly anonymous faces that obliterate subjectivity in favour of the abstracted surface of the work, but that are also classified “black”, “model” or “reject” by Dumas. This multiplication of subjects in direct correlation to the lessening of their subjectivity frames Dumas as an author-god drawing back further and further from the humanity of her subjects in favour of form. Like the Teacher group portraits, these works place Dumas at a remove from the group but in a different way. The subjects in these works are not united together in the photograph; rather they are a disparate collection of individuals organised and arranged by Dumas’ classification. Her position therefore is less one of outsider and observer and more of curator or narrator. We can begin to see that Dumas authorial character and role shifts between works. As I will make clear in Chapter Three, it is therefore necessary to conceptualise the difference between those modes of authoring.

The shifting position Dumas takes up in relation to her subjects is an important question for examining her authorial presence. Because artists must “deal with”, as opposed to “reflect”, their subjects, the question becomes an ethical one that affects the way we think of Dumas. For example, Time and Again at Zeno X Gallery in Antwerp in 2002 consisted of paintings of corpses. This exhibition engaged in dialogue with the history of “death painting” and also rendered Dumas as the perpetuator of death, particularly in works such as Imaginary 2 (2002, Figure 6) in which a schoolgirl hangs by a noose Dumas has constructed in one painted stripe. Dumas’ death works are always charged with an ethical authorial dilemma; is she the murderer, life-saver, or voyeur? The specificity of what and how she paints determines the difference. In the statement I most return to when thinking of Dumas, she writes: “The guilt of never knowing if one has done the ‘right’ thing ... I see it in my own eyes.”

How we “deal” with subjects as artists is a moral responsibility, but one that, as artists, we know we cannot be trusted with; the intentions are too ‘suspect’ and

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79 Op Cit.
80 Siff, “Less Dead,” 145.
the outcomes too contingent. The suspect nature of the author’s relationship to work was the premise for her 2003 exhibition *Suspect* in which the subject matter was bracketed by sex and death. In a statement about the show, Dumas writes:

> Looking back at images does not lead us to the truth. It leads us into temptation. It’s not that a medium dies. It’s that all media have become suspect. It’s not the artist’s subject matter that’s under fire, but their motivation that’s on trial. Now that we know that images can mean whatever, whoever wants them to mean, we don’t trust anybody anymore, especially ourselves.\(^{81}\)

Strangely, all of this critique of Dumas’ motivation, artistic choices and presence returns us to the performing critic: Dumas the author. As Shiff writes, “Her personality and her fantasy life are present in her art but her procedural decisions ensure that the ‘Dumas’ in Dumas is not all that exists there. She is not her own cliché”.\(^{82}\)

![Figure 6 Dumas, Imaginary 2, 2002, oil on canvas, 125 x 70cm.](image)

**Writers Who Note Dumas’ Self-Reflexive Approach**

Returning to criticism on Dumas’ work, I want to consider several writers who have articulated the self-reflexive divisions that exist in her authorial presence. By that I mean those who have identified Dumas’ material attack on biographism’s transparency. Shiff is one of a number of authors who have focused on critical and nuanced aspects of Dumas’ work. The most important factor connecting these writers—suggested above by Shiff and in autobiographical studies—is the differentiation between the author as a person and as an authorial entity generated by the work. This is a distinction that biographism does not

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81 Dumas, *Suspect*, 35.
82 Shiff, “Less Dead,” 152.
make. Tilman Osterwald, Ulrich Loock and Bonacossa, and Shiff refer to Dumas’ self-reflexivity in several different ways, all of which are useful for imagining Dumas as a multifaceted authorial self.

In *Watercolour as Physiognomies* (2004), Osterwald focuses on the transformative process by which the author recruits “content” for the purposes of the artistic ego. Osterwald argues that Dumas’ statement “The painter kills the living” “recalls a cultural and philosophical problem that is associated with the portrayal of content by an autonomous author”,83 He goes on to write: “in her watercolours the essence of content is transformed into artistic material ... the living becomes the background for her artistic autonomy and is taken by the power of the artistic ego”.84 Osterwald’s sense of the author in Dumas’ work is one that has a characteristic presence, she is an imaginable entity shaped by the specificity of the work and its content; the work is subservient to a framing of Dumas’ authorial persona.

In a slightly different vein, Loock describes the presence of the author in Dumas’ work less as a characterised presence than as evidence of an engagement between a person and a surface. This author is not an ego so much as a trace; evidence of someone (anyone) having been there and having made a ‘specific commitment’ to the work we are looking at.85 I concur with both Osterwald and Loock; both these versions exist in Dumas’ work simultaneously.

Bonacossa, who, as I have already noted, is also guilty of biographism in her work, also offers considerable insight into Dumas’ authorial performativity; what Bonacossa calls “self-irony”. She writes: ‘Dumas’ work develops initially from a flow of consciousness that is distilled through a touch of self-irony ... There is a gap between her emotions and her production, and it is in this gap that the power of her work takes hold, in the distance

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84 Later, Osterwald writes: “The ‘eternal triangle’ of form-content-medium has a middle. The centre is the reflected self in the other- the personal and the metaphoric alter ego, which is echoed in artistic expression. These substantial, personally charged water-colours correspond with an extremely differentiated, committed, ‘quick-witted’ written language, which Marlene Dumas ties into her thinking as an artist.” (Ibid., 20)
85 Loock writes, “The paint ... cannot be seen but as a trace of the artist’s body ... What Dumas calls the trace of the maker, which is measured by the specificities of the pictorial model, is a depersonalized trace. At the same time it is a singular trace, a trace that singles out a specific image, and the implementation of such painterly traces implies specific commitment.” Ulrick Loock, “Sense of Touching,” *Cura* (September 2011): 72–85, available on David Zwirner website, accessed 3 June 2012, http://www.davidzwirner.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/110901-MAD-Cura-Loock.pdf. Loock’s description of Dumas’ line is reminiscent of Hal Foster’s description of Cy Twombly’s gesture as “a mark of graffito” or a “Kilroy was here”; Foster, *Art Since 1900*, 372.
between desire and object ..." Bonacossa recognises at least something of the divide between artistic psyche and the work in the better parts of her criticism, recalling Dumas’ opening quotation to this chapter, ‘so between my ... intention and your ... intention, there’s the intention of the artwork’.

Perhaps the most insightful commentary on Dumas’ self-reflexivity comes from Shiff in “Less Dead”, where his focus on the material object ensures the Dumas he describes is absolutely authorial rather than historic. Not only does Shiff underscore the self-reflexive role of guilt in Dumas’ work in this essay—“the guilt of never knowing if I am doing the right thing”—he also addresses the way Dumas’ “line” conjures an authorial presence. Borrowing from Jan Andriesse’s assertion that “When Dumas draws a line, the line says “I am aware and conscious”, Shiff argues that Dumas’ line enters the first-person pronouns of “I” and “me”. I will quote Shiff at length here because he aptly shows one way that the author can be divided into both “authentic” seeming and contingent entities and why, due to the naturalness of our desire for the authentic author, we should be critical of this.

When Dumas spoke of her interest in two subjects confronting each other—she and de Kooning, she and Newman, she and a lover, she and a line, she may have associated the status of “subject” with the capacity to use the pronoun “I”. This would be natural: if you have a serious encounter with a line you may feel “the line says I am aware I am conscious”. It is an I: You are an I. Because of the association of the I with subjectivity is so natural, it is also, as Dumas might say “suspect” ... When involved in an exchange with a person or a thing, even just a line, you are not only an I but a “Me”. Things happen, to you and to me. The problem with speaking from the position of I lies in the distance from the Me; the I isolated and untouchable, creates a fixed self-image, like a photographic pose. It repeats itself becoming unreceptive to changing conditions, insisting on acting in character. The Me is less like an image (dead) and more like a mark (less dead). It has its own character but is forever affected by the marks surrounding it. It can move and change, responding to contingencies.

Here Shiff is arguing that it is quite a natural tendency to invest a gestural line, such as Dumas executes, with consciousness; that is to say, it is a mark infused with intention and therefore consciousness. This “autographic” mark was the understanding of line that Abstract Expressionism relied upon. However, Dumas knows that however much she

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86 The beginning of the quotation is “… what emerges of her identity through her paintings is constantly performed even in its apparently biographical elements … Dumas’ work develops initially from a flow of consciousness that is distilled through a touch of self-irony”. Bonacossa, “Further Than the I Can See,” in Marlene Dumas, 163.
88 Bonacossa has also referred to the “I” of Dumas’ line: “Just as an image ‘takes on meaning through the process of looking’ Dumas’ work embodies the tension between imagination and reality, as well as the struggle between the eye and the hand— and between the eye and the I”. Bonacossa, “Futher Than the I”, 213.
89 Shiff,Less Dead, 171.
90 Foster et al., Art Since 1900, 372.
“Sloshes the paint around”—and she does—ventriloquism through pictures is not so simple; things “happen to” a work or a line, they interact with other entities and with the general conditions into which the work arrives. The “I” becomes a “me” interacting and changing, entering into “dialogue” and becoming something very much apart from Dumas’ intentional gesture. Thus, Shiff points to the necessity for dividing the idea of the author into multiple components; preserving the role of the authorial I or me but disallowing direct connections from the meaning of a work directly to the psyche of the artist.  

Other Critical Approaches to Dumas’ Work

The penultimate sentence in the quote by Shiff above—that a mark “is forever affected by the marks surrounding it”—points to the overarching theme in most writing on Dumas’ work; human relations. By that I mean that Dumas’ “me”—the consciousness Shiff says exists in Dumas’ work—is made by its relation to others, it is not a fixed independent “I”.

The authorial presence in the work is constructed in relation to others. Indirect references to the “me” (as opposed to “I”) of Dumas’ authorial presence are made repeatedly across criticism of her work in the use of such frequently recurring and interrelational words, including: intimacy, desire, communication, touch, relation (between self and

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92 Other writers who have referred to her self-reflexivity include the following: Gianni Romano, who in his catalogue essay, “Being Suspicious” writes that “One of the few natural elements in Dumas’ work is her scepticism”. Romano, Suspect, 18–19; Peter Schjeldahl, who writes “the painting … becomes the practically abstract symbol of a powerful ungraspable intention. That’s Dumas’ stickiness in action.” Peter Schjeldahl, “Unpretty Pictures: A Marlene Dumas Retrospective”. Van den Boogerd, who writes on White Disease (1985) and Albino (1986) that “These paintings of faces are not portraits in the usual sense of the word. They are more about Dumas’s ideas, associations and experiences in relation to depicted figures.” Van den Boogerd, “Hang Ups and Hangovers,” 42; Ingrid Schaffner, who writes “The women in Dumas’s collage may be silent partners, but the artist herself is not … (s)nage the eye with their seductive gloss, these grotesque images brutalize the viewers sense of decorum and decency, which is further aggravated by the artist’s manipulative presence”. Schaffner, “Dial 970-Muse: Marlene Dumas’s Pornographic Mirror,” Parkett, 38 (1993): 102.
93 References to intimacy include: “for Marlene Dumas, notions of intimacy relate not only to love and relationships but critically to questions of painting”. Bedford, “Intimate Relations,” 33; “intimacy of the close-up in Dumas’ works of dead and blind-folded men. The question she seems to be raising (is) … What happens to intimate relations when politics has moved to the body … of my neighbor, of the stranger”. Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, “The Human Face”, in Intimate Relations, 128; “Her desire is to maintain the complexity of their interpretation, to render what is public and generic in a way that is intimate and specific. … In her work Dumas manifests a markedly feminine relationship to privacy, and intuitive erotic approach to painting”. Casadio, “Josephine”, 85; “Eroticism for you is clearly about intimacy, isn’t it? It’s not about distance; it’s about being in close?” Robert Enright, “Interview with Marlene Dumas” in Border Crossings, 25 June 2008, Marlene Dumas’ official website, accessed 5 June 2012. http://www.marlenedumas.nl/archives/category/interviews; “the two-dimensional space of the canvas is totally occupied by the viewer in an intimate relation”, Bonacossa, “Further Than the I,” 169.
94 References to desire include: “a series of one hundred drawings consists of portraits, that is, faces. Faces come to us one by one. It is our desire to relate to others, to establish an I-you relationship that constitutes our self that disables us and thus prevents us from seeing many people at the same time” and “desire is the key word here. Events in Dumas’s personal life often provided the spark for these works,” Ernst van Alphen, Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought (Chicago and London:
other, self and author, author and the work), and eroticism. Such regular use of these terms demonstrates that many viewers note her authorial presence in variously subtle or overt ways.

I think Dumas’ work invites such interpersonal terminology for the following reasons, some of which I have already alluded to. Firstly, her human themes allow the viewer to

University of Chicago Press, 2005), 140; “Her paintings seem to represent pure desire,” Bonacossa, “Further Than the I,” 169.

References to communication: “a conceptual work that is poignantly tender and strong, evokes the impossibility of communication across vast spatial, temporal and cultural distances”. Bedford, Intimate Relations, 34; “… Dumas’s representations acknowledge universal themes of instability, isolation, and the lack of communication, while moreover addressing the medium of painting as such. The titles of these works (among them Under Construction; Mindblocks; The Wall) not only describe the motifs depicted, but also refer to the artist’s struggle with the boundaries of her chosen medium ….”. David Zwirner gallery website, accessed 10 February 2013, http://www.davidzwirner.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/2010-MAD-Press-Release.pdf; “stasis is disguised by shifting among various charged subjects that communicate gravity in shorthand,” Roberta Smith, “The Body Politic: Gorgon and Grotesque,” The New York Times, 11 December 2008, accessed 10 February 2013.

References to touch include: “even when the features of the protagonists are barely suggested with fast swirls or light touches of the paint brush, they come alive and seduce the viewer with their personality,” Bonacossa, “Further Than the I”, 170; “Touch is the vehicle, a medium in itself. It is reciprocal, a matter of touching and being touched: two subjects confronting each other. The hand feels the set of sensations produced by its own actions. Dumas associates the painters touch with an erotically charged human relationship.” Shiff, “Less Dead,” 151; “Touching the human self has been one of Dumas’s preoccupations … Her figures, women and men alike, have involved themselves in an alphabet of touching that runs the gamut from A to Z: maternal, erotic, violent, pornographic. …There is, of course, another way in which touch is at the core of Dumas’ art. I mean the pressure of her own hand on her surfaces, the intractable elegance of her troubling mark-making”. Robert Enright, “Interview with Marlene Dumas”; “The photographic is reigned by the paradigm of pointing … while painting is resigned by the paradigm of touching—touching with the hand.” Loock, “A Sense of Touching,” Curro.

References to relation include: “in Dumas’ work the meaning of a painting is generated during the process of looking, through viewer’s relation to what they are looking at,” Bonacossa, “Further Than the I”, 213; “What happens to intimate relations when politics has moved to the body, leaving its traces all over the face of the other, of my neighbour, of the stranger,” Mbembe and Nuttall, “The Human Face,” 128; “It is our desire to relate to others, to establish an I-you relationship that constitutes yourself, that disables us and thus prevents us from seeing many people at the same time,” van Alphen, Art in Mind, 140; “In Dumas’ works the meaning of a painting is generated during the process of looking, through viewer’s relation to what they are looking at,” Bonacossa, “Further Than the I,” 213.

References to self and other include: “The ‘other’ is also a mirror image of ourselves! Look in the mirror and talk to Al Qaeda.” Dumas cited by Cornelia Butler, “Painter as Witness”, 47; “Our look is directed from one face to another” and “What we, as viewers, see is not an ordered, distanced spectacle—an ‘other’—but a ‘work’ (not a product). A dynamic work thematizes in its production the readiness or even desire to dissolve the boundary between self and other,” and “Many of these paintings are confrontational, like a smack in the face. It is as though someone else’s face is being pushed into our face.” Van Alphen, Art in Mind, 140–60.

References to eroticism include: “This complex unfolding process of mutual interaction resembles an act of love that gradually builds to climax though a slow, incremental process. This method is a form of eroticism in itself, quite distinct from the eroticism of the works themselves”. Hasegawa, “Open Paintings,” 146; “The fact that they lack psychological depth [the black drawings models and Magdalenas] and cannot be immediately recognized creates a state of suspense between the observer and the work, because at times it is difficult to distinguish between this unexpected desire and the explicit eroticism of some of her works.” Romano, “Being Suspicious”, 16; “in her work Dumas manifests a markedly feminine relationship to privacy, and intuitive erotic approach to painting”, Casadio, “Josephine,” 85; “Instead of depicting everything with the deadness of painstaking precision, the paintings reinvest sexually explicit imagery with an element of secrecy and promise. They return to the field of eroticism and desire.” Rainald Schumacher, “Marlene Dumas,” Flash Art, 265 (2009), online, accessed 5 June 2012, http://www.flashartonline.com/interno.php?pagina=articolo_det&id_art=344&det=ok&title=MARLENE-DUMAS.
closely identify with the work and to Dumas; as Andriesse writes, “Balzac wanted to write
the human condition. She wants to paint the human condition.” She does this not only
by depicting familiar experiences—birth, sex, death, school, weddings—but by the
analogous portrayal of human emotion in her formal methods, such as those identified by
Hasegawa (“anxiety, violence and sensuality”). The paintings therefore take on human
characteristics or consciousness that we identify as human, conjuring the possibility of

The highly gestural quality of Dumas’ paintings also contributes significantly to the
interrelational sense of open communication between Dumas, the subject and the viewer.
The surfaces are relaxed and open, rather than tightly sealed off; they attract a desire for
communication, like an “open” person attracts those around them. Her gestural surfaces,
as Loock identifies, also make explicit the encounter that occurs between an artist and that
surface; the trace of the artist evidences the existence of the author with whom viewers
relate by looking at the work.

Dumas’ use of first-person pronouns in her titles and prose also contributes significantly
to the relational sense in her work, quite literally mimicking the language of one-on-one
human dialogue and setting up the expectation of personal communication. Indeed,
Dumas’ use of textual language, in conjunction with her visual works, plays heavily into a
speaking authorial voice, which Bonacossa’s references to Dumas’ titles and unpublished
writing indicate. The instances of actual autobiographical information Dumas includes in
her output—what I call her autobiographical “tip-offs” (letters, self-referential images,
interviews and other personal tropes)—also play a significant role in the close
relationship many feel with Dumas authorial presence. Dumas provides enough personal
information and physical presence (via interviews) to the public that viewers start to build
an idea of who Dumas is. We can piece together a strong concept of Marlene Dumas, saying
“that there is the person speaking into the microphone, there is the picture she painted,
there is the postcard from her mother, there is the poem she wrote about South Africa”.
The tip-offs, of course, are no more genuine than anything else Dumas produces, but, as a
part of her oeuvre, they serve to verify—in our imaginations at least—the authenticity of
Dumas’ authorial self. The gravity of that persona is also compounded by the magnitude of
Dumas’ celebrity status that, as I will later return to, cannot be discounted from any

\footnote{Shiff puts it beautifully when he writes: “Peirce, Berson and later Deleuze, escaped the strict dualism
of mind and matter, believing that materials can become energized like living bodies, and that matter has
the potential to every stimulus with feelings of its own … We find it natural to use this metaphor about
mere material things (speaking to us). Among such things, works of art ‘speak’ the most clearly, as if they
have achieved the highest degree of sentience, becoming our equals.” Shiff, “Less Dead,” 165.}
authorial presence we detect. Additionally, the self-reflexivity of Dumas’ presence invites a felt relationship between the viewer, the work and Dumas. When Dumas performs self-critical modes of authorship in the many ways I have already described, she not only makes herself more visible and more palpable, but we detect a thinking self-critical authorial subject who, like us, is not entirely convinced of her own motivations and actions. We are invited to try to figure things out with her; asking questions such as, What is art? What is a surface? How do we relate to one another? What does this picture tell us about you and me?

This persistent questioning of the author and the work through self-reflexive strategies also points to another term that is frequently used to describe Dumas’ work: “ambiguous”.102 To some extent all work is ambiguous, but Dumas’ work plays into uncertain meaning by many of the oppositional strategies I have just outlined in the overview of her practice. This open-endedness gives the sense of being in conversation with an authorial entity as though you were also being asked to bring something to the work—to her. Hasegawa links the to and fro that is possible through Dumas’ open-endedness to a kind of eroticism: “This method is a form of eroticism in itself, quite distinct from the eroticism of the works themselves”.103

The ambiguity of her works consequently means that Dumas’ work can open a “Pandora’s box”, as van den Boogerd notes.104 Here my project is the role and nature of the author in Dumas’ work; her authorial presence. However, since the author at stake pertains to the work more than a biographical account, in the chapters that follow I will refer to significant related ideas that are also regularly cited by others. These include: Dumas’ rigorous engagement with painting her use of the photograph as referent;105 the “painting

102 References to ambiguity include: “The ambiguity of her paintings is ultimately an ethical act that obliges the viewer to acknowledge their role.” Bonacossa, “Further Than the I”, 213; “The title and the image of the “grave” painting grate rather than expand on each other, and neither brings anything else clearly to mind. The muddle works to strand the viewer in the here and now of the painting, which becomes the practically abstract symbol of a powerful ungraspable intention”. Schjeldahl, “Unpretty Pictures”; “Her right arm and hand are a supple attenuation, while the left hand is a crabbed brown thing that seems to top her left breast. In saying that, it’s not clear that it does not rest on her breast, or for that matter, that it’s even a hand”. Enright, “Interview with Marlene Dumas”; “The first meaning of her work, its meaning for her as artist and creator, is produced when she transforms the object she has chosen is not an image. Numerous subsequent meanings are produced by the viewers each of whom brings different ideas and feelings to the work … This complex unfolding process of mutual interaction resembles an act of love that gradually builds to climax though a slow, incremental process.” Hasegawa, “Open Paintings,” 146; “The ambiguity of her paintings is ultimately an ethical act that obliges the viewer to acknowledge their role in assigning meaning to faces, bodies, groups and figures,” Bonacossa, “Further Than the I”, 164; “she is uninterested in things as they are, as we see them. Her desire is to maintain the complexity of their intepretation”, Casadio, “Josephine,” 85.
103 Hasegawa, “Open Paintings,”146.
105 For a rich contextualisation of Dumas’ work in relation to photography, see The Painting of Modern Life (London: Hayward, 2007), and Helen Molesworth’s catalogue essay for “This Will Have Been: Art,
of modern life”;106 her dialogical engagement with the history of painting, including portraiture,107 the nude,108 expressionism and abstract expressionism;109 her investigation of existential themes (sex, birth, death and identity);110 and the political interpretations of her work (feminist, racial, identity and representational).111

References to the painting of modern life include: “An artist for more than thirty years, Dumas has only recently begun to articulate her practice as a visual accounting of our time through the representation of individual or, rather, of bodies and souls as they move through the incidents of life.” Butler, “Painter as Witness,” 43; “But you are not a painter of famous Dutch light; your light comes from long nights and great winters and the fluorescent street lamps and the warren of cubicles in the red-light district. It comes from the wet black of bicycle tyres and the blues of water on the brick streets. It comes from the canal streaked with oil, by the diesel engines of the big barges on the Amstel,” Matthew Monohan, “Victoria Falls,” in Measuring Your Own Grave, 254.

References to portraiture include: “For Dumas, later portraits suggest in their difference that these earlier works (groups) are part of an overall project to explore and systematically challenge the conventional characteristics of the traditional portrait as a politically invested genre,” van Alphen, Art in Mind, 43; he also describes how Dumas “subverts the political hierarchy” of portraiture, making babies vertical and men horizontal; regarding Measuring Your Own Grave, Butler writes that her paintings comprise an “ongoing exploration of portraiture” (“Painter as Witness,” 43); on the same work, Bonacossa writes, “The painting stands as a comment on the memorial and celebratory function of official portraiture and how useless it is to the dead,” “Further Than the I,” 185.

Her work has been placed in the traditional of expressionism and compared to that of Edvard Munch, Emil Noble, and Francis Bacon. Owing to her ironic view of art production and reception, it has also been considered a form of neo-conceptualism. Something can be said for both interpretations, but if any “ism” truly applies to her art, it would have to be eroticism. In the work of Dumas, the soul of love songs, the porno blues, can be heard.” Van den Boogerd, “Hang-ups,” 74.

References to existential themes include: “(a)s in psychoanalysis, there is a conflict at the core of her work, which focuses on the individual and on the principles and fears that regulate human existence, transforming Dumas’ oeuvre into a form of conceptual and visual existential ‘psychology’,” Bonacossa, “Further Than the I,” 164; “Dumas is entirely a painter of people. You won’t find landscapes, still lifes or other motifs in her exhibition—hardly even as background to her figures.” Barry Schwabsky, “The Human Metaphor: Marlene Dumas and Barkely Hendricks,” The Nation, 2 March 2009, The Nation website, accessed 10 June 2012, http://www.thenation.com/article/human-metaphor-marlene-dumas-and-barkley-hendricks?page=0.1; “Marlene Dumas’s work explores a range of human emotion while reflecting on social and political attitudes toward women, children, people of color, and others who historically have been victimized.” Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, website, accessed 10 February 2013, http://www.moca.org/pc/viewArtWork.php?id=12; “[Dumas] tackles the taboos that we hesitate to examine head on and, while preserving the autonomy of art, through her paintings, her highly metaphorical use of colour, her titles, and her texts, always draw us as observers from our objective position into the role of the subject”. Yuka Uematsu, “Broken White,” in Marlene Dumas: Broken White, 145.

One of Dumas’ key supporters, Cornelia Butler, who curated Dumas’ first American retrospective at MoMA, New York, sees Dumas’ work as primarily political. She writes, “(i)t is partly my desire to resuscitate Dumas’ oeuvre as a political one for an American audience,” Butler, “Painter as Witness,” 74. Further, she writes, “Dumas’s career-long investigation of the portrait cannot be understood outside her relationship to issues of identity,” ibid. 73. Dumas herself writes, “My work has always had political aspects to it. It’s about the politics of emotion and the politics of images, not really about the state of politics or borders, city planning or party politics like a lot of the last Documenta dealt with. Although I appreciate documentary art, I’m not a journalist that claims to be an eyewitness to events, capturing them when they happen. I’m interested in the politics of ambiguity, illusion, the politics of painting and deception”. Dumas in personal correspondence with Romano, “Being Suspicious,” 20.

It is impossible to discuss authorial presence, such as one finds in autobiography and in Dumas’ work, without acknowledging that race and gender affect the position from which an artist speaks. Dumas’ work is inherently political but it is not only political. In order to focus on a foundational aspect of Dumas’ authorial presence, I have limited—though by no means omitted—my response to political, including
Having established in this chapter that an authorial presence is one significant aspect of Dumas’ work, and that this presence is frequently noted in direct and indirect, simplistic and critical ways in Dumas’ work, I want to turn now to what autobiography can offer to the existing discourse on Dumas’ work.
CHAPTER TWO

A Background to Autobiographical Studies: The Problem and the Fantasy

If a Prostitute is a person
who makes a profession
to gratify the lust of various persons
For economic reasons or gain,
Where emotional involvement may
Or may not be present-

Then it seems not so far removed
from any definition of an artist.
Artists usually love to pretend.
Artists usually pretend to love
much more than they can handle.
They want everyone to want them
while they don’t want anybody.

Marlene Dumas

As I have made clear, at the centre of autobiographical studies is the desire for—as opposed to the reality of—an authentic author. As illustrated in the previous chapter, Dumas’ work engages with this authentic idea of the author in self-reflexive and critical ways. A brief account of the history of autobiography studies will help to identify key aporetic tension shared by both autobiography studies and Dumas’ work. That is, the tension between the impossibility of an authentic author on the one hand and the ongoing desire for that author on the other. This historical foundation will then permit a closer consideration of other key aspects of autobiographic theory and Dumas’ work in Chapter Three.

112 Dumas, excerpt from A United Europe (1997), in Marlene Dumas, 138.
The Impossible Authentic Author

At the time that critical studies in autobiography as a specific literary genre began, the role of the author hitherto understood faced significant challenges from theorists such as Michel Foucault (What is an Author?, 1969),113 Roland Barthes (“The Death of the Author”, 1967),114 and Jacques Derrida (The Ear of the Other: Otobiographie, 1985).115 These theorists and other post-structuralists challenged the idea of the “Author-God” of biographism and traditional autobiography, arguing instead that an author’s intention (intentionality)116 did not constitute the meaning of a work. These challenges to the author’s role followed on from late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century attacks on the unified self of the Enlightenment by Saussurean linguistics (the ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ of Synchronic Language),117 Freudian psychoanalysis (id and ego) and Marxian materialism (consciousness is created by social experience) that demonstrated the mutable, fragmented and socially constructed nature of the self. When combined with the destabilised idea of self, post-structuralist attacks on authorial transparency posed considerable problems for literary autobiography that had historically aimed to "spring open a door and give ... a glance into his or her deepest reality" or self.118 The most iconic anti-authorial contribution to literature and the arts is Barthes’ “Death of the Author” that foregrounded the insurmountable problem of human subjects having to occupy and be shaped by language. Barthes, a representative structuralist and post-structuralist critic for whom the meaning of language was key, argued that the meaning of a text lay not in the intentions of its “origin” (author) but in its “destination” (reader). Barthes argued that the

116 As I have already mentioned, “intentionality” had already begun to be questioned in the mid-1940s by Wimsatt and Beardsley in “Intentional Fallacy” (1946).
117 I have already referred in passing to linguistic theorist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) who, in his Course in General Linguistics (posthumously published in 1916), developed an understanding of language in which words took on meaning only in relation by their difference to other meanings that surround them. I mention Saussure here because Dumas’ scepticism for authorial authenticity is rooted in the ideological nature of languages and on the contingent nature in which we must make meaning. In Saussure’s system of signs, or semiotics, a word (signifier) has no fundamental attachment to the conceptual object (signified) but is always manufactured in relation to its difference from other signs (meanings). Saussure wrote: “In language there are only differences. Even more important, a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms ... (The idea (signified) or phonic substance (signifier) that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs (meanings) that surround it.” Ferdinand Saussure, Course in General Linguistics (1916) (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 121–22. 
form of language that must be the necessary embodiment of the author’s intention was, in fact, a predetermined set of codes that can only be “played with”, not superseded.  

A traditional autobiographical subject, therefore, is difficult to establish, given that, in whichever incarnation they arise, they will be shaped internally and externally by the language systems they inhabit. I will return to the problem of language in Chapter Four. For Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes, and their post-structuralist contemporaries, this recognition of language as a system that constructs, rather than represents, original subjects was also political. “Culturally dominant knowledges” against which we must shape ourselves as subjects were also being challenged in the mid-twentieth century by feminism, phenomenology, Western Marxism, anarchism, and nihilism, all of which challenged the dominant discursive regimes that language embodies. In that context, we see Barthes’ argument against the “author” as the originator of meaning as an argument against authoritarian modes of writing that tell the reader what meanings they should derive from the text. His argument “for the reader”, is an argument for individual and nuanced perspectives; for the agency of the reader (or the individual), and of the play of signification over the specificity of meaning.

By contrast, consider the traditional aims of autobiography. One of the earliest modern writers on autobiography, Georg Misch, whose definition of autobiography permeated subsequent generations of thinking, argued in 1907 that the ‘supreme example” of autobiography is: “(T)he contemporary intellectual outlook revealed in the style of an eminent person who has himself played a part in the forming of the spirit of his time”. That is, well-educated and empowered men who are users and creators of our language systems write the best autobiographies—or set the benchmark to define autobiography. According to Misch, autobiography is, therefore, a truthful textual “revelation” that fits dominant social and cultural ideologies (or languages). These ideologies determine who has the authority to speak (eminent men) and how stories ought to be told (in the language of an eminent man). For Misch, autobiography—by definition—reaffirms the status quo.

As a part of the aforementioned critical and political shifts of the mid-twentieth century however, voices that fell outside of that classification of autobiography began to assert

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119 Barthes, a representative structuralist and post-structuralist critic for whom the meaning of language was key, argued that the meaning of a text lay not in the intentions of its “origin” (author) but in its “destination” (reader). Barthes argued that the form of language, which must be the necessary embodiment of the author’s intention was, in fact, a predetermined set of codes that can only be “played with”, not superseded. Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 142–48.
themselves. Feminist autobiographies and criticism, queer autobiography, and autobiographies by ethnic minorities changed the landscape of autobiography, not only because they presented alternate subjectivities but because they—following in the paths of avant-garde writers in the field such as Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf—offered alternate and self-reflexive approaches to the genre and individualised, nuanced uses of language. By demonstrating difference in subjectivities and formal methods, and by challenging the traditional assumptions about authentic and fixed subjecthood, autobiography began to change approach. Those political shifts, along with the earlier attacks on the unified self that I have referred to, as well as other theoretical influences to which I will soon refer, shifted the presumption of autobiography as a truthful account spoken from privileged and fixed position to a volatile, democratic and relative proposition. An autobiography was no longer restricted to being the unified account of a well-educated influential male subject. The subject was not a defined and coherent self and, in any case, the text was no longer regarded as being determined by the intention of its author.

What then is left of autobiography, that simple contract that Lejeune proposed between author, narrator and protagonist? In The Body as Medium and Metaphor (2008), Hannah Westley explains that “(t)he myth of an integral self that is identical with self-image has been exploded, and we are left picking up the pieces”. Eminent autobiographical theorist James Olney writes that the “definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems to me virtually impossible”. However, an acute interest in autobiography, in literature, theory, criticism and a myriad of other art and non-art cultural forms persists and even proliferates. Olney describes the appeal of this indefinable genre as a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries and accompanying that fascination, an anxiety about self, an anxiety about the dimness and vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever seen or touched or tasted.

Olney’s description creates a potent mental image—the autobiographer looking for herself amid “the pieces”. However, because as a complete self she is nowhere to be found—not in the person and not in the work—and because the desire to engage with a unified self

remains unsatisfied, this search will have to continue to be performed with the “pieces” of autobiographic self that are left over. Smith and Watson propose therefore that “perhaps it is more helpful to approach autobiographical telling as a performative act”, performance occurring in a perpetual unresolvable state. What is left of autobiography, and what makes it so useful in thinking about Dumas’ work, is that it admits that we cannot, as humans, help but desire and imagine an authentic authorial subject while knowing that subject has been theoretically smashed into irreconcilable pieces.

In a material case study of the arguments made in "Death of the Author", Barthes, in Roland Barthes on Roland Barthes (1977), attempts to write the post-structuralist autobiography, or non-autobiography, in which the author tries to demonstrate his own contingent nature. His autobiography is relevant here because his strategies bear a strong resemblance to Dumas’ self-reflexive mode. Barthes worked against traditional autobiographical form, writing from multiple perspectives (“Him”, “R.B”. “I”, “You”) and maintaining a non-linear narrative (ordered alphabetically); "Cut! Resume the story in another way." But what Barthes ultimately says about this autobiography is highly significant here, and returns us to the autobiographical fantasy and to Dumas. Note that in the following quotation, Barthes’ use of “imaginary” refers to Jacques Lacan’s use of the term, which can be understood as an imagined (imaginary in the form of an image) whole version of himself. Barthes writes:

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\text{I have the illusion to suppose that by breaking up my discourse I cease to discourse in terms of the imaginary about myself … but since the fragment … is finally a rhetorical genre and since rhetoric is that layer of language which best presents itself to interpretation, by supposing I disperse myself I merely return, quite docilely, to the bed of the imaginary.}
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That is, the stylistic shifts in his writing (rhetorical) only serve to underscore an authorial voice that begs to be interpreted (coherently imagined). Whether this subject is “fractured” self-consciously in a work of autobiography or not, the understanding is still that there exists a whole subject who has been fractured. And here again is the point: It is

125 Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 47.
126 Barthes says of his ambition, “(t)his book is not a book of ‘confessions’; not that it is insincere, but because I have a different knowledge today than I did yesterday; such a knowledge can be summarized as follows: What I write about myself is never the last word: the more ‘sincere’ I am, the more interpretable I am, under the eye of other examples than those of old authors, who believed they were required to submit themselves to but one law: authenticity”. Originally Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (1977) trans. Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1977) 120, quoted in Anderson, Autobiography, 71.
128 “(T)he repertoire of imaginary identifications and mirror images through which the subject covers his relations with the external world in order to ameliorate his otherness”. Ibid., 72.
129 Barthes, Barthes by Barthes, 95, quoted in Anderson, Autobiography, 75.
the promise of, and desire for, a “real” autobiographical subject that drives our understanding of an autobiographical author; even though we know that subject is a fiction.

The Autobiographical Fantasy or Desire

Why, then, persist with the term autobiography at all? As de Man has argued, “it is impossible for language to ever represent reality accurately” therefore autobiography is “theoretically impossible”. It is interesting to recall that the formalised field of autobiographic studies was born out of these exact difficulties. The tension between what an autobiographical work is (a formal composition of material substances and ideological language) and what it desires to be (transparent) established an aporetic but much more interesting position from which to conduct an argument about what autobiography was exactly. Autobiography became a curious compulsion that required academic diagnosis because even though it had been theoretically brought undone, we could not give it up.

My understanding of Dumas’ work in relation to autobiography and our desire for authentic communication was partly arrived at after reading Jakki Spicer’s, “The Author Is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual” (2005). In this elucidating essay, Spicer establishes the irresolvability of the arguments around autobiography and fiction, and suggests a middle-ground solution—not a compromise but a means by which the “promise” and the impossible reality of the autobiographical subject can co-exist. Spicer cites Lejeune in response to de Man:

We indeed know all this (that one is fooled if one believes “in the transparency of language, and the insistence of a complete subject who expresses himself through it,” etc.); we are not so dumb, but, once this precaution has been taken, we go on as if we did not know it. Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as a complete subject—it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing. Perhaps, in describing it, I in turn took my desire for reality; but what I wanted to do, was describe this desire in its reality, a reality shared by a great number of authors and readers.

Spicer draws attention to Lejeune’s “fantasy” and argues a connection to Freud’s "fetishism", which is best summarised as,"the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s

131 Ibid., 388.
Spicer sees Lejeune's autobiography as taking on the role of the mother's phallus. Whether or not one accepts Spicer's phallic metaphor— and I am not equipped or inclined to pursue the point here—the idea has some illustrative value:

The author is the presence that the author once believed in and does not want to give up. But no, it is not the author that remains the reality for Lejeune. He is more careful than that. It is the desire for the author, the complete self, the transparency of language that remains a reality. It is the fantasy that the autobiography stages for (and of) this (dead) author that Lejeune will not relinquish. The fantasy has not died, even if the author has.134

Spicer does well to illustrate the dogged persistence with which writers, artists, critics, readers and viewers have continued to use autobiography as a meaningful title for particular kinds of self-representation or authorship. This is one reason why we hang onto autobiography and the "reality" it evokes. Importantly for this thesis, and Dumas’ work, Spicer says that “autobiography seems to attempt to answer a desire of and for irreducible others, who touch us for a single instant through their singularity, through their unique value”.135 A desire that is evident in writing on Dumas’ work and one that Dumas fully exploits. As individualised subjects, we reach out to other individualised subjects, seeking the “reality” of that whole and knowable subject.136 As Dumas says: “I situate art not in reality but in relation to desire.”137

The aporetic tension between the impossible authentic author and the autobiographical fantasy in autobiography studies underscores the frustrated nature of all human communication. While such a frustration exists even in the most earnest literary autobiographies, the problem is made all the more explicit by the use of such disfiguring and fictional art forms as painting. Dumas’ authorial self pits the authentic authorial fantasy against the blatant materiality of painting. That is, she makes palpable a problem that is inherent in all human communication that our desire for authentic communication demands we overlook. It is this shared focus on the problems of—and desire for—authentic communication that makes autobiography such a useful lens though which to consider Dumas’ work and her oft-noted authorial presence.

135 Ibid., 392.
136 It is not too hard to concede that Spicer might be right if we consider the ubiquitous nature of supposedly “honest” and “transparent” voices connecting through cyberspace.
137 Dumas, “Love Notes (the Lava Edge),” Sweet Nothings, 21.
In a poignant statement, Dumas sceptically fuses the fantasy and the object: “I paint because I like to be bought and sold.”\textsuperscript{138} Such statements in conjunction with the work encourage the viewer to question who or what is that “I”. How does it work?

\textsuperscript{138} Dumas, “Not from Here (I)” (1994), \textit{Sweet Nothings}, 84.
CHAPTER THREE

Dumas and Autobiography:
Connections between Dumas’ Self-Reflexivity and Autobiographic Theory

How then can autobiography studies be used to re-conceive Dumas’ authorial presence? I have chosen one formal mechanism for testing the relevance of autobiography to understanding Dumas’ authorial presence: Smith and Watson’s four authorial “I”s. These “I”s structurally characterise Dumas’ authorial presence and underpin the thematic connections between autobiography and Dumas’ work covered in the second half of the chapter.

The Four “I”s: Two Examples

In The Autobiographical Pact (1974), Lejeune describes the relationship between the author of autobiography and the reader as a “pact” or contract: “What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name.” As I have said, Lejeune also establishes a trinity of identities “established for and accepted by the reader”; those of the author, the narrator and the protagonist. By articulating these three entities individually, however, Lejeune also underscores their inherently separate natures. If it is possible to conceptualise a version of

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139 Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 8.
140 Steiner and Yang, Artworks Autobiography, 13.
Dumas that is one entity but with a range of guises and roles, we can start to conceptualise her self-reflexive authoring more rigorously. Rather than using Lejeune’s model, however, I refer again to Smith and Watson and their four I’s—the Historical I, the Narrating I, the Narrated I, and the Ideological I—the last of which, as I will soon explain, is a useful addition for applying autobiographic theory to Dumas’ work. Although the differences between these “I”s may appear slight, and shifting references between them requires focused attention, grasping the concept of these “I”s provides a significant foundation for understanding Dumas’ authorial presence. The following describes the characteristics of these “I”.

The “real” or “historical I” is the person “behind” the text that the reader can never know. They have a life outside the text.\(^{141}\) This is also the “I” that biographic criticism pretends it can know, it is Marlene Dumas, who is a woman somewhere in the world doing who knows what, perhaps waiting with one eye open for her alarm clock to go off.

The “narrating I” is the “I” available to readers, the one who tells the autobiographical narrative. This I is the autobiographical author who we can know because she is built through the work and discourse surrounding it; she is a public figure, heard and created socially. As Smith and Watson argue, this I “is the subject of discourse.”\(^{142}\) In Dumas’ case, she is most visible in interviews, in photographs, in commentary about her personality, in the idea of her professional accomplishments, in her curriculum vitae. But she is also imagined in the studio standing before the easel, making decisions about what colours to put where and what pictures to choose. This narrating I is the author Dumas who is engaged in the discourse of art, painting, photography, writing, and autobiography. We believe this voice, partly because she is “Marlene Dumas”, the name whose authorial mythology surrounds her work and the position from which she speaks. Foucault writes “The author’s name serves to categorize a certain mode of being in discourse; the fact that the discourse has an author’s name that one can say ‘this was written by so-and-so’ or ‘so-and-so is its author’.”\(^{143}\) The narrating I picks up aspects of the historical I inasmuch as art and life fuse in the proper name.

The narrated I is the performed I; the protagonist. This I exists as an artistic subject. The most obvious location for this I in Dumas’ work is her self-portraits. But it would be simplistic to leave this presumption unexamined. The narrated I is the perceptible author-

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\(^{141}\) Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 59.


\(^{143}\) Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 107.
character we experience when Dumas makes statements, such as "I paint because I am a woman", or who paints pornography, or who "shoots" her subjects with a camera, or who hangs little girls by their necks with a single white line, or who puts supermodels behind bars, or who turns black men to watercolour. This narrated I is "performing" as an autobiographical subject/author. The difference between the narrating I and the narrated I is difficult to isolate in Dumas' work because the primary role of Dumas' protagonist is to narrate. If she were writing her life's story having been a medical doctor, for example, the problem would not be so great; the narrating I would be the one writing and the historical I would be the one performing operations and meeting patients. Here, however, the author character Dumas performs is a character who is performing herself as author. Dumas draws this narrated I into sharp light in her self-portraits, and especially when she refers in interviews or texts to the fact of her authorial role, such as we find in lines such as "I paint because I am a woman".144

The "ideological I"—according to cultural theorist Paul Smith to whom Smith and Watson refer—is the "the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells the story".145 Because a narrator is always located in place and time, they are defined by the specificity of their moment.

The ideological "I" is everywhere and nowhere in autobiographical acts, in the sense that the notion of personhood and the ideologies of identity constitutive of it are so internalized (personally and culturally) that they seem “natural” and "universal" characteristics of a person.146

I would argue that Dumas pulls this ideological I that is ordinarily “internalized” into the realm of the narrated I. Dumas’ work refers endlessly to her cultural and historical positioning as autobiographical subject/author. She is a white South African woman painting black men; a middle-aged woman painting adolescent penises; a feminist painting strippers; an able-bodied person painting disabled figures; an artist making paintings after the “death of painting”; a person operating under a famous name; a contemporary painter engaging in age-old techniques, drawing relationships between herself and male figures from painting’s history. In this way, the ideological I in Dumas’ work is central to the narrated I, since her narrated I, as an autobiographical subject, is so rigorously self-reflexive.

Dumas’ narrated I is loaded with authorial decision-making, and is highly aware of her historical context. There is, if we look closely, evidence of all I's in Dumas’ work—

145 Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 61.
146 Ibid., 62.
remembering the historical I unknown to us—oscillating into and out of visibility, and then momentarily overlapping. These I's are nonetheless important to keep in mind—even at the back of our minds—because they provide strong foundational architecture for a self-reflexive model of authoring with diverse critical possibilities. Identifying the different types of authorship in this way provides the tools with which to approach a work both critically and “authentically” in the specificity of the work. I want to consider two examples of Dumas’ works—one textual and one visual—keeping these I’s at the fore. In later analysis, I will relax that association but this exercise is valuable in establishing the nuanced ways in which Dumas performs the authorial subjectivity that delivers a sense of her presence.

One good example of this perpetual shift in perspective can be found in a poem Dumas wrote about her painting *Genetic Longing* (1984, Figure 40). The poem demonstrates something of Barthes’ shifting stance that breaks the solidarity of the narrating voice, but that also serves to underscore it. Note the shift between first and second stanzas.

Someone told me that especially people from warm countries seem to have longing not for a specific country, but a place that does not exist or has no name, as if it comes from their genes.

She was actually very much the opposite of me. 
I found her very beautiful. She never spoke much.

When I try to identify the voice speaking in this poem, I become disoriented. The first part pulls us into the company of a narrating I—somebody telling us a story and some anthropological hypothesis; we are in her presence listening to her story. The “me” means that we are aware not only of a narrative voice, but of a person; a “me” interacting with the world. As the lines progress however we begin to move away from the “me” and into her story, by the end of the first stanza the narrating voice wins out and we are thinking of the people from warm countries as described by a less-visible narrator. In the second half of the poem we are then snapped into the presence of a narrated I. The subject is no longer the “people from warm countries” and the voice is not that of a storyteller but of a conversationalist. The “me” of the narrating I has now collapsed to also become the protagonist or the narrated I; she becomes her own subject. The subject is specifically the relationship between this specific narrative character (narrated I) and the people from warm countries in a highly localised and specific way. The tone is changed to position Dumas closer to the central role of subject (“the opposite of me”, “I found her very beautiful”).
However, one could also argue the reverse. Because the first part suggests an ephemeral, indistinct “reality”, I could say it is where the narrated I performs, it is here that she is playing out the possibilities of the subject matter, and in the second half we are snapped back into the reality of the narrating I, who speaks more plainly out of the “reality” of her interest in her hypothesis. By moving closer to and then away from the core of the poem, by fracturing her speaking voice, we are made aware—as Barthes realised in relation to his autobiography—of a singular voice having been fractured. This variation heightens the visibility of Dumas as an authorial presence performing her own role as author.

In Snow White and the Broken Arm (1988, Figure 8), Snow White lies dead on a cold slab. She is gazed upon from the background by a row of seven small faces. She clutches a camera. On the floor is a stack of Polaroids. It is as though a narrated I—no longer visible in the frame—has spun around and pulled the narrating I into the frame to replace her position, therefore exposing the ploy. The one wielding the camera is finally caught at her own game. It is she who is now looked at, who is the object of the gaze. Perhaps the gaze kills her. She is a body—solid, naked, visible—she is gazed upon and objectified from all sides, sandwiched between the eyes in the background and our own eyes, and trapped within the limits of the painted frame. One can imagine the narrated I posing as the narrating I, quickly sewing up the photographer/author inside the frame before she can escape. The camera in the hand of the narrating I, trapped in the picture, is the active element here and serves to remind us that that act of looking and being looked at is seldom if ever benign.

In these two works, the real subject is Dumas, the narrating, narrated and ideological I. We are watching her decisions, watching her as she wrestles with these ideas so important to autobiography, and also to life. Where is the voice coming from, what can it say, why, what
does it matter? Dumas’ works are in many ways about the difficulties of saying anything at all. Dumas explains:

I am dealing with emotions that everyone feels. But I am always conscious of this tension between knowing you are making an object a physical thing, and being aware that you are also referring to things [the emotions] that cannot actually be painted. If the painting works that tension is in there.147

If it works, we detect both an attempt at communicable authenticity and the impossibility of it; this is the tension she maintains and exploits so skilfully.

**Thematic Connections**

The relationship between autobiography and Dumas’ work is not only structurally demonstrable through Smith and Watson’s four authorial “I”s, but such divisions open up significant thematic connections around the problematics of “authentic” communication as traditionally conceived by the autobiography and biographism that Dumas agitates. I have already said that a significant body of writing on Dumas’ work refers to human relations. This also extends to human relations with the self; that is, how do we construct and relate to public manifestations of the self and how do these externalised “versions” of one’s self contribute to who we are? How do the languages with which we must engage—as I already mentioned—change the way we are seen and understand ourselves? In Dumas’ case she has more than an occasional self-portrait to deal with; as an artist, and a celebrity artist in particular, she must also navigate her relationship with the name “Marlene Dumas”. I have chosen four key themes that come from autobiographic theory that I think are particularly significant to Dumas’ authorial presence. They are The Split Subject, The Proper Name, Dialogue, and the Ideological Nature of Language and Embodiment. I have chosen these particular themes because they most directly address the dynamic relationship between the author, the work or the subject, and the viewer, that facilitates the idealised authentic author and its problems. These themes are introduced here and demonstrated in the case studies that follow.

**The Split Subject**

How and why do autobiographical subjects—and artistic and ontological ones—come to be so split? Dumas writes that in order to make work “you have to take distance … there is too much emphasis on the artists having to be themselves, whereas in fact you have to be
against yourself". That is, one has to be self-reflexive; dividing from the self in order to "see" the self in the first place.

In Bakhtin's historical account of ancient autobiography, he establishes an historical link between the split autobiographical self and the split ontological self. Bakhtin argues that the concept of a public and a private self occurred with the introduction of the personalised God of Christianity. Since the shift from the external human subject of Ancient Greece to the Roman-Hellenistic epoch, human—and autobiographical—subjects have carried, according to Bakhtin, a "mute register"; the "I for myself and the "I for another". The autobiographical process therefore became one of conscious self-editing in which the writer creates a private (between him and God) and a public (between him and the world) version of himself. As artists or autobiographers, the moment we imagine a public reader or viewer we have already begun to split from ourselves. As autobiographical theorist Susanna Egan writes: "the very claim on audience already splits the internal and external manifestations of the writing self". The first paradox of autobiography therefore is clear. In order to establish and communicate a subjective self, one must first separate from the self at the "origin"; the very same origin that autobiography supposes to deliver and that audiences desire to see.

148 Bloom, "Interview with Marlene Dumas," 28.
149 Bakhtin’s concept of a "mute register" appears in “Forms of Time and the Chronotope” (1975). Bakhtin describes how our current acceptance of split human subjectivity—a subject from whom we are "picking up the pieces"—has not always been so understood. Instead, he describes how Ancient Greeks lived almost entirely with an exterior and public consciousness. Bakhtin writes, “The square in earlier (ancient) times itself constituted a state (and more—it constituted the entire state apparatus, with its official organs), it was the highest court, the whole of science, the whole of art, the entire people participated in it . . . all of the most elevated categories, from that of the state to that of revealed truth, were realized concretely and fully incarnated, made visible and given a face . . . the laying bare and an examination of a citizens’ whole life was accomplished, and received its public and civic stamp of approval.” Bakhtin, The Bakhtin Reader, 187. Like their Homeric heroes, ancient Greek subjects performed their consciousnesses to one another, in the full view of the public square, life, death, mourning, conflict, political decisions, personal confessions, and a relative level of sexual freedom were openly expressed. The first autobiographies of ancient Greece reflect this kind of socialised subject-hood. In their autobiographies, or apologia, they gave an idealised account of their lives only in relation to the folk, establishing whole identities interwoven in religion, politics or the successes of their profession; in many ways these autobiographies resembled the advocacy biographies (econium) that came before them. Bakhtin writes, “such are the types of ancient autobiography, which might be called forms for depicting the public self-consciousness of man,” Bakhtin, The Dialogical Imagination, 138. In the following Roman and Hellenistic epochs—that were infused with Christian morality and an individualised religion between one man and a remote God—that public consciousness began to falter. Subjects began to develop what Bakhtin called a “mute register” and “something that is in principle invisible,” Ibid., 137; a "private experiential and psychological sphere," ibid., 134–36. “[A] vast number of new spheres of consciousness and objects appeared in the private life of the private individual that were not, in general, subject to being made public (the sexual sphere and others), or were subject only to an intimate, conditional and closeted expression. The human image became multi-layered and multifaceted. A core and a shell, an inner and an outer, separated within it.” Ibid., 136.
150 Bakhtin referred to the "I' for myself as the spirit and the "I' for myself as the soul. See Deborah J. Haynes, Bakhtin and the Visual Arts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 59.
Ontologically we know that although we live inside our bodies we are also seen from the outside; we are also an “other” in the world of others. That divided sense of self as other is famously articulated in Lacan’s Mirror Stage, which begins when a child realises that the “other” in the mirror, is in fact his own “I”. This “other” in the mirror, however is a whole and perfect imagio (imaginary image) who contrasts with the reality of the split human consciousness. Importantly for this discussion, it is here that the unfulfilled desire to put ourselves back together as a complete and perfect self begins, inside the frame of a unified image; a desire made material in self-portraits and autobiography, and, arguably, in all works of art. But, as Linda Anderson quoting Shari Benstock writes, there is a glitch—because the unified self of the mirror does not exist.

Read in the light of Lacan’s mirror stage, autobiography … “reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins in the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction”. The subject, through autobiography, strives toward the false symmetry of the mirror, a unified self which can only ever be a fiction.

Consider Dumas’ long list of self-reflexive works noted in Chapter One. With every offering of her self and with every self-reflexive attack on that self, Dumas names the split between the “I for myself” and the “I for another” inherent in the human subject. The narrating I in Dumas’ work interferes with the whole and perfect image of the narrated I, showing it to be an alien curiosity even to Dumas herself.

In Self-Portrait at Noon Dumas seems to be reclining, gravity pushing her face and neck flat against the horizontal plane. The face is flattened out several times over by the verticality

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152 Lacan refers to an “Imaginary” order that works in conjunction the “symbolic” order and the “Real” order to establish the “Other”; the overarching systems and codes by which we communicate. For an overview, see Slavoj Žižek, How to Read Lacan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2007).

153 Importantly here, this “imagio” is a construction, not a reality. An image, for Lacan, belongs to the realm of the “Imaginary”.

of the wall, by the photographic source and by the broad flat brush strokes she employs. Dumas appears a whole subject—such as in a mirror—squeezed as though between two glass slides to the point of extreme two-dimensionality and transparency; a kind of subject specimen. She seems to be asking not so much who is this subject before me, as what is this subject before me? This alien quality is also addressed in relation to Drunk in Chapter Five and Pregnant Image in Chapter Six.

The Proper Name

Yes, I am half-hearted and cowardly. A split heart rather than a split personality! ... I want you to love me. I'll give you everything, you can take my name, only you can't have my heart. Art is an inscrutable, many-handed monster. I know it doesn't care about me.\(^\text{155}\)

The strangeness of Dumas' self to herself, embodied in Self-Portrait at Noon, is arguably redoubled by the magnitude of her proper name, the Marlene Dumas: the international title who is "bought and sold".\(^\text{156}\) Significantly, however, that name is not a benign entity in the artist's life; rather, the way it behaves in the world has significant impacts on the person who shares it. Dumas' name gives her what she presumably wants (an audience, an historical name and the financial means to continue her work), but it also takes whatever it needs to survive. In an excerpt from a published letter (Figure 28) she writes: "Dear Mamma, I am in the train again on my way to a meeting at the art academy. I am so busy all the time. These days I do have money, but so many appointments."\(^\text{157}\)

The proper name therefore bears a problematic relationship with the autobiographer and the autobiographical work because, although as Lejeune wrote, the proper name "seals" the autobiographical pact,\(^\text{158}\) it does so while being a construction in the minds of others and while also changing in real ways the life of the artist it is supposed to stand for. Dumas illustrates the point in a textual work entitled Name No Names that was part of the New Museum show. She writes:

Names distinguish you from others, serving different purposes in different fields. A name is an identifying device. You can't get the papers if you don't have the

\(^{155}\) Dumas, “Give the People What They Want,” 92–3.

\(^{156}\) Matthew Monahan in “Victoria Falls” writes about Dumas’ relationship with her proper name. The following is an excerpt: "More than once ... I have tried to get you to admit that you really are Marlene Dumas, that your reputation precedes you and that ... you are a famous painter, published, auctioned off, the rich and notorious female savior of feminist figurative painting. On these occasions you go deaf to me. How can you answer for this public doppelganger, this sum of (mis)understandings that accumulate around your own name and trade you for a symbol? How hard is it to remain specific when the world passes you around like a coin, wearing down your heads and tails?" Monahan, “Victoria Falls,” 251.

\(^{157}\) Dumas, Intimate Relations, 51.

\(^{158}\) Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 8.
passport and you can’t get a passport if you don’t have a name (but you don’t want your name if your name ain’t no good).  

The proper name therefore conceptualises the problematic relationship between the artist and their reputation and the reputation and the work. Addressing the latter, Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” focuses on the relationship between the work and the proper name. That is, the affect of the name on the meaning of a work and vice versa. Taking an anti-biographic—but not anti-authorial—approach, Foucault argues that the proper name does not belong to the person but to discourse; it exists only as it is shaped by discourse. This can include but is not limited to biographical details. He writes:

(T)he author’s name … does not pass from one interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of a text, revealing or at least characterizing, its mode of being.

It would be impossible to estimate, for example, what proportion of the apparent power of Dumas’ “over-rated artist” drawing at the New Museum was attributable to my knowledge of her artistic status. My experience highlights preconceptions attached to the proper name that we include in any viewing experience; in a way, I felt caught out by that picture, or rather, by Dumas. I was at once experiencing Dumas’ “reputation” and another presence deeper than that exposed the fabricated nature of that preconceived reputation. This descriptive—and also activating—role of the author, what Foucault calls the “author function”,[161] both makes a work a work at all and shapes the way that work is read.[162] Without the name “Marlene Dumas”, the drawing would not have been in the New Museum in the first place; “you can’t get a passport if you don’t have a name”. But with the name I cannot but read the work according to the descriptive function of her proper name that I had already acquired.

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[159] Dumas, “Name No Names,” in Name no Names, 34.
[160] Foucault also writes that the proper name “has other indicative functions: more than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone, it is the equivalent of a description,” Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 105.
[161] The author function serves a descriptive function but is also the thing that makes a work a work at all. Foucault asks “when Sade was not considered an author, what was the status of his papers? Were they simply rolls of paper into which he ceaselessly uncoiled his fantasies during imprisonment?” Foucault’s answer is yes, until, that is, they were activated by his proper name. It is also important that this is not a soulless author but the author Sade that is its own specific discourse. Foucault’s essay is of significant value here because while remaining in opposition to biographism, like Barthes, he acknowledges that there is an accumulative discourse pertaining to the proper name that does not leave the proximity of a work. Sade’s writing cannot be separated from the biographical fact of his time in prison and they cannot be separated from the specificity of that activating authorial name. Foucault, “What is an Author?” 103.
[162] “What is a work? What is this curious unity, which we designate as a work? Of what elements is it composed? Is it not what an author has written?” Ibid., 103.
And what of the relationship between Dumas (Historical I) and that name, as stressed by Dumas in the extract from Name No Names? In Otobiographie, Derrida argues that Nietzsche gave his real (personal) life—working hard in isolation and living on a “line of credit” against his own name (or signature)—in order to establish Friedrich Nietzsche. Working in isolation for the majority of his life, Nietzsche made a substantial sacrifice in order to be seen and known by others as a proper name. In this situation such a relationship begs the question: who serves whom? If the name needs a work and the work needs the life of the artist, where can one say the “real” author exists outside the influence of that name?

In a poem for her retrospective exhibition Measuring Your Own Grave (2008)—an event that in itself connotes an author who worked for a proper name—Dumas wearily answers questions for a biographically addicted audience. Groaning under what Bonacossa calls “the weight of (her) own reputation”, Dumas nonetheless adds to it.

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163 Derrida discusses Nietzsche’s assertion that his life had been lived on a line of “credit” against his own name: “I live on my own credit. I go along living on my own credit, the credit I establish and give myself”. Of the period during which his name carried no currency he said that he does not live because educated men do not know his name. In other words, Nietzsche sacrificed his life to build that proper name. Derrida, The Ear of the Other, 8. Derrida referred to the proper name as the signature, Anderson, Autobiography, 80.

164 Derrida writes that the proper name sits at the (dynamis) between the work and the life, between “the system and the subject of that system”. The “eternal return” describes the existence of the author as wholly contingent on the recognition of others, what he calls a “wedding ring” or the “reaffirmation of the hymen,” Derrida, The Ear of the Other, 5. It is only in this present moment of authorial affirmation by others that the author exists at all for Derrida and it is also the reason that the author as a prior and originating self—one that autobiography traditionally demands—is impossible. He writes, “You cannot hear them before the reaffirmation of the hymen, before the alliance or wedding ring of the eternal return,” ibid., 12.

165 Bonacossa writes that here “Dumas seems to allude to how often retrospectives kill the creative energy of the artist’s work, burying them alive under the weight of their own reputations”. Boncaossa, “Further Than the I,” 205.
I’ve been told that people want to know why such a sober title for a show? Is it about artists and their mid-life careers, or is it about women’s after 50 fears? No, let me make this clear: It’s the best definition I can find for what an artist does when making art and how a figure in a painting makes its mark. For the typical portraitist like me this is as wide as I can see.  

This poem poses a seemingly more personal authorial voice responding to questions asked of the Marlene Dumas. “I’ve been told that people want to know” however creates a distance between the biographical self we imagine to be speaking, and all the ‘people’ who want to know facilitated by the proper name and the discourse to which it belongs. There is a tension therefore between person speaking and the authority of the proper name that required she speak at all. A second set of tensions also exists between the author, the proper name and the work. On the one hand, Dumas pushes our attention away from her biography (and her name) and back to the paintings (“what an artist does when making art”). On the other hand, the use of first-person pronouns and biographical references per se (“women’s after 50 fears”) iterates a potent authorial voice. The poem contradicts its own declaration (“let me make this clear”), formally demonstrating the inescapable power-play between the author, the work (“a painting makes its mark”) and the conceptual influence of the proper name belonging to discourse (“people want to know”). Though she is equipped to steer her proper name, in the end, she knows, as Derrida writes, “the name begins … to get along without (her).”

Dumas’ proper name and her associated reputation is an important aspect of this discussion since her authorial presence cannot be argued to be the same as that of an artist of whom I have no knowledge. Dumas knows—wearily answering—that her name has developed for her an audience of eager listeners and viewers, and also fervent critics. Big reputations attract big opinions since the larger they grow the more the public feels ownership. It is they after all who have given the name its attributes, who have grown the discourse that grows the name. What to do with that as an artist? How to locate one’s original self and to make “authentic” work? Of course that is impossible—as much as we desire otherwise—but one can at least make the problems of that situation a source of inspiration. Referring to one’s artistic self as Miss Interpreted or indeed Suspect, Dumas foregrounds the difference between the name and the person. Not even Dumas seems sure where it starts and ends but the situation is clearly not straightforward.

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166 Ibid.
167 In Dumas poem entitled “Some Qualities I Exhibit” (1982), she concedes that she attempts to shape, if not tame, that name. “Is the information necessary in a work contained in the work itself? I say no. It is largely contained outside the work. One can, does (I do) and one has to at times, put words in the mouth of the work, and/or take them again. One’s eyes are situated next to one’s ears.” Quoted in Essink, Miss Interpreted, 8.
According to Anderson, this is why Derrida referred to autobiography—that foregrounds and is "sealed by the proper name"—as an "irritant", "troubling the border between art and life", and why de Man asks "Does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way around?" The proper name makes and shapes not only the work but also the person who must make it.

Bakhtin’s Dialogue and the Ideological Nature of Language

Given that language is not transparent, we know that not even Dumas’ most “authentic” handwritten diary entries deliver the transparency we desire. In painting—with its viscous and palpable materiality—the difficulty of the transparent project becomes even more overt. A word or a photograph can at least pose as invisible form; however, painting, especially as Dumas performs painting, puts all its materiality in plain view. As Dumas writes:

My paintings are not the execution of one idea or emotion that goes from a) intention to b) artwork ... The more you move towards painting, the darker the wood becomes through which Little Red Riding Hood goes, and it’s not only the wolf but the Wicked Witch and the Seven Dwarves, Judas, Jesus and the journalists, whom she has to face.

Bakhtin might call this dilemma the dialogical nature of meaning-making, including the "meaning" of autobiographical and human subjects. For Bakhtin no meaning is fixed, all subjectivities are in flux and shaped by their relationship with others—"me" in relation with the world, as Shiff would say. Bakhtin writes: “Everything that pertains to me enters my consciousness, beginning with my name from the external world through the mouths of others.” He writes similarly of the relationship between the work and formation of meaning by others:

The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as a part of the process of its creation,

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171 Dumas “Miss Interpreted” (1992) (extract), published in *Marlene Dumas*, 123.
172 Bakhtin writes, “(c)everything that pertains to me enters my consciousness, beginning with my name from the external world through the mouths of others (my mother and so forth) … I realize myself initially through others; from them I receive my words, forms and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself … just as the body is formed initially in the mother’s womb (body), a person’s consciousness awakens wrapped in the consciousness of others”. Bakhtin et al. “Notes Made in 1970–71,” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 138.
as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers.\textsuperscript{173}

Therefore not only does the meaning of a work change according to the projection of the viewer but the work also changes the fabric of that viewer’s perception. Therefore, an infinite cycle of mutually affecting dialogue is established. For the autobiographical subject, this means there is no fixed subject, only a subject created at the moment of comprehension by the reader that changes from moment to moment. Smith and Watson underscore the importance of Bakhtin’s influence on autobiography when they write: “the autobiographical is a performative site of self-referentiality where psychic formations of subjectivity and culturally coded identities intersect and interface one another”.\textsuperscript{174}

The meeting of “two consciousnesses”,\textsuperscript{175} says Bakhtin, is a creative act. Those consciousnesses change one another and they do so because they both bring with them their own ideological languages. It is important to draw attention to language in relation to Dumas’ work because her formal and conceptual methods frequently expose the inherently ideological nature of representative languages, such as painting, photography and art history. As I have said, Bakhtin argues that all languages have behind them a “voice”, a “speaking personality, a speaking consciousness ... (with) will or desire behind it, its own timbre and overtones”.\textsuperscript{176} For Bakhtin—and for the many theorists of language since Saussure—those languages also exist in power relations with one another; not all languages are equal. Bakhtin divides those power categories into alien or familiar languages; that is languages may be unusual compared to the dominant language or they may be familiar to it. What is alien and what is dominant shifts according to circumstance. Feminism, for example, might be considered an alien language compared with “patriarchal discourse”; however, as Julia Kristeva argues, feminism is also a dominant discourse

\textsuperscript{173}Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, 254.
\textsuperscript{174}Smith and Watson, \textit{Reading Autobiography}, 11; For Smith and Watson, autobiography provides a forum in which to demonstrate the contingent nature of our subjectivities, rather than asserting them. By using autobiography’s single subject centre, and comparing that to the reality of cultural and intersubjective influences and interpretations, we expose the dialogical nature of our selves. Egan’s \textit{Mirror Talk}—perhaps the most dialogically focused of all recent texts on autobiography—identifies key literary examples. One such example is Ernest Hemingway’s \textit{The Movable Feast} (1964); Egan describes Hemingway’s use of “true simple declarative sentences” in combination with “cubist” form; truth from a multitude of perspectives, and writing his autobiography “by reflection, bounced off the wall so to speak, as in jai alai, the Basque version of handball,” Egan, \textit{Mirror Talk}, 31.
\textsuperscript{176}Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, 434. What Bakhtin means here is that language is not transparent; rather is it is “laden with the meaning of others”. Bakhtin et al., \textit{The Bakhtin Reader}, 75; He writes: “We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather, language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion.” Ibid.
compared to the many alien (female) voices beneath it.177 In keeping with Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue, alien and dominant languages affect one another; this is what Bakhtin calls the heteroglossic nature of language. For him, heteroglossia is the reality of language as opposed to the posited ideology of dominant language systems.178 It is this interaction of voices within language that defines Bakhtin’s dialogical notion of discourse; “language in its concrete living totality”, language in use, in social context.179 This language and social context is indeed built by the voices added to it, evolving through time according to the dynamics of what is spoken and what has been spoken before.180 This is one reason why, as referred to earlier, the writing of feminine, gay and black autobiographies had the capacity to change the very fabric of autobiography and of “acceptable” literary voices. The moment when an alien voice is particularly potent—when a swear word is uttered in a church, for example—is what Bakhtin calls the “inappropriate” word. These are the most powerful and combative modes of heteroglossia and are the mode of heteroglossia best suited to Dumas.

177 The concept of familiar and alien languages has been widely discussed in autobiographical theory, perhaps most significantly in relation to feminist autobiography. The following are references to that connection: “Autobiography has been one of the most important sites of feminist debate precisely because it demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subject.” Anderson, Autobiography, 87; “An awareness of difference allows for textual readings which are sensitive to such oppositions as the dominant and the MARGINALized. Looking at texts this way has a huge impact on discussions of identity as it opens up multiple questions about the notion of the social and sexual self”. Ibid., 135; Also in reference to feminist autobiography, Smith and Watson use “agency” to describe the capacity of the autobiographical subject to affect the dominant language, writing, “the autobiographical subject is inescapably in dialogue with the culturally marked differences that inflect models of identity and underwrite the formation of autobiographical subjectivity,” Smith and Watson, Interfaces, 10. Betty Bergland, who directly refers to Bakhtin’s dialogue, writes, “Because autobiography has acquired power in the culture to legitimate certain subject positions, autobiographical studies can be a site from which to challenge not only essentialist notions of the human being, but also to examine the effect of discourses on subjects, both those that seem to guarantee prevailing social relations and those that critique them. AutoBiographical studies might also therefore provide a site for cultural critique and social change”. Bergland, “Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the “Other”, in Autobiography and Postmodernism, ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore and Gerald Peters (Amherst: University of Massachusets Press, 1994), 162.

178 Bakhtin uses the term “Polyglossia” to describe this to and fro of multiple discourses altering one another, similar to Saussure and Barthes combinative concepts of language. “In this interchange discourse and idea come alive, with the language of the familiar and the language of the alien transforming and thus animating one another.” Patterson, “Mikhail Bakhtin,” 132.


180 Importantly, however, the frequency or potency of what words are related to does contribute to an underlying or collective meaning of the word. This is what Barthes, in Elements of Semiology, calls the combinative nature of language. He writes “The combinative aspect of speech is of course of capital importance, for it implies that speech is constituted by the recurrence of identical signs: it is because signs are repeated in successive discourses and within one and the same discourse … that each sign becomes an element of the language”. Barthes, Annette Lavers, and Colin Smith, Elements of Semiology (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 15. In Elements, he singles out linguistic languages as distinct from Saussure’s broader systems of signs; however, here I will follow Bakhtin’s acceptance that all modes of communication constitute languages.
Dumas’ work engages in the dialogue between alien and familiar languages in innumerable ways. She paints porn stars in watercolour, which is the common medium of polite Sunday painters of landscape (Dorothy D-Lite 1998, Figure 11); babies in the dimensions of Abstract Expressionist macho painting (The First People 1990, Figure 41); oil-painting portraits of “terrorists” shown in a museum (The Prophet 2004, Figure 42); a group of excitable brides in Robert Ryman’s white field (Ryman’s Brides 1997, Figure 43); a drunk middle-aged woman as author-god (Drunk 1997, Figure 13). It is also possible to say that Dumas’ whole project—which combines feminine figuration and autobiographical material with paintings that also deal in abstraction—is one big “inappropriate word”, positioning the psychological against the material, the personal against the universal, the private against the public, the authentic against the inauthentic. As Essink writes, “The individuals in her work are, or seem to be, in continual conflict with the situation in which they find themselves.” Consider also Dumas’ linguistic engagements with Bakhtinian heteroglossia and dialogue in this context.

In one of her most famous poems, Women and Painting (1993), Dumas brings the alien language of her female blonde subjectivity to the patriarchal discourse of painting. Her subjective I is overtly pitted against the dominant and familiar other. At the same time, Dumas’ poem Women and Painting also takes oppositional terminology (good/bad, man/woman) through a series of Saussurean sign associations, demonstrating the constructed nature of meaning in language. The following is an excerpt:

Essink, Miss Interpreted, 13.
I paint because I am a woman …
If painting is female and insanity is a female malady,
Then all women painters are mad and all male painters are women.
I paint because I am an artificial blonde woman …
If all good painting is about colour, then all bad painting is about having the wrong
colour.
But bad things can be good excuses. As Sharon Stone said, “Being blonde is a great
excuse. When you are having a bad day you can say, I can’t help it, I’m just feeling
very blonde today”. 182

The living and dynamic relationship between languages serves to make Dumas’ authorial
presence highly visible. It also makes us aware of the ideological nature of the languages
we encounter and express.

Embodiment: The Language of Human Visibility

The human body is an integral part of Dumas’ work and to autobiographic studies. For an
autobiographical subject to exist, even in our minds, a body must also exist that includes
the psyche of that subject. Even in a situation where the subject’s body is not represented
or described, the viewer will make one up; a human subject cannot exist without a body.
Smith and Watson write: “there must be a body that perceives and internalizes the images,
sensations, and experiences of the external world”. 183 The body is also, however,
problematic of the authentic autobiographical self, since our bodies already frame the way
our audience perceives us.

A human body—and this relates significantly to Bakhtin’s dialogue—is the physical
interface for a psychic being. 184 Hannah Westley writes,

The body is the threshold of subjectivity, the point of intersection between the
private and public, the personal and political, and the artist or writer attempting to

183 Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 37.
184 The inherently contextualising nature of the body is a theme for many artists working
autobiographically. French performance artist Orlan has conducted the best-known and most extreme
autobiographic investigation of the coded nature of our bodies. In a series of plastic surgeries she has changed her
face to a composite of female beauty icons. These include the chin of Boticelli’s Venus, the nose of
Roman goddess Diana, the forehead of da Vinci’s Mona Lisa and the mouth of Boucher’s Europa (The
Rape of Europa, 1732–4). By taking on apparently acceptable or desirable aspects of female beauty, what
she in fact exposes is the arbitrary nature of those attributes. By using feminine icons loaded with
mythology, Linda S. Kauffman explains, Orlan exposes the ways in which our idea of a beautiful woman
is a compilation of historical male fantasy. In a less sensational but equally powerful way, Latina lesbian
artist, Laura Aguilar’s performatice self-portrait photographs foreground the way we read bodily subjects.
Obese, naked and shapeless, her figure is inserted as an object into landscapes and domestic scenes, her
body in its size and shape seems devoid of humanity; we know it is a body, but it does not look like “the
“body”. All subjects have between them and the world, a body that although it can be altered is various
ways, has limits on its capacity to change. See Kauffman, “Cutups in Beauty School and Postscripts,” in
Interfaces, 103–31.
represent themselves must negotiate the complex divide between subject and object roles.\textsuperscript{185}

The body is something that can see and can be seen. Therefore, without claiming to be definitive on the subject, I want to briefly mention Sartre’s and Lacan’s concepts of the Gaze. The gaze is an important idea for Dumas’ work both because she examines the way we see and are seen as human subjects and also because she addresses the idea that painting, as Rosalind Krauss writes, “is the true analogue of the ... the gaze”;\textsuperscript{186} painting’s focus is on looking and being looked at.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s gaze concept, famously articulated in \textit{Being and Nothingness} (1943), is not only about being “looked at” with “ocular globes”, but also the ambient sense of being looked at by the world—or “the Other”\textsuperscript{187}—with attitude. For Sartre, the gaze of the other brings an awareness of being objectified as a part of a visual schema.\textsuperscript{188} We experience the gaze not only as a matter of looking or being looked at but being pictured according to a set of visual rules; what Lacan calls a “screen”.\textsuperscript{189} Lacan also, however, “impresses upon us the fact that a human being can distinguish between his existence and the picture of that existence, its visual being”.\textsuperscript{190} With this understanding, a subject can then choose to take part in the visual code or not, or indeed to play with it.\textsuperscript{191} In her self-portraits Dumas does just this: making her image alien, drunk, or banal. Not all subjects however can choose to subvert their position on the visual schema as freely as others. For example, at the core of a body of writing much too large to even summarise here is Laura Mulvey’s classic

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{185} Westley, \textit{The Body as Medium}, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{187} For Sartre, explained succinctly by Janne Seppanen, “one feature of our consciousness is of being for others,” Seppanen, \textit{The Power of the Gaze: An Introduction to Visual Literacy} (New York: P. Lang, 2006), 70. This is an excellent book on the ‘gaze’. Sartre writes that, “the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain”. Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology}, trans. H.E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 346. Certain parallels can obviously be made with Bakhtin’s dialogical subject. This process of being looked at by the Other is also shameful for Sartre. He writes, “the shame of self, it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object,” ibid., 350.
\item \textsuperscript{188} That schema, according to Smith and Watson, “determines when the body becomes visible, how it becomes visible and what that visibility means.” Smith and Watson, \textit{Reading Autobiography}, 38; Seppanen describes the visual schema as “visual reality’s regularities and structures, as well as meanings connected to them,” Seppanen, \textit{The Power of the Gaze}, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{189} Seppanen explains that in between Lacan’s Subject (visible object) and the Other (Gaze) exists a Screen (or ecran) that operates largely as the place of the visual code or the Picture. The Gaze and the rules of its visual languages are spread out across the screen. Again, it is easy to detect similarities to Barthes’ “subject in language” and Bakhtin’s alien and familiar languages. See Seppanen, \textit{The Power of the Gaze}, 77.
\item \textsuperscript{190} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{191} Seppanen writes, “the screen is then not only a one-way force that shackles the visibility of a human being, but it grows to a point of mediation through which it is possible to appear to the Gaze in a certain way ... I can dress deliberately in a provocative manner. I can exaggerate just for kicks.” Seppanen, \textit{The Power of the Gaze}, 77.
\end{itemize}
feminist text from 1975, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in which "visual pleasure became something intimately tied to patriarchal ideology". The power struggle here is between the bearer of the look and the one looked at.

As autobiographical subjects, our bodies have already allocated for us a position within the visual schema and meaning in relation to that schema; this body means such and such before we even begin the autobiographical act. The way others read our bodies also shapes the way others read what we make or say; consider Dumas' repeated references to being a woman or being blonde.

In her self-portraits and her writings, Dumas deals extensively with the body as ideological interface but also, as I have mentioned, with regards to the bodies of those she paints. One overt example of this can be found in a series of paintings based on photographs of psychiatric patients, commissioned by the Psychiatric Centre, Het Hooghuis, Etten-Leur, in 1991 (Figure 44). In these works, Dumas questions the use of a body's appearance as a diagnostic device, and, by extension, the psychological interpretation of the body's surface generally. In a written piece “The Body Guard” (1993), Dumas describes the psychiatric photographs of Dr H.W. Diamond, who was "one of the pioneers of psychiatric photography". She writes:

> a woman's appearance was very important. If she did not pay enough attention to her dress, it could be read as a sign of lunacy, but too much attention was easily seen as the malady of intense vanity.

Dumas treats the bodies in her paintings less as flesh and blood than as skins from which we read meaning, similar to the pages of a book or the skin of a piece of fruit. In *The Blonde, The Brunette and the Black Woman* (1992, Figure 24), for example, Dumas paints

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192 Mulvey marks out two kinds of viewing pleasure: identification and objectification. In short, she argues that in realist cinema, women are depicted as visual objects (objectification) and men are active elements within a narrative with which a viewer can identify (identification). Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 6-18.

193 There is a question across human and autobiographical subjects of agency; or our capacity to participate and the affect the discursive regimes—including the visual schema—in which we live. The best-known theorist of subjective agency is French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser whose theories on ideology suggest that all subjects, however free they might feel exist within coercive frameworks of the dominant class and of institutions. For Althusser, the way we are regarded or seen by those frameworks dictates the subjects we must be. See Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984).

194 Elizabeth Grosz argues that we possess an “imaginary anatomy” that “reflects the social and familial beliefs about the body more than it does the body’s organic nature”. Grosz, “Intolerable Ambiguity Freaks as/at the Limit,” cited in Smith and Watson, *Interfaces*, 10.


196 Ibid.

197 Dumas writes, “Painting is about the trace of human touch. It is about the skin of a surface.” Dumas, “Sweet Nothings”, 75–76; Bal refers to the child’s perception of herself during Lacan’s mirror-stage as a “sack of skin,” Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 264.
the same figure with three different skin and hair colours. Dumas asks what we could possibly imagine to know of inner subjects based on the thin oily smearing of a surface? Dumas’ thin, flat surfaces seem to mimic Lacan’s screen as a surface upon which to collect and project meaning. Her own physical body is rarely inserted on this visual schema but when it is, it positions her bodily surface among all the rest. “All of us”, she seems to say, “are living in and as surfaces”. We establish Dumas’ body in part by the body we know belongs to her, but also as a relational composite of all her other subjects. Not that they are divided surrogates for her person, but they serve to shape her body by their difference to it. Her body is white whereas others are black, her body is middle-aged whereas others are infantile.

We see Dumas’ body through her traces. The body is the producer of the material work. The hand writes or paints, it creates gesture and style. The body evidences the authorial self in technique; “the painter takes his body with him, says Valery”. We imagine the subject produced through that body; a strong gesture, a weak gesture, a humorous voice or wordy prose. The human body is the house, the visual and physical interface, the life and death force, and the producer of the autobiographical subject; the autobiographical subject and the human subject are inextricably tied to the physicality of their being.

For this reason, how human bodies are represented through languages, and consequently, how we see and respond to them, matters. Dumas’ work carries the gravity of that knowledge—this is part of the guilt she describes—and as a result her work evinces a highly purposeful and conscious authorial presence attempting to both work and live authentically.

All of these thematic concerns of autobiography that manifest in Dumas’ work are self-reflective questions. Autobiography is useful for understanding Dumas not because she is overtly autobiographical in the traditional sense but because her work is heavily engaged in the concerns of autobiographical discourse, and because that engagement gives rise to a potent authorial presence. Although Dumas draws on many “autobiographical tropes”—

198 She takes a similar approach using the same figure and different skin colours in Waiting (for Meaning) (1998), Snow White and the Next Generation (1988), Reinhardt’s Daughter (1994) and Cupid (1994).
200 Her direct biographical references are relatively few when compared with her overall output and artists such as Tracey Emin, Louis Bourgeois, Elke Krystufek, and Hannah Wilke, for example, would be much better candidates for a discussion on autobiographical art so far as “personal” subject matter is concerned. It is important to emphasise this distinction between the “personal” and the “autobiographical” from the outset. Personal referents contribute to autobiographical practices but the personal is not interchangeable with autobiography. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the personal means “of or concerning
handwriting, personal snapshot references, publication of personal letters, intimate language in poetry—she is much more interested in foregrounding the problems of “authentic” communication, and examining the role of the author than she is in actual authentic autobiographical expression. We are drawn to her “bios”—lived and authorial—not only by her autobiographical “tip-offs” but by her self-reflexive performance that makes her authorial decisions so visible. To consider autobiography is also useful for understanding Dumas’ work because it foregrounds our desire—both author and viewer—for an authentic authorial subjectivity and communication through art while also providing the theoretical language with which to reflect on that desire. As Lejeune says, autobiography requires a contract. Autobiography is a belief system; an “I promise to be truthful, authentic and real” and an “I believe you”. However, such transparent communication between artist and viewer has a great deal too much in its path—ontological, visual, formal, contextual and interpretive elements—to allow that promise of truth to be fulfilled. Desire, however, thrives on dissatisfaction and is perhaps made all the stronger by Dumas’ insistence on material and conceptual obfuscation; but, as Dumas says, “Being hard to get is all right, only if there’s something to get.” It is that unfulfilled and obfuscated desire for the authentic autobiographical subject amid the complications of public and material manifestation that characterises Dumas’ authorial presence and that makes up a big part of what there is “to get” in Dumas’ work. Not that she can deliver an authentic autobiographical subject or that she intends to, but that she draws on the desire for that subject nonetheless, questioning at every turn and creating an irreconcilable autobiographical subject-in-flux; her authorial presence.

In Unsatisfied Desire and the Untrustworthy Language of Art, Dumas writes:

> Art is not a mirror. Art is a translation of that which you do not know, but of which you want to convince other or rather, that which no-one knows, but by which you want to convince others or rather, that which no-one knows, But by which everyone can be seduced to believe that although “it” is bad, “it” is good; It’s good not to have what you most desire.

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I now move into a closer examination of several of Dumas’ works in light of what has been discussed. As Yve-Alain Bois writes, it is important to consider not just the general condition of a work “but also its means of production in the slightest detail”. What follows internalises Smith and Watson’s four ‘I’s—referring to them intermittently—and draws out some of the thematic aspects of autobiographical discourse established in this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Don’t Talk to Strangers:
Dialogue and the Field

Don’t Talk to Strangers (1977) seems like an anomaly within Dumas’ practice. There is no other work that looks quite like it, and yet, this work seems to lay the foundation for everything that follows in the artist’s oeuvre. Between 1976 and 1983 Dumas worked with collage—newspaper photographs, drawing, and text—to make work centred primarily on biographical events and relationships in the lives of famous women; including Simone de Beauvoir, Winnie Mandela and Betty Sabbh (wife of Malcolm X). This work—the most minimalist of the period—contains the beginning and end of real and fictitious love letters to Dumas, ripped from their origin and given over to the artwork. Don’t Talk to Strangers seems to best exemplify the core tensions in her work between authentic communication and material form.

In an interview for her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2009, Dumas reflected on the work:

A friend of mine said to me, when we were sitting in a restaurant, “You always want to talk to strangers and tell them everything that’s going on”. Then I thought, well in a sense, being an artist is talking to strangers because the works start often
in a more private place and end up in a public space. So actually this old work is
one of my favourites because although there is no literally figurative painting in it,
it is about the same type of problem of what the original source of things is, and
what you are actually doing when you make a work of art.\(^{204}\)

The source of this work is, for all intents and purposes, private. Dumas said that this work
shows "the beginning and end of love stories",\(^{205}\) but the crux of this work is the vast
chasm between beginning and end not merely of stories but specifically letters. Not only
does Dumas use “real” letters—as well as fictitious ones—but love letters, by definition
designed to send direct feelings from one person to another. A letter is perhaps the
quintessential material form for purposeful and intentional human communication; the
most overt objectified means of entering into dialogue with another person.

Intentionality is the first significant factor about the letters in this work. The letters are
stacked on top of one another on either side, starting on one end with the beginning of the
letter and ending on the other: Dear Marlene, for example, sits at the left-hand edge of the
frame and is connected to Love at the opposite edge of the frame. Another pointedly says
"Dear Miss Dumas, I am sorry to say but the lines are disappearing." The left and right (or
east and west) of the work are intentional borders; definitive points bracketing human
voices purposefully communicating. I write to such-and-such and a letter comes from
such-and-such; what I wish to communicate comes from me, travels through the world of
language, time and space, and is received and read by the other. In writing a love letter the
writer splits from the self, crafting the best possible incarnation of inner feeling for their
purposes. That feeling is intended to make its way through language, time and space and
to directly reach the beloved, perhaps to stir up reciprocal feelings or at least to attempt a
mutuality of understanding (such as in a “Dear John” letter). Love letters are designed to
bring consciousnesses together. It is because of this supposedly close connection to our
inner selves that letters, including love letters, are often used in the place of or in
conjunction with autobiographical texts. Letters offer the authenticity of a primary piece
of evidence; something that was not originally intended for public consumption but that
has now been “revealed”.

This is one reason why it is important that we imagine these letters are authentic letters
from Dumas’ life. If they are inauthentic love letters they bear none of the gravitas or
empathy we feel with their determination to communicate. All intentionality is lost. The

\(^{204}\) Dumas, transcript from her commentary on Don’t Talk to Strangers (1977), available at the Museum

\(^{205}\) Dumas in conversation with Gavin Jantjes, 15 December 1996, iniva website, accessed 5 July 2012,
fact that she uses her personal love letters—letters we could call authentic—in combination with inauthentic ones sets up a situation in which we inevitably try to tell the difference and must therefore ask: what does it matter? The only reason it can matter is because we desire authentic verification by the author that they are “real” human selves trying to communicate with Dumas. (Of course, there is no way of knowing whether or not they are all fabricated or all authentic.) However, by removing the body of the letters, Dumas shows this differentiation to be futile since there is nothing to be seen but the pictorial space: the lines mimicking an ellipsis.

Dumas has removed any revelatory elements from these letters. Names and subject matter are cut out and replaced with long lines of clear, yellowing oil that look like the Sellotape (“sticky-tape”) that pins down the notes on the side. I know someone is trying to communicate with her, but I have no idea what they are saying or who they are. These letters evoke mini-authorial presences that we are unable to identify. The characters are known only by the meagre elements of their own handwriting, which Dumas has stuck onto the surface of her painting. The fragments perform a chorus of moving but silent mouths, whose breath reaches with all its fragile might from the furthest reaches of the work to their proposed reader, in this case, Dumas. The finishing sentences express a gasping cough as they reach the end, driven by the human desire to communicate. The lines resemble telephone wires or Internet connections or phone signals; hypothetical spaces for communication anchored by human subjects at either end. These subjects are just enough of a tip-off to suggest human communication but not enough to overcome the fact of the painterly field. That demonstration serves to exemplify the kind of rich but unnameable desire to communicate through the material interface of art that Dumas has continually returned to. Van den Boogerd writes: “the artist is speaking to herself, in terms that express not only the futility of artistic confessions but also a scepticism as to the permanence of her own feelings”.206

The oil paint’s transparency is also significant. We can see all the way to the back of the field, all the way to the empty, minimalist flatness of the canvas where there is nothing to see except the relatively white or yellow ground, fused with the oil. There is nothing behind these lines. They are thin smears of transparent paint, getting distracted by the material game while they attempt to traverse the distance and deliver the message their senders intended. The material and painted core of this work consumes the intentionality of its many authors. The simplicity and imperfection of these lines straddle a minimalist and material line and an authorial signature; begging the question as to what can we “tell”

by this very simple line. If we imagine we can construct authorial meaning from her many other lines in the shape of figures, then what can we tell from this line? Because Dumas has provided something of a beginning and an end to the lines, we transpose a narrative, making up the authentic bits we cannot see, much—the work argues—as we do with all biographical interpretation.

The material and subsequent metaphorical properties of sticky-tape are also interesting in this regard. Though the central lines are painted in oil and not tape, they refer to sticky-tape. Sticky-tape sticks things together. In this case, the symbolic tape holds together the beginning and end of a communicative attempt and the consciousnesses of the writer and the reader, but tenuously so. Sticky-tape is a feeble means of sticking, particularly when sticking anything to a canvas surface. Sticky-tape resembles a patch-up job, or a bandaid. It suggests a tragic and hopeless sense of trying, rather than succeeding, to keep things together. Further, the broader an area across which sticky tape attempts to span, the more likely it is to break, and the weaker it becomes. This work seems to subject these sticky communicative lines to a tyranny of distance, watching curiously to see how far the voice can travel and what survives at the end. I am reminded of Shiff’s discussion of the relationship between Dumas’ work and Barnett Newman’s five-and-half0metre wide Uriel (1955). Newman said of that work: “I wanted to see how far I could stretch it before it broke.”

Shiff rightly points out the significant wording of Newman’s statement that alleviates sole responsibility of the work from the artist and shares that responsibility with the material thing. Newman does not say “before I broke it”, but before “it broke”. Dumas starts the work off with the beginning of these letters then watches to see what happens before the work is arrested by the right-hand edge of the frame. In that expanse, it is as though Dumas cannot be held responsible for what happens; that field belongs to art and to painting. She is as curious as we are to see if the communication lines break down, and what happens in the place of verbal communication. The historical I who received these letters gives them up to the narrating I, who steps back to watch how the narrated I interacts with these formal imperatives.

The authorial presence in this work arises because Dumas performs that tension between what people desire to express and reveal about themselves, and what is possible in verbal and visual language. The author’s biographical documents are pushed to the edges of the surface, being used only insofar as is required to get the picture going. After that, she must

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assume her position with us in the room, watching to see what will happen and if “it will break”. If we feel closeness to a Dumasian presence in this work it is not because of what has been revealed of her personal life, but because of her shared observation on the difficulty of communicating ourselves with others, especially through art.

The love letters do, however, show an author character that is loved and made by others. In this work, the Dumas we imagine is the subject of the affection of other authorial subjects, mimicking what could be described as the contemporary mode of autobiographical subjectivity. Contemporary autobiographical authors tend toward the creation of non-unified and socialised self-subjects, shaped by their relationship with the outside world. Susanna Egan writes,

(T)he contemporary autobiographer turns with great frequency to double voicing, double vision ... Not privileging one perspective over another, but transforming the narcissistic by means of the corrective lens of the other. 208

What has she done, then, by ripping up the letters from beloved others and using them for her art? Is Dumas demonstrating even in the earliest stages of her practices, that art, the many-handed monster, will want to devour her biographical self? Omitting the main subject matter of these letters seems to be the inversion of salvation-through-painting. In this case, she has saved the truly personal for herself and sent only the bare minimum required to suggest intimacy and authenticity. It is salvation by omission; you can have my name only, you cannot have my heart. In the title she reminds herself: “Don’t Talk to Strangers.”

The work is also dialogical in its use of oppositional languages of the personal and the political, minimalism and autobiography. Dumas’ choice to work in collage and with handwritten text at this time was logical from a political point of view. Cornelia Butler writes that “(t)he uneasy marriage between personal and political that ignited the feminist movement in the West during the 1970s is where the tension has resided in Dumas’ work throughout her career”. 209 Dumas’ insertion of love letters in a minimalist field makes a clear point of that tension. This work posits the personal (the alien) as a critical element in a “serious” (familiar) work of art, while also addressing, accepting and even celebrating a work’s material and political imperatives. She has written, “[i]t has been said; men make history, women make autobiographies”. 210 In this work, Dumas intends in one way or another to do both, though never conceding to the merely personal or to the merely historical life but considering what the personal is in relation to painting and its history.

208 Egan, Mirror Talk, 25.
210 Dumas, “Give the People What They Want,” Marlene Dumas (2009), 126.
Don’t Talk to Strangers charges the edges of the field with the personal and the intentional, only to give way to a minimalist and abstract central field. That silent space is a site for seeing the materiality of the work, looking at the flat, yellowed, shiny and matte streaks across the surface, and of looking through her lines to the physical support of the canvas. We are returned to the material formalism of Bois, crediting that material with the meaning it evokes. The verbal text on the edges evokes the authentic communication, and by contrast the oil lines show the comparative quietness—or grace\(^{211}\)—of this visual but barely visible field.

The work also sets up the textual visual interplay that has continued throughout Dumas’ practice. In a poem that seems written in support of this work she writes:

\[
\text{An old love of mine once said,} \\
\text{Just give me the one thing} \\
\text{I know you can’t give me} \\
\text{Give me a simple yes or no} \\
\text{I never liked either of these terms} \\
\text{And if you’re not prepared for a} \\
\text{Never-ending answer, don’t ask me no questions} \\
\text{I’m not deliberately hiding something,} \\
\text{Take your healing hands off my broken sentences.}^{212}
\]

\(^{211}\) “Grace” is a term used by Michael Fried in his famous essay “Art and Objecthood” in Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), in which he writes “presentness is grace”. Fried’s idea is that in the moment of perceiving a work, before we are able to attach to it the meanings we construct, in that gap of comprehension that is not verbal, we experience, “presentness” and “grace”. This is the sensation attached to the form of work before it is intellectualized and loaded up with human voices. Fried’s idea is also reflects Clement Greenberg’s “at-onceness” in “The Case of Abstract Art” (1959) in Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism; Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 81, and Rosalind Krauss’ “all-at-once” in The Optical Unconscious (1995). Dumas has also referred to “grace”, but her meaning seems less on the “presentness” than on the persistent independence of a painting’s materiality. Dumas has said that “paintings exist as the traces of their makers and by the grace of these traces,” Dumas, “(Miss) Interpreted” (1992), in Miss Interpreted, 26–80; Dumas, Sweet Nothings: Notes and Texts, 59–65 and van den Boogerd, Marlene Dumas, 2009, 117–23; see also Marlene Dumas’ official website, http://www.marlenedumas.nl/archives/3204.

\(^{212}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER FIVE

Drunk: The Delinquent Self-Portraitist and the Female Nude

Figure 13 Dumas. Drunk, 1997, oil on canvas, 200 x 100cm.
Using one’s own image in one’s artworks is not necessarily narcissistic, just as selecting a pose, thus not being spontaneous, is not the same as faking. Her emphasis is not on the playing of roles but on the notion of selfhood, in spite of the fact that it might be impossible to show the self without becoming someone else”.

(Dumas on the work of Lidwien van de Ven) 213

Thematically, Drunk, made in 1997, seems to occupy a middle space between early works by Dumas, including Give the People What They Want referred to in Chapter One, and her Magdalena series from 1995, in which photographs of catwalk models are reincarnated as feminine “models” (icons) in painting. In Drunk, Dumas exposes herself to her audience in a self-portrait. In the process, she presents an unlikely “model” for feminine artistic being in the tradition of the nude. Dumas is showing us both what we long to know (the authentic author “stripped bare”) and what “we”—dominant cultures—do not really want to see (drunk, naked, middle-aged women). There are two aspects of this work that I want to pursue. One is the way in which Dumas fronts up to her audience in this painting. The second is how this painting relates to the great history of the nude in European painting and the mode of acceptability of feminine subjects. This second aspect is important to mention even in the context of a study of Dumas’ authorial presence because by posing in the frame of the history of the nude, Dumas engages in what Smith calls “autocritique”, using herself as the subjective protagonist for cultural change; “in the sense of cultural critique through self-referential display”. 214 She is at once political author and experiential female subject.

Considering the first point, the maker and narrator who holds what could be a towel but could also be a painter’s rag—drunk and perhaps lacking in better judgement—steps into the frame. 215 This feels partly like a drunk act of brave bodily self-assessment and partly a resignation to show us what we have been searching for, such as it is. Unlike the girl in Give the People What They Want, Dumas makes no pretence of saucy revelation, nor does she seduce with her languid gaze as the Magdalenas do. Rather, she lets the towel hang and she exposes herself—apart from her thongs—in total nakedness; “this mistress of Dionysius reaches an all-time low of sex appeal”, as van den Boogerd puts it. This “everyday” quality, or lack of pretence in this work serves very well our desire for the real and the “authentic” author. The thongs, in particular, point toward a potent ordinariness

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215 Of course there is no way of knowing if Dumas was in fact drunk in the original image or if indeed she even drinks, but I treat the painting along with its title as my subject.
that feels like reality. The snapshot-like quality of this image brings us emotionally into the domestic inner sanctum of Dumas’ life.  

Forgetting for a minute that the artist is naked, consider how Dumas has used drunkenness and her hazy gaze to critique the concept of self-portraiture as the ultimate authorial revelation; a ‘horses-mouth’ account. In Hugh J. Silverman’s Cezanne’s Mirror Stage (1982) he describes the mandate of self-portraiture. Referring to many of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ideas from Eye and Mind (1964), Silverman establishes that the joint exercise of self-portraiture is not only to show an artist’s body but also his vision (or his mind). He writes: “Cezanne produces the self-portraits and by bringing out (making visible) what would be invisible to someone else looking at Cezanne and painting a portrait of him”. Expectations around self-portraiture are similar to those around autobiography, by which the viewer believes that the depicted subject is “precisely a rendition of the painter’s body by the very one whose image appears in the painting”; there exists a contract that the viewer expects to be honoured. In addition, as with textual autobiography, the viewer/reader expects to find a performative visualisation of the internal self to which no other creature has access. Of course, for reasons I have already made clear, it is dubious these expectations will ever be fulfilled. By traditional notions of self-portraiture, drunkenness ridicules the possibility of Dumas delivering, in any profound way, her external or internal vision of herself—even her inner-most workings are under the influence of alcohol. And this is where the work delivers its very best humour. Because Dumas is such a strong presence across her work, and yet she is so infrequently "seen”, her self-portraits become highly charged instances of authorial expectation on our part. But this painting embodies something of the disappointment one

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216 See Bal’s description of Barthes’ "reality effect" at play in Carrie Mae Weems’ Mirror Mirror (1987–88). “Her head is turned away, resting on her beautiful shoulder with its perfect shape and shiny skin, where the moving detail of her garment’s twisted strap takes on the Barthesian ‘effect of the real’.” Bal, Quoting Carravaggio, 211.  
217 For this reason, Silverman says that Merleau-Ponty’s essay is actually all about self-portraiture (something that is both true and unfortunate for the reasons discussed in the material body section of this paper). Silverman’s essay and Merleau-Ponty’s approach do however indicate our expectations around self-portraiture whereby more than a rendering of what Silverman calls a ‘sketch, a plan, an outline of the self’, we expect the invisible self—the way the artists sees himself, in his own internal logic—to also become visible. Silverman, “Cezanne’s Mirror Stage,” in The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 40, no. 4 (Summer 1982), Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Society for Aesthetics, 367. JSTOR, accessed 8 January 2011, http://www.jstor.org/stable/429968.  
218 Silverman also gives a useful account of the origin of the term “self-portrait” that frame traditional expectations surrounding self-portraiture and that also elucidate why autobiography and self-portraiture have been so closely linked. The Greek term “autoportrait” emphasises the link between the one true living self and the one depicted. The Italian term “autoritratto” emphasises a drawing-out of the self by that very same self. And, of the Spanish term “autorretrato”, Silverman writes “(to) the Spanish way of speaking the self is an author—the direct connection with autobiography is established—the self originates the painting, the self-produces its own picture of itself as a writer might write his or her own life,” Silverman, “Cezanne’s Mirror Stage”, 370.  
would feel if they arrived to fetch a much-anticipated date only to find they have been drinking for the afternoon. Dumas may be looking in the mirror—she may be physically present—but her capacity to read and reveal herself with any clarity has been severely undermined. Further, as a drunken subject, she has made herself definitively other. To be drunk in the company of sober others is to occupy the position of a more intense otherness; our cognitive chemistry is completely different. The drunkenness does elicit a corporeal merger between viewer and subject as we identify with the experience of being in that state. That identification, however, deflects the author’s subjectivity back on ourselves and we are no closer to finding the centre of Dumas. It is as though Dumas has sabotaged her eagerly awaited live performance, presenting herself in *Drunk* as a delinquent self-portraitist. As such, she drives home the bald reality that to desire revelation of an authentic self not only from something that is a material painting but from someone in the game of fabrication is, to borrow Dumas’ phrase, (Mis)directed. In an extract from “Miss Interpreted” (1992) she writes:

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Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies
Intentions unclear (or never trust an artist)
How do you know my love is true?
How do you know I’m not a fake?
Why do you insist on my authenticity?
When I warn you against my non-integrity?
Art is a low risk, high-reward crime.220
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We have been warned not to rely too heavily on this author, no matter how authentic she may appear to be. One thing that makes self-portraits seem so authentic is that they have traditionally been made using mirrors. Dumas plays into the trope of the mirror in *Drunk*, by using compositional strategies such as the front-on pose of the figure and the mirror-like shape of the support. There are also symbolic connotations, such as her “homely”, dishevelled and pre- or post-bathing state, where a full-length mirror is likely to be present. The mirror as a conceptual construct in the self-portrait—and also in autobiography221—is a powerful sign of authorial presence because when the subject seems to be staring back into the viewer’s eyes, we know in fact, that they are staring back into their own. This gives a sense of being inside the author’s very being since, as viewers, we literally occupy the place of the artist’s own eyes as well as look into her face (“originally” seen in the privacy of her mirror). But, as we know, Dumas is more complex than that; her mirrors are “agitated” and impassive.222 In Dumas’ case it is apt to regard

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221 See Egan’s *Mirror Talk*.
222 Marlene van Niekerk’s poem, “Mass for the Painter” (2006), is written in the voice of Dumas: “Glory to my self-portraits. Praise them that they so distrust the good intentions of the viewers. Praise my
this mirror as that suggested by Bal in *Quoting Caravaggio*: “it seems to make more sense to look not at what mirrors mean but, in performative conception of semiotics, what they do”.223 In this case, what Dumas’ mirror trope does is to facilitate a strong sense of a blatant face-to-face or front-to-front encounter with Dumas in the “mirror” or, recalling Hasegawa, a direct *reflection*. Read another way, it simultaneously serves to shows us a woman who is self-sufficient, looking at an image for herself by herself. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes that historically this has not been the case; that in the history of the female nude, the mirror was used to symbolise the woman’s vanity and “thus morally condemn(ed) the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure”.224 (This brings tme to the second half of the discussion.) But *Drunk* is not painted for male pleasure.

![Figure 14 Dumas, Several works from the Magdalena series, 1995, oil on canvas, various dimensions, work in progress in the artist’s studio. Published in Marlene Dumas (London: Phaidon, 1999), 131.](image)

Dumas produced this painting only two years after her *Magdalena* series was shown at the 1995 Venice Biennale. It is a painterly act of differencing her own body from the bodies of other women in her paintings and in painting generally. In subsequent shows, she has also positioned this portrait alongside the *Magdelenas*;225 a title that speaks to the totality of the male gaze on our understanding of representations of women’s bodies. Magdalena portraits of myself, they blow my plans and break my laws, these agitated mirrors that stir up misrule in my will”. Van Nierkerk, *Intimate Relations*, 92–3.

223 Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 225. Simply put, the performative conception of semiotics can be identified with the capacity for individuals to perform themselves through language such as can be found in Bakhtin’s concept of “alien languages”. For a more detailed account of the topic, see Judith Butler’s *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997).


225 Cynthia Valdez writes of Dumas’ inclusion of *Drunk* amid the *Magdalenas*: “But where there is complicity there is also camaraderie—Dumas (who helped install the show) seems to take pleasure as well in placing herself alongside a series entitled Magdalena, where the mythic temptress comes in all shapes and sizes”. Valdez, “Marlene Dumas @ MoCA,” *Whitehot Magazine* (October 2008), Whitehot website, accessed 29 May 2012, http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/october-2008-marlene-dumas-moca/1565.
(Mary Magdalene) was a biblical figure who was said to have washed the feet of Jesus with her long hair and who transformed her life from being a prostitute to a life of "penance and contemplation". This Magdalena is a satisfactory feminine "model", according to Ernst van Alphen, so far as patriarchal visions of women are concerned, since she is subservient, sexual and ultimately clean. For centuries, painters have repeatedly used the Magdalena as an iconographic figure, including Caravaggio in _Penetant Magdelene_ (1594–95), El Greco in _Mary Magdalene in Penitence_ (c.1577, Figure 15) and Antonio da Correggio in _Maria Magdalena_ (1517). Often these paintings combine beauty, narcissism (in the form of looking in the mirror), subservience (through sexually passive poses), sexuality (in the form of exposed breast and languid gaze) and a romantic and dreamy spiritual piety. It is not my task here to analyse Dumas’ Magdalenas; however, their catwalk model-like appearances also play into idealised representations of women; at times, these Magdelenas follow the traditional feminine model and at other times they are more confrontational, looking back and reacting against the masculine ideal. The point is that Dumas named all her women "Magdalena" since all women’s bodies are read according to a masculine ideal; one that aesthetically shifts and changes over time but persists in its articulation of power relations.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 15 El Greco, Mary Magdalene in Penitence, c.1577, oil on canvas, 157 x 121cm.**

As far as the dialogical approach is concerned, all things derive meaning from what they are in opposition to and in comparison with; the aged, drunk Dumas is to be measured against all women in the history of the idealised female nude. In _Drunk_, Dumas engages in the spirit of Bakhtin’s, alien languages—or the "inappropriate word"—which shifts the nature of the dominant language, incrementally as it may be. Given the familiar language

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227 See van Alphen’s analysis of Dumas’ work in relation to the Magdela in _Art in Mind_, 140–60.

228 Likewise, her Magdalenas are not the usual nudes. Van Alphen writes, “But we now have these Magdelenas who look you straight in the eyes. These looks are self-confident and never enticing… By looking back at the viewer these figures are members of the tradition of Manet’s _Olympia_ … Dumas’ Magdelenas importantly stand: they do not recline. Thus they are full subjects, adopting a pose as well as a gaze that inscribes their dignity and authority”. Van Alphen, _Art in Mind_, 160.
of the female nude in European art is primarily characterised by the fact that it is, as Berger says, made to "appeal to his sexuality," how does Dumas' drunk Magdalena subvert and intervene in that idea?

The most obvious subversion Dumas employs is to portray her body as sexually unattractive—according to the Magdalena model—as possible. She has painted her body in flat extreme tones of white and sunburnt red as though to show the parchment-like quality of post-nubile flesh. Her pubic hair is grey and recedes into a darker grey pubic area that might be the place for her barren Origin of the World. Her breasts sag almost to her belly button and combine with the creases at her armpits to form a strange wing shape; the body morphing into something other and alien. Her hands are painted like robotic claws, useful for the manufacture of artefacts perhaps—an idea encouraged by her possession of what could be an artist's rag—but undesirable as feminine (sexual) hands. The inclusion of thongs on her feet pushes the inelegant nature of that body further, seeming to mimic the classic example of awkward male sexuality; the naked man in his socks. All of this plays out in front of the backdrop of drunkenness, which, for a woman, also renders her less socially acceptable. As van den Boogerd points out in his aptly titled essay, "Hang-Ups and Hangovers in the Work of Marlene Dumas,"

Drunk refers to the same social code as Degas's The Glass of Absinthe and Manet's Prune, by which the consumption of alcohol is a measure of machismo in the male world ... but a female can fall no lower than by having one too many.

A second subversion lies in the static, matter-of-fact quality of Dumas' stance that I have mentioned and the affect this has of rendering her body less nude than naked. Berger describes the difference between nudity and nakedness, one of the key differences being that nudity requires an active subject that suggests sexual activity, whereas nakedness is not an act but a state of being. Berger describes the difficulty of creating a static image of sexual nakedness [or nudity]. In lived sexual experience, nakedness is a process rather than a state. If one moment of that process is isolated, its image will seem banal.

But she (drunkenness) is one of your spirits, and you will face her in the mirror, painting Drunk not as a winged creature but in a particular nakedness, not shouting or dancing or flying or fucking, just standing there, already anticipating the many hues of hangover, when the wings wither into a dull throb and you become light sensitive and languid, thin as an egg shell. In the morning it is all different: the body is fragile and bashful, the gaze is just a furtive glance. The vision can't get past the fact of an eye in the skull, the body is something put together, and not all that well. The mind is curled up behind bloodshot eyes, just an amateur puppeteer of limbs. The clanking silverware at the breakfast table is like a clatter of bones.

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230 *Origin of the World* (1866) by Gustave Courbet is held at the Musee d'Orsay, Paris. Dumas also made her own version of this painting entitled *Immaculate* (1998).
231 Van den Boogerd, “Hang-ups and Hang-overs,” 82; This extended excerpt from Matthew Monahan's “Victoria Falls” (251) describes the body of Dumas in *Drunk*:
In order to glean sexual suggestiveness from a naked body, there must be a performative sense in which the body is revolving around the gaze of the viewer, literally performing and moving like a pole dancer with varying degrees of explicitness. Berger writes that historically female nudes are painted to be sexually complicit with the male viewer; playing always to his view of her rather than her own view of herself or to evoke her internal subject. Dumas is more naked than she is nude because, as Berger suggests, the static subject is “for herself”; “To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself”. Dumas does not embody “his” desire, she simply is as we find her, drunk, naked and unkempt. Dumas’ eyes look back at us, but in a vague drunken haze, and her expression is arguably more self-satisfied than invitationable, unlike what is historically preferred: “the expression of a woman responding with calculated charm to the man she imagines looking at her—although she does not know him”.

The third, and perhaps most interesting, subversion Dumas’ painting enacts is the plain fact of her body being middle-aged. As a middle-aged woman who is more desired and visible than most, and who carries significant agency beyond her appearance, it is unlikely that Dumas bears the full personal weight of the general complaint amongst “women of a certain age” that they become invisible. Or rather, since they are no longer considered fit for the preferred (masculine) mode of reading women’s bodies, they are actually not readable, that is, not visible. However, Dumas is always dealing with subjective experiences that are not her own—blackness, religious extremism, prostitution. Silverman offers a less romantic definition of self-portraiture, writing that in self-portraiture, “(t)he self seeks to render itself visible”, which recalls Dumas’ statement, “if you can’t see it, I paint it”. In Drunk she seeks to make her body visible and, in so doing, makes visible the body of a middle-aged woman and, by extension, all middle-aged women. This is a banal enough observation and a perfunctory form of “auto-critique”, but the more interesting power of the inappropriate word comes in the tension between the generic body “of a certain age” (historical I) and the Marlene Dumas (narrated I) that we perceive simultaneously. In the familiar language of the female nude, Dumas’ middle-aged woman’s

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233 Berger gives the example of Bronzino’s *Venus, Cupid, Time and Love* (1546) in which the kiss between Venus and Cupid does nothing to distract Venus from the task of organising her body for the point of view of the viewer. Berger asserts that “There are a few exceptional nudes in the European traditional oil painting” that do not fit this model. “Among the hundreds and thousands of nudes which make up the tradition there are perhaps a hundred of these exceptions”. Ibid., 54–55.
234 Ibid., 54.
235 Ibid., 55.
236 That is the self must be able to be seen. As Silverman writes, “the self-portrait cannot be a drawing or an image of the self understood only as soul (psyche or anima); it must also involve the body. In the self-portrait, the self-must necessarily be represented as embodied.” Silverman, “Cézanne’s Mirror Stage,” 264.
body is “invisible” and inappropriate (in the Bakhtinian sense). Yet, in the discourse of painting and contemporary art, Dumas is anything but invisible. By positioning the gravitas of Dumasian discourse (her narrated presence) with the inappropriateness of the middle-aged body, Dumas underscores the insanity of reading human subjects according to their bodies; in this case, the capacity of their body type to adhere to the language of the male gaze.

In addition to these two points of access to Drunk—the way Dumas presents herself to the audience in full frontal and her relationship with the female nude—a formal detail in the work serves a significant purpose in addressing performativity, not just of a female subject but of an authorial self. Just beneath the surface of the skin areas is a crudely drawn framework for the painted figure. The knees are circled in as one might find in a fast drawing or a “doodle”; they are lines that reveal themselves intermittently as the paint thins and disappear as the paint thickens. There are also painted lines around the cheeks and the chin that sit somewhere between drawing and painting, as though the drawing from beneath was attempting to reassert itself after the fact of the paint. These lines draw attention to the many versions of Dumas you see in the work; the narrating I rather than the narrated I. More simply than offering an authentic gesture, the schism between the drawing and the painting point to an authorial action not entirely in agreement with the subject. The drawing and the painting are not reconciled. The painting does not follow those lines precisely—the drawing is not made in service to the painting such as one experiences in the drawing underneath Albrecht Durer’s Adam and Eve.237 Rather, the drawing and the painting seem at best to tolerate one another. Neither the drawing nor the painting are the “real” Dumas, rather there are a multitude of Dumasian characters at play; or “marks” in conversations with one another. The jostling authorial presence demonstrated in this marks also serves to pull our attention away from the most brazen self-display of the author’s body and to instead imagine the author as creator and worker of material surfaces. The title of Dumas’ Magdalenas to which she later added additional titles, such as Newman’s Zip (1995) (Figure 16) and A Painting Needs a Wall to Object To (1995), asserts Dumas’ material awareness. Therefore, the title Drunk, read in relation to the Magdalena titles, also points to our being drunk on the meanings we project onto a painted surface—of which I am no doubt guilty—and the authenticity we think we can glean from it, drunk on our fantasy, perhaps, for the authentic autobiographical author.

The overwhelming presence of Dumas in this case is in that self-critical narrating presence that is positioning, jostling and testing the way different images of different bodies behave

237 The Prado Museum in Madrid displays X-ray images of Durer’s Adam and Eve (1507), in which we see the great lengths Durer went in order to perfect the drawing before the painting was placed on top.
in the world as well as the way this body in painting behaves on the world. We might feel a natural sympathy for a drunken body, or relate to its imperfections, but these issues are of less account than the performance of authorship Dumas carries out in deflecting, with incredible skill, our desires for the authentic author. Perhaps this is only possible to argue from the artistic position from which I speak. She writes in *Sweet Nothings*:

I have never experienced paintings as windows or mirrors. It is impossible to tell what is up and what is down, who is above and who below. We just don’t know.

Is she humiliating him or is he oppressing her? Is it a prescriptive or a descriptive position?238

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238 Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 72
CHAPTER SIX

Pregnant Image: Split Subjectivity and the Reading of Skins

Figure 17 Dumas, *Pregnant Image*, 1998–90, oil on canvas, 180 x 90cm.
Motherhood

Now I am not one of the Boys anymore.

I feel more related to the mother Mary who knew by giving birth, she entered new areas of sorrow.

In The Binding Factor: The Maternal Gaze of Marlene Dumas (2008), Lisa Gabrielle Mark writes that few artists have dared to evoke the erotic flush and existential terror of motherhood, a trajectory that begins with the warmth and intimacy of sexual desire and eventually meets the cold indifference of the outside world.\(^{240}\)

In fact, Dumas is one of relatively few contemporary artists who depict motherhood at all, especially if we compare the instances of pregnancy and childbirth in art to those of death; both of which are equally certain in any human life. One reason for the paucity of maternal images, Julia Kristeva might argue, is because we have made maternity "abject"; that in order to become self-sufficient individuals, we have to turn away from the "maternal container" from which we came.\(^{241}\) It might also be the case, to which Mark alludes, that we find it difficult to make interesting maternal images that deviate from the soft-focus stereotype. However, for many women, to be pregnant is not the consolidation of their feminine identity that those ideals suggest; rather it can be a fracturing and alienating experience. In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir put it this way:

She feels it is at once an enrichment and an injury; the foetus is a part of her body, and it is a parasite that feeds on it; she possesses it, and she is possessed by it; it

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\(^{239}\) Dumas, “Miss Interpreted,” in Marlene Dumas (2009), 123; Dumas, “The Boys Room,” Suspect, 54.

\(^{240}\) Lisa Gabrielle Mark, The Binding Factor: The Maternal Gaze of Marlene Dumas, in Measuring Your own Grave, 201.

\(^{241}\) See Julie Kristeva, The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Kelly Oliver provides a useful explanation of Kristeva’s maternal container: “Kristeva describes a phase in which the child must abject its mother in order to separate from her. Actually, what the child must abject is the “maternal container”. It does not need to abject the mother’s body as the body of a woman. It does not need to abject its mother herself as a person. Rather, it needs to abject the “maternal container” upon which it has been dependent in order to be weaned from the mother. In our culture however, because the maternal function is not separated from our representations of women or the feminine, women themselves have become abjected within our society.” Kelly Oliver, “Julia Kristeva’s Feminist Revolutions,” Hypatia, 8, no. 3 (Summer, 1993): 105, JSTOR, accessed 10 February 2013, http://www.jstor.org.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/stable/3810407.
represents the future and, carrying it, she feels herself vast as the world; but this very opulence annihilates her, she feels that she herself is no longer anything.242

Like *Drunk, Pregnant Image* (1988–90), is another of Dumas’ female nudes but one that, if possible, is even less sexually provocative. One curious aspect of this work is that if we were to imagine that instead of the stomach arching convexly, that rather it fell in a concave line down to her pubic bone, this image would in fact show a highly erotic pose. The bodily composition is one used in soft pornography—kneeling in a submissive pose, engaging the desires of the viewer, the woman’s shirt resting gently open—but it takes a different turn when that body is pregnant. By shifting that nude to a maternal nude, suddenly we are faced with a reproductive rather than sexual body; in the vicinity of tangible biology and science. In its maternity, this body twists and contorts, as Kristeva writes, “cells fuse, split, and proliferate: volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm”.243 In *Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity and Maternal Imagination*, Rosemary Betterton writes:

(S)uch monstrous imaginings are the stuff of fairytale, and horror films, and yet an ontological awareness of the body’s alienation from itself and an emergent relationship with an unfamiliar being is familiar to many women.244

In the maternal state, the woman becomes other to herself, she literally embodies otherness. To make a representation of that state is to represent one maternal subject and another invisible subject hidden beneath the skin. Kelly Oliver writes that, what a representation of maternity provides, which a representation of woman does not, is a model of alterity within identity ... the mother provides a case of the other as the self and the other in the self.245

There are three key points I want to raise about *Pregnant Image*, all of which relate to the problematised identity of maternal subjects. The first is the way Dumas visually expresses the othering of the self I have just outlined. The second is Dumas’ use of the mask as a metaphor for the reading of bodies according to the visual schema. And the third is Dumas’ divided authorial presence as artist and mother.

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245 Oliver, “Julia Kristeva’s Feminist Revolutions,” 105; See also Rosemary Betterton, “Mother Figures: The Maternal Nude in the Work of Kathe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker,” in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996) in which Betterton argues that the pregnant nude is awkward because it, “transgress(es) the boundary dividing the inside from the outside, the self from the space of the other”, 167.
The othering of self that occurs when a woman is pregnant is underscored in *Pregnant Image* by a visual disconnection between the subject’s head and her body, which are distinct in colour and in orientation. While the blue face of the woman points out of the frame toward the viewer, the arrangement of nipples, belly button and pubic hair organise another face—reminiscent of René Magritte’s *The Rape* (1934)—that looks forlornly down and to the left of the frame. It becomes very difficult to locate the central subject of this work once that separation is apprehended. There is no point at which I feel it is logical to rest my gaze. Naturally, my eyes return to the facial arrangement of the breasts, stomach and pubic hair; they are the strongest, brightest, largest and most sexual aspects of the composition. But then I go looking for the real face, the one that will tell me if this strange shape is human or not. When I arrive at that human face, another problem arises. Her face is mask-like and I cannot quite meet her gaze. This female subject is in the process of perhaps being as close to nature as she ever could be, fulfilling her reproductive capacity, and yet she appears other, even to herself, the “natural” rightness of maternity appears quite wrong. We cannot find the central subject in Dumas’ painting because the subject of the unborn child—who seems to be represented by the bodily face—and the subject of the mother are competing. The foetus has produced an externalised human-facial version of itself that appears to have its own agenda. The mother is embodying otherness and the mother is other to the foetus yet that body ties them inextricably together. That push-and-pull breaks down the boundaries of the limits of a subject and demonstrates in a literal way what—as I have argued—is the dialogical and contingent nature of human (inter)subjectivity. The mother and the foetus literally shape the way each other appear.
The mask as a trope in this work plays into stereotypical understandings of human selves—in this case, maternal selves—according to the visual schema discussed in Chapter Three. In “The Portrait’s Dispersal”, van Alphen considers the mask-like quality of Dumas’ portraits and group portraits from 1985 to 1987, such as *Teacher (Sub A)* (1987), *Teacher (Sub B)* (1987) and *The Schoolboys* (1987). I think his observations on the mask-like quality of the faces in these works also apply to *Pregnant Image*. He writes, “they look like sheets or screens that are emptied out”.[246] They are human subjects but their surface dominates. Referring clearly to Lacan’s *écran*, Alphen writes, “(l)ike artists such as [Andy] Warhol and [Cindy] Sherman, Dumas is aware of the screen of images and representations that make references possible.”[247] Maternity, represented very clearly by a physical change of appearance, alters the way that body (and subject) is read according to the visual schema. What was a sexual body becomes a “maternal container”. The mask is a trope for both unborn baby literally masked by the mother’s torso and the mother whose personal identity has been covered over by the very fact of her now being a mother. Both subjects are rendered subjects of the screen; a flat stock rendering of predetermined selves. At the same time, the mask as a surface is analogous with painting; subjects in paintings are masks with nothing behind them. All meaning comes from very much in front of the picture, that is (recalling Barthes and Foucault), the viewer. Alphen goes on to quote Benjamin Buchloh:

> Both Caricature and mask conceive of a person’s physiognomy as a fixed rather than a fluid field; in singling out particular traits, they reduce the infinity of differential facial expressions to a metonymic set. Thus, the fixity of the mask and caricature deny outright the promise of fullness and the traditional aspirations toward and organic mediation of the essential characteristics of the differentiated bourgeois subject.[248]

That is, our expectation of finding an agenic and authentic individual is negated by the predetermined fixity of the mask. These masks then become masks not with humanity or authorial intention behind them but subjects made wholly by the painting (and mask) and by their place on the visual schema, interpreted in the mind of the viewer. The two-mask effect in this work serves both to draw attention to the arbitrary way in which we allocate maternal identity to what “was” a woman, but also point to the surface existence of all schematised subjectivities and more particularly painted subjects. These are not subjects

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246 Van Alphen, *Art in Mind*, 40.
247 Ibid.
behind masks; these subjects are masks. As Susan Sontag writes in her famous essay “On Style”, “in almost every case, our manner of appearing is our manner of being. The mask is the face.”

Recall that the title of this work is *Pregnant Image*, as opposed to *Pregnant Woman*. *Pregnant Image* might be the perfect metaphor for the way Dumas describes our projection of meaning onto those material, mask-like painterly surfaces. A pregnant image is loaded—like a pregnant pause—with ideological expectancy. The stomach of the subject has grown almost to the maximum of its size, and yet it will never give birth. A pregnant image does not give birth—revealing its ultimate truth behind the surface—a pregnant image remains pregnant; that is, filled with gestating, growing, accumulating cells, ideas, discourses, viewers, dialogues. Over time, the picture will only continue to grow in meaning, and the foetus “inside” or the imagined meaning “underneath” will only be more and more mythologised and speculated upon. The mechanism by which Dumas critiques this idea is, of course, through the title of the work—this is an image, a fabrication—but also in the mask-like quality of the two faces that represent surfaces with “something behind”. This pregnant image is not pregnant; she is a surface of incoherent skins and masks upon which you project your ideological desires and structures. For example, if this maternal image is not erotic, it is because we have disallowed the sexualisation of that “maternal container”. It is the viewer who, to use a visceral but apt phrase, impregnates this image with like or dislike for the body in the work. *Pregnant Image* shows Dumas dealing with the politics of representation and our relationship with images. In this way, *Pregnant Image* shares a concern common across her work; irritating the edges between the images in front of us and the mental images we project upon them.

What then of Dumas’ authorial presence in this work? One small compositional detail in this work demands particular attention. At the bottom edge of the canvas she has written the years 1988, 1989, and 1990. Although the subject is not drawn from an image of Dumas, she was pregnant, gave birth to and nursed her only child during this time. It is not my project to draw connections between the biography of Dumas and her work, except that in this work Dumas directly connects that real-life experience and the production of

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250 In W.J.T. Mitchell’s “What Is an Image?” (1984), Mitchell makes two broad categorisations, that of proper and improper images. Proper images are visual or graphic images (photographs, drawings and paintings for example). Improper images are verbal images (made by textual and verbal language) and mental images (dreams, hallucinations, and memories). He makes this distinction provisionally however, asserting that all are interdependent. In reality, he says, “proper images have more in common with their bastard children than they would like to admit”. Mitchell, “What Is an Image?” *New Literary History* 15, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 507. JSTOR, accessed 10 February 2013, http://www.jstor.org.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/stable/468718.
this painting. Over this period, Dumas also produced a significant corpus of other works around birth, such as *The First People* (1990, Figure 41), *New Born* (1991), *After Life* (1989, Figure 37), *Warhol’s Child* (1989–91, Figure 19) and many others. At different times in our lives, certain occurrences turn our attention to different kinds of subjects and images. In Dumas’ case, her experience of having a child fed into her art in a very tangible way; something we see her making explicit by the listing of those three years at the bottom of *Pregnant Image*. Those dates add to an indexical biographical time in the work that, unusually for painting, locates the work in a very specific time and place. Such a practice is usually reserved for photography. All of this is not to say of course that we can tell one thing or another about Dumas’ personal experience of that process. Rather, Dumas cleverly sets up a juxtaposition between a very particular part of feminine biographical time (pregnancy, childbirth and caring for a baby) and the production of a material work.

Yes, Dumas had a baby in this time, but she was also making this painting; she was also tending to this painting for those three years.

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Figure 19 Dumas, *Warhol’s Child*, 1989–91, oil on canvas, 140 x 300cm.

The question of the female artist bearing children is a problematic one because, more than an ideological prejudice arising from feminism, it is logistically and factually an artistic challenge to be both an artist and a mother. In real terms, a woman must divide her artistic attention, in a way similar to the distractions of a romantic relationship or a second career. As British literary critic Cyril Connelly wrote in his *Enemies of Promise*, “there is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall”. Connelly’s

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251 Why do so few female artists insist on the “it-has-happened” of their child bearing? Certainly so far as human experience is concerned, birth is a significant event. Most female artists—if they want to be seen as serious artists—tend to avoid inclusion of pregnancy, childbirth and babies in their works. In part, this demonstrates that, according to Oliver, referring to Kristeva, “existential feminism (has) made women feel guilty for wanting to have children”. Oliver, “Julia Kristeva’s Feminist Revolutions,” 103.

252 “Marriage can succeed for an artist only when there is enough money to save him from taking on uncongenial work and a wife who is intelligent and unselfish enough to understand and respect the working of the unfriendly cycle of the creative imagination. She will know at what point domestic happiness begins to cloy, where love, tidiness, rent, rates, clothes, entertaining and rings at the doorbell should stop and will recognize that there is no more somber an enemy of good art than the pram in the hall”. Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1938) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 116.
truism is quoted so frequently because it resonates for every creative person who has found themselves simultaneously in the dimensions of high art and the banalities of daily milk pouring. The dates at the bottom of *Pregnant Image* fuse those dual and oppositional roles together. Dumas makes another point of the conundrum of motherhood in her poem *Birth* (1989):

To create an artwork
(to make an image of)
and to give birth
(to another human being)
have essentially nothing to do with one another.
Yet this is no reason to stop loving metaphors or avoiding the unrelated.
But the poetry that results from mixing different kinds of language,
disappears into sloppy thinking,
when we imagine that these differences can never be solved harmoniously; or even worse,
when we forget that these realities we are mixing are of a beautiful and often cruel indifference towards each other.

To be an artist and to be a mother is to serve two jealous masters. What Dumas does with this issue in *Pregnant Image* and across her corpus of maternal works, however, is to follow the maternal turn of her life (historical I) all the way to its furthest reaches until it consumes ever her artistic self (narrating I). What this does, in Dumas’ skilful hands, is to provide the ultimate solution to the conundrum of the pram in the hall, where the artist uses the trials of the historical I not to debilitate but to feed the narrating I. Of course, to do this effectively and to continue to perform the Dumasian authorial self, she must treat that subject matter with the same conceptual and artistic rigour that she treats everything else. She cannot play “mother” in the nurturing sense; rather she remains a critical authorial self asking the same ontological, material and artistic questions of the process of childbirth and infant identity as she does of the process of sex and death and the identities of prostitutes, terrorists, and dictators. The exercise underscores Dumas’ authorial more than maternal self since she is bringing everything, even her only child, back to the language of art. Dumas writes, “a (modern) painter is more interested in *images* than in the actual living of modern life” (my emphasis). Her authorial presence is strong here, not only because of the inclusion of biographical information but because the performing authorial self shows itself to be Dumas’ primary self, at least so far as we are concerned.

*Pregnant Image* and Dumas’ other works on the theme articulate her compulsion to subject all human subjects—even her own child—to the materiality and discourse of painting. This, it seems, is her primary function. Though we might say this work shows us

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253 Dumas, *Sweet Nothings*, 49.
254 Dumas, *Marlene Dumas* (2009), 152.
Dumas because the subject matter is reflected in her biographical details (more pointed because of her inclusion of the dates), it is more interesting to realise that her choice to push the personal experience of having a baby into the language and composition of this painting is what actually shows us Dumas; the historical, narrating and narrated I’s jostling for primacy, and the ideological I of the maternal self manifest in the trope of the two masks. Turning babies into giant bloated alien creatures and showing pregnancy as an othering of self, Dumas goes where most of us do not dare to tread and, as such, shows herself to be, above all, an artist.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Likeness of Deadness: The Role of the Undertaker

Figure 20 Dumas, Gelijkenis 1 en 2 (Likeness 1 and 2) 2002, oil on canvas, diptych, each panel 60 x 230cm.
No single art has ever managed to penetrate the mystery of death, but since all artists hope that their work will outlive them, every work of art is inevitably marked by death. Marlene Dumas is convinced that “art is and always has been a preparation for death”.

In relation to the famous Death of Marat (1793) by Jacques Louis David, Didier Maleuvre writes that we cannot be sure whether Marat is alive or dead: “Is Marat here or there? Has he crossed the limit or not? On this wavering question, the painting provides no decisive clue”. David’s painting, originally entitled Man Breathing His Last Breath, is situated in that very present moment of dying or having just died. The colours are warm, the flesh has not begun to sink and the death is still a present event rather than a historical fact; Marat has not yet entered the eternity of “deadness”. This romantic vision of death represents the most common mode of depicting death in painting, where narrative, event, and preservation are the main aims. Eugene Delacroix’s Death of Sardanapalus (1827), Titian’s Death of Actaeon (1559–75), Egon Schiele’s Death and the Maiden (1915), Theodore Gericault’s The Raft of Medusa (1818–19) and even Diego Velasquez’s Christ on the Cross (1632) all present death as an event or a drama. Sometimes death is a character lurking or threatening human souls, such as in Gustav Klimt’s Death and Life (1910) or Albrecht Durer’s Death and the Landsknecht (1510). In painting we like to see how death engages with life; that is, as a “lively” kind of death.

Painting lends itself to this lively depiction of death, largely because of a set of beliefs around painting—something akin to our beliefs in autobiography—that the gesture, language and materiality of the work offers up a life source; a surrogate for our dying selves. Maleuvre calls this “painted embalming”. There are conceptual and formal aspects of painting that encourage this belief. Painting preserves the author in their physical trace; a hand moves across the surface at one moment in time, and we relive those movements in another. That animated quality of painting is life giving for the subject too, even in the case of a corpse. Shiff writes that “when the subject is death painting is

more alive (than photography) because it contributes its own animation". Dumas has said that when she painted Jen (2005), for example—a painting made from a photograph of a corpse—she made the subject "less dead". Painting also gives life though representation or likeness. A portrait, in the spirit of biography and autobiography, can supposedly "capture" a person, and hold them outside of the biological imperatives of a bodily human demise. Because all depictions of human bodies refer also to our own bodies, we prefer this lively version of death in painting.

Figure 22 Dumas, Jen, 2005, oil on canvas, 110 x 130cm.

Likeness 1 and 2 (Gelijkens 1 en 2) (2002) are not lively paintings. At the centre of these works is a surrender—even an embracing of—the cold material fact of painting, and the analogue for human deadness that that material fact can embody. A body, like a painting, is, in the end, a thing. Dumas' task here, as she has said, is not to paint human suffering—that is, to paint or preserve life events including death—but to show the "deadness of death, through a medium declared dead". What does she mean by a "medium declared dead"? Painting can give life to subjects and authors on a localised level in the ways I have

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259 Ibid., 147.
260 A painting might also offer life, comparatively speaking; by its capacity for fiction or invention. In a photograph a dead body requires a real death, whereas in painting there is the possibility of a fabrication; there may in fact be someone living who was the model for this "dead" body.
261 Dumas, Sweet Nothings, 20; The death of painting—a concept widely discussed in twentieth-century painting discourse—like the "death of the author"—does not mean the end, but the beginning of a more critical engagement. If we still paint in the twenty-first century, and many of us still do, then it is a mode of painting that necessarily has to ask why we still bother. When photography can represent more accurately, the most material and formal paintings have already been made, conceptual art has shown the painting surface is unnecessary for art, and when digital media have proven to outdo even the fictional possibilities of painting, one has to work hard to make painting that matters. Likeness 1 and 2 engage painting as a dead medium, and show that painting’s phenomenological possibilities remain relevant.
described, and Dumas knows this to be the case. She has said of the dead bodies she has painted that they often appear to be asleep or still breathing: "Images don’t care. Images do not discriminate between sleep and death." Painting on a theoretical level, however, has an altogether different relationship with death. Although painting persists and even proliferates, it is also the case that, as Terry Myers says, that "painting since the end of the 19th Century is inextricable from the parallel (if not superseding) story of the perpetual cycle of its deaths and rebirths". Working with painting is always a matter of dealing with death, not only because it exposes our desire for painted "embalming" in the face of its persistent materiality, but because it is an old and historical medium that— theoretically at least—has struggled to remain relevant. In Likeness 1 and 2, Dumas seems to say that if we must admit that photography, Modernism, conceptual and digital art have rendered painting dead, then perhaps it is the ideal medium to make the deadest image of all, to see if a painting might not be able to get closer to showing what death really is; to penetrate that mystery of death.

In Likeness 1 and 2, Dumas strips back painting’s life-giving qualities, pushing the theoretical death of painting into localised material form. These paintings are dead not only because they depict corpses but also because in every conceivable way the paint and the painting venture into the deadness. Deadness, as opposed to death, is an ongoing state. Dumas’ aim is not to resuscitate or preserve her subjects through gesture, or material object, but to scrutinize human and artistic deadness front on; as a curiosity or a thing. As Gertrude Stein said, "Being dead is not an end; it is being dead and that is something."

The power of Likeness 1 and 2 is in the difference between how Dumas manifests that something—deadness—and what we desire: more life. These works play out our desire to find an eternal life source—through painting or through God—and the reality of seeing that hope denied; these paintings are about mortality without salvation. In that gap between desire and the material works in front of us, Dumas stirs up a likeness of death. Dumas’ statement concerning painting’s ability to communicate potently summarises the point:

The work is the sum of all of its conflicts, that is, not an illustration as much as a real thing happening, playing out ... The contemplation of the work (when it "works") gives off a physical sensation similar to that suggested by the work.

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263 Myers, Painting, 12.
What are the methods Dumas has used to suggest the physical sensation of deadness? It is worth discussing Dumas’ conceptual strategies at work in Likeness 1 and 2. These paintings are based on Hans Holbein’s The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb (1521, Figure 23) a powerful painting of a dead Christ in the horizontal coffin-like format (305 x 200cm). Initially, I did not know of the reference to Holbein’s work, but I do not feel that knowing the reference matters very much in terms of my response. The deathliness in Dumas’ works was made apparent to me by a cold, emptying-out sensation that I doubt a knowledge of Holbein’s original would have changed. Critically, however, it is necessary to acknowledge how Holbein’s original does contribute to the meaning of these works, particularly in relation to Dumas’ choice of title.

“Likeness” refers necessarily to Dumas as having created a likeness of Holbein’s painting and also, given the Christ subject of Holbein’s original, to the biblical assertion that we are born in the “likeness” of God.266 “Likeness” might also recall painting before its death when we still believed in its representational and salvational power.267

Firstly, how “like” Holbein’s original is Dumas work? Holbein’s dead Christ is a notoriously deathly image; the dead Christ confined to a coffin and in the early stages of putrefaction. Fyodor Dostoyevsky is said to have had to be dragged away by his wife from this painting in order to avoid an epileptic fit268 and in his 1869 novel The Idiot, one character declares that Holbein’s painting would make a man “lose his faith”.269 More than most historical paintings of death, this one seems to embody the morbidity Dumas is looking for and, as a likeness of deadness, provides her with a promising starting point. By making new versions of Holbein’s work, however, Dumas seems to assert that, mortifying though his painting was, Holbein’s painting was not quite as dead as it might have been if he had

266 “Likeness” is used in the Old and New Testament. See: Genesis 1:26; Exodus 20:4; Psalm 17:15; Romans 6:5; Romans 8:3; Philippians 2:7.
267 As a term, “likeness” has been interchangeable from the time of the bible to “image” and later to the idea of the mimetic in art. It is in this spirit that Merleau-Ponty quotes Giacometti when he writes “What interests me in all painting is likeness—that is, what likeness is for me: something that makes me uncover the external world a little”. Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind, 126.
268 Batschmann, Oskar and Pascal Griener, Hans Holbein (London: Reaktion,1999), 89.
known the depth of painting’s current deadness; if he had had that modernist resignation at his disposal and if, like Dumas, he had lost some faith in painting post-photography, post-Modernism, and post-conceptual art. Dumas creates a dialogical likeness of Holbein’s painting but from an updated position; injecting the life of contemporary painting into Holbein’s original, the results of which are mortifying rather than preserving. The work has been re-imagined according to this artist who resides in a much less romantic place, so far as painting, and indeed religion, is concerned, and what was previously the “deadest” painting in the world has just been outdone. It is more dead too in that to recycle images from old paintings seems to indicate an expired medium.

The choice to depict Christ is also worth considering. Dumas has made a likeness of Christ, in whose likeness to God, according to the biblical assertion, we are also made. If it was Dumas’ aim to paint deadness, then to paint the deadness of the son of God whose likeness to God we share, not raised, but dead, is also to paint the certainty of our own death. Our culture no longer believes in painting without suspicion, nor the other hope for eternal life in Jesus Christ, as Nietzsche wrote “God remains dead. And we have killed him.” Not only have we killed our saviour, but the fact that we murdered him ourselves extinguishes our right to salvation in any case. The parallel of which can be imagined in the modernist drive toward the end of all possible painting. The life-preserving possibilities of painting and religion have both been killed off. Dumas has subjected Holbein’s dead Christ to the post-Nietzschean climate of a very dead god. Therefore, given the theological and critical culture in which this painting was made, the outcome of Dumas’ painting was bound to be “deader” than the original. The depiction of Christ dead in his coffin also suggests the

270 “God is Dead” is a phrase best known as coming from Nietzsche in “The Madman” as follows: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?” Nietzsche and Walter A. Kaufmann, The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 154.

271 These works remind me of Immaculate (1998). This work has also been drained of all coloured vitality and possibility of life. She has moved the eroticism of the warm end of the spectrum and she has also cut off even more severely from the sexual context of the body opting for a stunted doubled up figure as opposed to a languid waiting one. In a poem named after her work, Dumas wrote:

I’m not moved he said, it’s too static.
It’s too sad, I said.
As if no one ever entered here.
As if no one ever returned from there.
As if it has never been used.
As if all colour has gone from the inside, has been drained.
This is not the origin of the world.
This is the end of the world.
likeness between Christ and humanity. Death does not distinguish between “celebrity” and the rest of us, and so far as we can see from Dumas’ painting, Christ has not survived any more than we will.

This comparison between how a dead Christ might be represented in 1521 and 2002—the process of “likeness” or representing Dumas performs—importantly demonstrates her interest in the dialogical and ideological nature of all artistic meaning-making. Dumas has made many works based on the works of other artists, including (but not limited to): Against History (2001) from David's Marat, Immaculate (2003) from Gustave Courbet's Origin of the World (1866), Magdalena (Venus) (1995) from Botticelli's The Birth of Venus (1486), Stern (2004) from Gerhard Richter's Dead (1988),272 Red Moon (2006) and Male Ophelia (2006) from Sir John Everett Millais' Ophelia (1852). Each time Dumas performs the process of appropriation, she metaphorically asks the question, “what would this painting look like if it was subjected to my own artistic sensibility in this particular time and place”? The use of paintings as sources of reference is a more overt demonstration of dialogical artistic practices and modes of authorship than the use of mass-media photographs because it involves taking on the highly specific artistic consciousness of another artist as well as the discourse surrounding their work. This action performs in plain view the specificity of one's own take on the world as opposed to another’s.273 For example, as well as inflicting her own gestures, style and discourse on Holbein's original, Dumas recontextualises Christ with a feminine counterpart that acknowledges her post-feminist position. The ideological I in Dumas' authorial self instils in the work the cultural position from which she speaks. She has written “the source Materials are about the political choices one faces. They are of the time they are made in. They are about those whose side you are on.”274 Dumas is the painter of modern life, taking up a position in relation to other positions from which artists have made their own “likeness” of human experience.275

I want to turn now to the physical form of the work and, by extension, to the specificity of Dumas’ authorial performance in these works. How does Dumas make a likeness of death

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272 In relation to Richter’s Dead (1998), Dumas said to Shiff, “I also wanted to see if I could take Richter’s source out of its blur”, quoted in “Less Dead”, 57.
273 Dumas’ photographic referents, on the other hand, tend further toward a generic mass-media image base from which she is establishing new meaning; as though the paintings are in fact the originals.
in a material way? In *Likeness* 1 and 2, Dumas pushes every possible manipulable characteristic of a painting’s surface toward a likeness of deadness. I will focus on *Likeness* 2 as it is the most direct interpretation of Holbein’s Christ and is the stronger of the two works. Even compared with the sombre tones of Holbein’s original painting, this work is devoid of lively colour. There are no flourishes of warmth to incite hope, the light blue to raw umber body collapses in on itself, lacking blood pressure and air. Rigour mortis has set in and the head is futilely positioned for one last gasp however the brushwork forces his throat and mouth into permanent stasis. These gestures, far from liberating and animating this body, restrain it. Some of the most “murderous” gestures in this work are the downward strokes of paint that construct the back wall of the coffin. They are insistent statements, vertical and accusatory of the horizontal (dead) nature of the body; pinning the corpse to the white slab at the bottom edge of the frame. At Christ’s foot, Dumas decimates and makes a mockery of Holbein’s sensitively rendered toe, adding a bulbous line and dead blue colouring. It is as though the painting had no regard for whose toes they were or for toes at all. The colour is ice cold, but not stirringly or romantically so; it is indifferent. The paint lacks generosity toward its subject, fulfilling its perfunctory role as the deliverer of death, with no frills and no embellishment and no discrimination between toes or lips or eyes or stomach. If Dumas is serious about painting deadness she has to strip painting down of all human desire for sensitivity, narrative, posterity, monument and life. She has to let painting perform its material analogue to deadness at the cost of the absolute death of the human subject. This rendering of a corpse is terrifying because it reminds us that there are no living people; there are only those who are already dead and those who are not-yet-dead. All corpses therefore, as images or otherwise, tether us to them, separated only by time. Everything Dumas does to this corpse she also does to us.

Not all gestures, therefore, give life to pictured subjects. Dumas’ gestures in this work instead wrestle Christ into stasis and turn the body from a person into a thing; back to objecthood, to nature, landscape, to dust or pigment. The horizontality of these paintings, the scumbling lines that wrap Christ’s body, are the lines of rocks and dirt, they are not flesh and they are not love; at least if we could perceive of love as a partial resuscitation through painting. Matthew Mohan’s text *Victoria Falls* reads: “To die is to become horizontal—verticals are living, horizontals are dead. To die is to become a landscape, a chin-bone a cliff, a rolling chest of hills eroding into a thin river of legs.” More than tending toward landscape, these subjects, devoid of any kind of life, move toward material abstraction. The paintings are flat. The hollowed-out corpses are wedged between the

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276 British artist Maggie Hambling exemplifies a loving depiction of corpses, making work from the corpses of her mother, father, lover and dear friend.
277 Monahan, “Victoria Falls,” 258.
flatness of their skins stretched over bones and flattened by the back of the coffin. Their bodies are like empty shells replicating the skin and frame of the stretched canvas.\textsuperscript{278}

It is in this deadness of the paintings that Dumas’ authorial presence is so lively in this work. The only life we detect in these works is that of the author, scratching around in the grave of the painting. By eliminating all other signs of life, it is Dumas’ authorial presence we are left with, and it is one that feels something like a murderer, undertaker and witness all at the same time. As murderer (narrated I) she incites anger, resentment. As undertaker (narrating I), we respect that she has dealt with what was unavoidable in any case. As onlooker (the imagined historical I), she is an intimate figure standing in the room with us, looking on in shared fear. The first moment of looking at these works, delivers shock, a gasp and it is here that we feel the deadness Dumas was looking for. But as that sense melts away, we cling to what signs of life are left; namely the author. Recalling Dumas’ poem \textit{A Girl for All Seasons} (1986):

\begin{quote}
Perhaps you are asking:
Who is responsible for these works?
You probably mean:
Whose fault are they?\textsuperscript{279}
\end{quote}

Dumas is responsible for creating that deadness in the paintings—as she has said, “you can’t take a painting, you make a painting”.\textsuperscript{280} In this way we can regard Dumas as a murderous protagonist (narrated I). But because Dumas is an artist, and because it is her job, she says, to paint what we do not see, the murderous protagonist soon gives way to the narrating I; the undertaker who gets on with her business of dealing (visually) with death, uncomfortable as it may be. It is the narrating I that resounds the most in this work. Anyone who has made a painting knows that to paint something is to spend time with it, to be involved with it and to let it “infect” you— to be in close dialogical relation. The troubled nature of that encounter between the narrating Dumas and death is palpable in these works. Whether or not she is suspicious of painting and knows that painting is but a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[278] In this situation the frame that heavily suggests a coffin provides a metaphor for painting and for the human role inside it one that Dumas engaged in \textit{Measuring Your Own Grave} (2003). In this work Dumas makes direct reference to our desire to find refuge in painting, but also that by establishing a sense of ourselves in painting we are also pointing toward our own death; It is also interesting too, to remember that these works are a pair. If anything in these paintings revives the possibility of preserved human subjectivity, beyond that of Dumas’ authorial one, it is in the giving of one subject to another; by creating a relationship. In painting there is only pigment, but between two consciousnesses—between author and viewer and also between subjects in a work—there is relationship and the construction of meaning, the potential at least for life; “two consciousnesses is the minimum for life”. Though we know they are dead—that those forms are not subjects—the fact of co-existence of two bodies means that they seem somehow, less dead, than if they were alone. This is also the only consolation for the viewer too; that at least we are all headed in the same direction.
\item[280] Dumas, “The Private Versus the Public,” in \textit{Marlene Dumas: Miss Interpreted}, 43.
\end{footnotes}
material pigment on a surface, it remains that this knowledge is intellectual rather than experiential and to paint works that so ambitiously embody death remains a difficult task. She wrote, “I am intimately involved with my subject matter in this painting. I am not disengaged from the subject of my gaze.”

Dumas’ paintings are always a human engagement or a consideration of an aspect of human experience as well as a more intellectual engagement with the work and artistic discourse. The formal articulation necessary in a painting is a means of wrestling with those human ideas and fears. Loock writes, “the path she is following is epitomized by the notion of ‘touching’”. When her hand traces the bodies of these dead figures in a literal way, she must “touch” the subject-matter; she must get her hands dirty.

Because of the frontal vantage point from which these works are made, there is a sense in which Dumas has had to climb inside the coffin with the decomposing body in order to understand the limits of the coffin, the airlessness and the still deadness. To view them, we have to do the same thing. In an interview with Hasegawa, Dumas says: “You have to let your subject breathe, if it cannot breathe, you kill it and then your work loses any sense of love”. Yet, in Likeness 1 and 2 Dumas has made a conscious effort to work against that love in order to show us that “deadness of death”. These paintings are devoid of love and of breath. Gasping, they cannot find air, sealed absolutely on all sides by a frame that persists in its suffocating function that both enables and limits the painterly field. There is no pleasure in this action so far as her gestures are concerned. They are pragmatic gestures darting around and dealing with the matter at hand as efficiently as possible; marking a fine line between representation and experience in the making of and looking at a work of art. These works are a facing-up-to deadness, an unromantic look into what we will one day become. In Unsatisfied Desire and the Untrustworthy Languages of Art (1983) Dumas writes: “some people die of their own passion. Some by the passion of others. And some simply die of illness or another natural cause. I am against it.”

Similarly, Likeness 1 and 2 summarise the futility of artistic attempts at immortality. The “I” of Dumas line is in dialogue with her subject-matter, becoming a “me” that responds and changes according to the matter at hand.

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281 Dumas, “Miss Interpreted,” in Marlene Dumas (2009), 118.
283 Dumas, Marlene Dumas: Broken White, 154.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined Dumas’ authorial presence for three reasons. Firstly, to address the gap between the importance of the author in Dumas’ work and the lack of critical analysis of that author. Secondly, to demonstrate a more nuanced model for addressing the author in the visual arts, particularly in painting. And thirdly, to learn from Dumas for the benefit of my own studio practice. Autobiographical studies have provided the necessary conceptual framework by which to satisfy these aims.

Using contemporary theory from autobiographical studies and more conventional art-historical approaches, I have established one way to theorise Dumas’ authorial presence and to address that gap. I have—as Bal writes of her approach to Louise Bourgeois’ work—sought to “explain the biographical tendency in [Dumas] criticism, to characterize her work as visual art, and to position the work culturally”.285 I have taken into account Dumas’ biography as I necessarily must, but I have also looked for the reasons why and how the authorial presence is evoked by the specificity of the work. As Bois says, “the specificity of the object involves not just the general condition of its medium, but also its means of production in the slightest detail”.286 Through the mechanism of the four authorial I’s and the thematic connections to autobiography, I have demonstrated an authorial self that is not merely present by default—as Foucault says, all artworks have an author—but an author who is consciously engaged with the problems of human communication through art.

The case I have made for Dumas—that the role of the author can be at once sincere and self-reflexive—has also served to theoretically frame my own work. Using autobiographical studies in relation to Dumas has provided a relatively objective means by which to assess if the critical possibilities of the author in painting—that I have long been arguing in my paintings—were in fact theoretically demonstrable. I conclude, of course, that they are. Therefore, as a result of this research, I wish to make a short but more general assertion about the rich critical potential of the author in painting: one that I think is based in the very nature of painting as a visual object. I am not arguing here that more attention ought to be paid to the author across visual arts criticism pertaining to painting—the authorial lens should not be inappropriately applied—only to propose that, if a works demands it, we equip ourselves with the language and the conceptual framework to properly understand self-reflexive authorship and the critical role that the author can play.

286 Bois, Painting as Model, xxi.
To argue a general case for the author as a critical aspect in painting, it is important to think, in the context of the previous discussion, about what a painting is. Paintings, perhaps more than anything else, are literal sites for looking and being looked at, for human consciousnesses to visually “meet” one another; as Krauss writes, painting “is the true analogue of the ... gaze”. When we come to a painting we are always coming to “see” what has been made visible (by someone). Artist, subject and viewer “meet” at the locus of the painting (an idea embodied by my 2011 exhibition title Meet Me at an Arm’s Length). But, as I have argued, the painting in is not a transparent screen. Painting as a “site” is also an overt fabrication—this brush stroke here, this colour there, these edges that, lump, placed here on this wall, in this moment in time. As such, painting makes overtly visible the material language systems that facilitate human communication. When an author makes herself a palpable element in that work, by whatever means—such as Dumas does—a simulation of human engagement occurs; an authorial presence is offered. This ideal, however, is undermined by the insistent material fact of painting that we are brought to “see”. The authorial presence may exist as an idea, but the painting—the language, as Barthes would say—is what we can see. This tension between the psychological presence of an author and the present and visible material work, when performed with the expertise of Dumas, for example, posits the author as a potent critical device. The author is both desired authentic other and the executor of the material language that supersedes the psychological subject. The critical possibilities for the self-reflexive author in such a situation, therefore, stand to question the foundations of artistic and human communication; evidencing the conflict between ideal transparent communication and material objectification of content through language. I argue therefore that art criticism needs to look more closely at the nature of that self-reflexive author, who can be both sincere and critical of their own material manifestation, such as the author autobiography proposes. Not only because such an author opens up new possibilities for engaging with the author in the visual arts and for painting, but also for the simple fact that—as Dumas’ work demonstrates (and my own too)—these modes of authorship exist.

It is also important to emphasise the sincere aspect of that self-reflexive author. While knowing intellectually that Dumas is a fabrication of discourse, it remains that Dumas’ work operates on a rich phenomenological level. Dumas’ portrayal of human ontology—several aspects of which I have just considered in Chapters Four to Seven—means that, despite her ultimate critique of the “intimacy” imagined from her work, we nonetheless experience it. As Lejeune says: “We indeed know all this [that one is fooled if one believes “in the transparency of language, etc.”]; we are not so dumb, but, once this precaution has
been taken, we go on as if we did not know it.”

The humanity with which Dumas makes work about receiving love letters, being drunk, being a mother, being mortal means that we are in the presence of an author-character who lives and breathes, just like us. Likewise, when I make work about deception, the search for wisdom, the heaviness of living, I am doing so because, as a human being and an artist, I want to ruminate on the human state of affairs. People like to communicate about people, it makes us feel connected. The theoretical case I have made for Dumas’ mode of authoring does not exist without a felt response to Dumas’ works as human and “authentic” in the first place. Otherwise, I would be describing the tedious and academic illustration of a theoretical author lacking humanity. It remains that whatever critical perspective Dumas consciously engages, many of us experience a great deal of pathos from her work, and this is why so many have mentioned her authorial presence in simplistic, critical and indirect ways at all.

The analyses I have conducted on Dumas’ work constitutes a limited range of case studies intended to show the relevance of autobiography for some of Dumas’ work and do not address the full scope of Dumas’ oeuvre. These analyses are designed to be short examples of what could be achieved with a more sympathetic and rigorous engagement with the authorial self in a work of art.

Finally, this research has led me to conclude that Dumas’ work demonstrates ways in which it is possible to use and to regard authorial presence as a medium in itself. Not in terms of biographical authenticity—not to demonstrate the reality of our lives so that others may see some “truth” about us as individual authors—but to demonstrate a human desire for communication and connection, despite the apparent obstacles inevitably posed by material representation. We can read Dumas’ authorial presence as an author-character rather than an author-god. We must be conscious that this author is engaging in her craft; performing externalised and embodied representations of herself and others and dealing in the ideologically loaded languages of her references and materials. Dumas’ presence derives from the tension between our human desire to connect with other consciousness and that desire as made material yet problematic by the process of painting and interpretation.

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288 Spicer, “The Author is Dead,” 2.
Postscript:

It has been said Men make history, women autobiographies.

I’m aware that I’ve used a great deal of sexual terminology, but it’s all bound up with my subject-matter.

No, they’re not all self-portraits.
No, it’s not always my daughter.
No, I had a happy childhood.
No, I’ve never been in therapy.
No, I’ve never slept with museum directors.
Yes, I find compassion the most difficult thing there is and not easily compatible with creativity.
Yes, I find myself the best example of evil.\textsuperscript{289}

\textsuperscript{289} Dumas, “Postscript”, excerpt from “Give the People What They Want,” \textit{Intimate Relations}, 93.
Figure 24 Dumas, *The Blonde, the Brunette and the Black Woman*, 1992, oil on canvas, triptych, 25 x 30cm. 25 x 30cm. 30 x 40cm.

Figure 25 Dumas, *The Painter*, oil on canvas, 200 x 100cm.
Figure 26 Dumas, *Helena*, 1992, oil on canvas, 60 x 50cm.

Figure 27 Dumas, *Couples*, 1978, coloured pencil and collage on paper, 49 x 75cm.
Translation from *Intimate Relations*: Dear Mamma, I am in the train again on my way to a meeting at the art academy. I am so busy all the time. These days I do have money but so many appointments. We went to see a film—“Man of Flowers”. Very beautiful about a man that loves flowers so much. He doesn’t even have to have sex or too much intimacy. He rather looks at beautiful things. Pays a girl to undress with classical music but doesn’t have to touch her. I was also funny sometimes. A beautiful sensitive film. He writes letters to his dead mother, which he then posts back to himself. This way he always receives mail and the postman tells him about the weather etc. The weather is warm here, but still unpredictable. The pope was in Holland. I didn’t notice it all. Just saw something about it on television. There were also posters against the pope. “Help the pope get into heaven” and “Homo’s —anti-pope”—etc.
Figure 29 Dumas, notebook page with collected quotes from lecturers and fellow students at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, 1972–75, published in *Intimate Relations*.

Figure 30 Dumas, *Self-Portrait*, 1973, ink on paper, 55.5 x 76cm.
Figure 31 Dumas, *The Space Age*, 1984, oil on canvas, Diptych, 265 x 110 cm.
Figure 32 Dumas, *The Teacher (Sub A)*, 1987, oil on canvas, 160 x 200cm.

Figure 33 Dumas, *The Turkish Schoolgirls*, 1987, oil on canvas, 160 x 200cm.
Figure 34 Dumas, *Art is Stories Told by Toads*, 1988, oil on canvas, 180 x 90cm.

Figure 35 Dumas, *I Won’t Be Held Upside Down for Mr Baselitz*, from the series *Defining the Negative*, 1988, ink and watercolour on paper, variable dimensions.
Figure 36, Dumas, *Fear of Babies*, 1986, crayon, pencil and watercolour on paper, 9 of 12 parts, each 30 x 11cm.

Figure 37 Dumas, *After Life*, 1989, oil on canvas, 18 x 24cm.
Figure 38 Dumas, *Black Drawings*, 1992, ink wash, watercolour on paper, slate, 25 x 17.5cm each, series of 111 drawings and 1 slate.

Figure 39 Dumas, *Rejects*, 1994–, ink wash, watercolour on paper, 60 x 50cm each.
Figure 40 Dumas, *Genetics Heimwee (Genetic Longing)*, 1984, oil on canvas, 130 x 110cm.

Figure 41 Dumas, *The First People*, 1 of 4, 1991, oil on canvas, 180 x 90cm each.
Figure 42 Dumas, *The Prophet*, 2004, oil on canvas, 125 x 70cm.

Figure 43 Dumas, *Ryman’s Brides*, 1997, oil on canvas, 130 x 110cm.
Figure 44 Dumas, *Het Hooghuys, Etten-Leur* (detail) 1991, oil canvas, 2 of 36 paintings, 60 x 50cm each.
Figure 45 Dumas, *Immaculate*, 2003, oil on canvas, 24 x 18cm.
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APPENDIX

Artist's Statement and Documentation of Studio Research
ARTIST’S STATEMENT

My studio research is a perpetually shifting study of human ontology, human representation, painting and materiality. I work in series referring to one aspect of human living or another including deception, conflict, imagination, the search for wisdom and touch. Although the work stems almost completely from autobiographical subject-matter, the paintings—as I have by now made clear—have a life of their own. Using the specificity of autobiographical content on the one hand and the material, conceptual and historical imperatives of painting on the other I trawl the intersection of these two ends of the spectrum making works that are both “authentically” human and self-reflexive. At times the specificity of the content—the “likeness” of a particular subject for example—is obfuscated or “antagonized” by contrasting form such as scribbles, monochromatic colour schemes, layers of images, and text. At other times I play on the symbiotic nexus between the painting and the subject; such as in the self-portrait Ghost Skin (2012). I have also employed other materials—bronze, clay, video — but the question is always the same; what is the nature of human representation as it is found in this or that material form?

What follows is a selected catalogue of studio work conducted during the period of the candidature. These works demonstrate a close relationship between thesis and studio however I do not argue that the works “illustrate” the theoretical discussion. While it is necessary as an artist to acknowledge one’s field—that knowledge is obviously internalised and influential—it is important for my practice that the work maintains an intuitive approach. This, as I wrote in the preface, informed my choice to write about Dumas work rather than my own. It is necessary to maintain a practical distance from theory to allow for experimental outcomes (that precede academic reflection) and also to make anything of ‘authentic’ human interest. This separation is difficult but absolutely necessary otherwise the autobiographical—that requires at least a trace of “authenticity”—would cease to be relevant. I have provided therefore, brief summary statements that loosely frame ten series of works made during the candidature. I have provided several indicative images for each body of work, however, for a comprehensive account of the approximately one hundred and fifty works produced during this time, please see the accompanying disk.
The final exhibition of my candidature, *Marathon Boxing and Dog Fights* (Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, 2013), addressed interpersonal conflict; both on a sustained level (“marathon boxing”) and an episodic level (“dog fights”). The series of twelve paintings—centred on a couple I know whose fifteen-year relationship had just ended—were intended to embody the brutal and exhausting nature of conflict in dysfunctional long-term relationships. I think they do. The works combined multiple images of marathon boxers and fighting dogs in single frames. In two works I have used my own image. The result is a confused but deep painterly space—one I think feels as psychological as it does visual. For two of the works I added sculptural elements. These moments of overt materiality and physicality—in which the grabbing and holding of my hands is impressed in the surface of the resin—brought the drama of the paintings into “real” three-dimensional space. It was important that the works explore the drama of the conflict on a narrative level in painting, but that they also acknowledge the physical reality of that lived experience.

*Above: Installation view, Marathon Boxing and Dog Fights, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, May 2013.*
not your fault
POKING THE GHOST SKIN
November 2012
Block Projects, Melbourne

*Poking the Ghost Skin* began from a clay caste of my index finger left in the studio from a previous exhibition. As a dissociated object it acquired a powerful presence; emitting to desire to touch and connect, reminiscent of the finger of God in Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* (1511). In the context of a painting studio, the finger also seemed to symbolize the impossibility of “touching”—or absolutely grasping in any sense—the illusory dimension of a painting. The three dimensional and intentional nature of this finger accused the nearby paintings of flatness and of impenetrability. The images in painting are like ghosts, visible but not “touchable”. It was this quality I wanted to exploit. The layered images opened up a deep and exploratory psychological space but one made wholly of ghostly “skins”. There exists a tension between the desire to “grasp” what these paintings depict, the conscious “other” who has made them, and the illusory nature of painting. I see this body of work as bearing a phenomenological parallel to what in psychology is termed “dissociation”.

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Above: Installation view, *Poking the Ghost Skin*, Block Projects, 2012. Following page clockwise from top left: *Draw Breath*, oil on board, 60 x 40 cm, 2012; *Poking the Ghost Skin*, oil on board, 60 x 40 cm, 2012; *Marathon Boxing*, oil on board, 60 x 40 cm, 2012; *Ghost Skin*, oil on board, 60 x 40 cm, 2012. Over page: *Single Minded Gesture*, oil on board, 60 x 40 cm, 2012.

290 This sense is most potently depicted in the work of the same title *Poking the Ghost Skin* (2012) in which the ghost (the artist hidden ‘beneath’ the sheet) uses the clay finger to attempt to ‘penetrate’ its her own illusory skin.
The title of this show, *The Albatross and a Mountain Man* began as code names for two people I know whose intense and romantic relationship was brought undone by the practicalities of daily life. Their problem spoke more broadly about the ease of imagination versus the practical weight of daily living. The characters of the Albatross and the Mountain man seemed to conceptually embody that problem. The albatross can glide like no other bird, but in the Samuel Taylor Coleridge poem *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1797) it symbolizes the burden of guilt. Likewise, a mountain man’s expectation of the summit is balanced by the difficulty of getting there. The white clay and the dark-brown bronze therefore symbolized those oppositions. The subjects in the sculptures are looking right, left, up down, within and without but always to something or some place else—imagining what might be—while also being rooted in the heavy materiality of the bronze components.291

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291 This was my first excursion into sculpture. When I came across the clay maquettes of eighteenth century Spanish sculptor Damia Campany on a residency in Barcelona I was alerted to the emotive possibilities of diminutive artistic subjects freed from the context of a painted surface.
For Primavera 2010 I made a series of three large-scale self-portraits. Both the paintings and the text works proposed an insistent but obfuscated authorial subject in favour of material self-reflexivity apropos the photograph. These works argued in an overt way the question of autobiographical versus the material in my work. The self-portraits—shown also with twenty-seven earlier works—draw attention to the two-dimensional photographic referent relatively “hidden” in the earlier works. Painted in a careful “photorealist” style, the Primavera works constituted a doubled-back homage to 1970's American West Coast Photorealism that had influenced my earliest ideas about what painting was. These works broke the illusion of the photograph, but—in a way that recalls Barthes “docilely the bed of the imaginary”—also reinstate that illusion; the final painting is made from a photograph of a cut up photograph.
Having studied Courbet’s paintings at the Musee Fabre in Montpellier, France in 2009, I was interested in the interrealional dynamics between the hunter, the hunted animal and the viewer in Courbet’s paintings. In works such as *The German Hunter* (1859), and *The Death of the Hunted Stag* (1867) Courbet makes an active spectacle of death in which viewer and hunters are at once united against the otherness of the animal and compassionate for the stag. For my paintings, referring to trophy photographs from a hunter friend of mine, I wanted to problematize the relationship—making intimate, ambiguous and antagonistic—between those three entities. I did so using text and other compositional devices. From an authorial view this was also an interesting exercise. In the artist talk that accompanied the show the audience turned repeatedly to the morality of hunting to my own position in relation to it. When one paints a thing, as I have argued in the thesis, one takes a moral responsibility for the outcome.
The title of this exhibition refers both to the dialogical “meeting of two consciousnesses” that Bakhtin describes and the self-conscious nature of all communication (including autobiographical communication) performed quite literally “at an arms length” in a painting. The show consisted of a disparate collection of autobiographical works united by agitated surfaces. Whatever autobiographical world lay “behind” that surface—and from a personal and human point of view the works were also loaded—the surfaces of the paintings were restless, dynamic, insistent and effecting.

Above: Installation view, MEET ME AT AN ARMS LENGTH, Bruce Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.
Over page clockwise from top left: Slow Lane, oil on board, 60 x 40cm, 2010, The Idiots, oil on board, 60 x 40cm, 2010; untitled (self-portrait with white dot), oil on board, 60 x 40 cm, 2010; Undercover self-portrait, oil on board, 60 x 40cm, 2010.

294 In works such as Self-Portrait with White Dot (2010), the white dot on the surface seems to effect the psychology of the subject “beneath”. At other times, such as in Undercover Self-Portrait, the content shows off it’s own surface qualities.
For Optimism: Contemporary Australia I developed the Get-Up series; a body of work that consciously “propped up” the subjects of the paintings by formal compositional devices. Responding to the theme for the show (optimism), I was thinking about the fine line between encouragement and belittlement. When you tell someone to “get up”—a schism occurs between the positivity of the request—suggesting life is worth getting up for—and the belittlement of having been told to. The subjects in these works are all lying down, but the orientation of the painting in one way or another makes the subjects vertical; encouraging the subjects to action. Several of these works also paid homage to Courbet, which by extension also addressed the fine line between inspiration and the burden of art history.
An oracle supposes to provide some kind of god-inspired wisdom not available to most people. At the time of this show I had started to look with increasing seriousness to Dumas’ works to understand her authorial presence. I was thinking about paintings as oracles; very specific localities one visits to see something unseen, or to know something unknown. This body of work underscores the action of coming to a painting in order to find something out; treating paintings as oracular objects. In autobiographical work, as I have already made clear in the thesis, painting is very often imagined to be a direct insight to the author’s mind. The paintings both represent that approach to painting in a figurative way and critique that desire by the form of the work. Paintings such as This Sucker Has no Points of Access (2009), Danger Fire Pit (2009), and Looking for D-Recton (2009) (a direct reference to Dumas) respectively block traditional “access points” such as the eyes, send out warning signs against their own veracity, and self-consciously depict the act of looking to a painting—as one looks to a book—for knowledge. This show questioned the idea of painting as a source of revelation.
This primarily video exhibition at MSSR—a domestic exhibition space in Brisbane—addressed the problem of using one’s heritage to feed a contemporary art practice. On a visit to my hometown of Wee Waa in North West New South Wales, I had initially intended to make an abstract series of works from the landscape—documenting vision from a previous period of my life—but the self-conscious act of publicly setting up the tripod raised significant ethical questions. See accompanying text for the exhibition.

Above: You Were There the Whole Time, video on DVD screen, 55 seconds and oil on board (six panels 20 x 30cm each), variable dimensions. (Originally exhibited in The Oracles).

Over page top to bottom: Heavy Heart Transplant, video projection on outdoor screen, 12 minutes 24 seconds, 2009; Dog, video on computer screen, 2 minutes and 9 seconds.
At the time I made the work for *Liar* there had been a significant amount of deception in my primary relationship. I wanted to make work about that and to consider what deception looked like in a human subject. At the same time—and this is often the way the process goes—that premise began a deeper consideration of the way deception looks in painting. This was a pivotal body of work for my practice, bringing front and centre the problem of “authentic” autobiographical work and the fabricated, mediated and self-conscious nature of painting. The exhibition crystallized in one text work that read “these are only small scale lies”.

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Above: *Self-Sufficient Self-Portrait*, oil on board, 60 x 90cm, 2008.  
Over page clockwise from top left: *Lie to Me*, oil on board 60 x 40cm, 2008; *Lame Duck*, oil on board, 60 x 40cm, 2008; *Smoking*, oil on board, 60 x 40cm, 2008; *You Know Who You Are*, oil on board, 60 x 40cm, 2008.
The ideas around this exhibition are discussed in the following interview conducted by arts writer Wes Hill. The interview was published in a catalogue for the exhibition.\footnote{Wes Hill is a freelance art critic and curator. He has written for Artforum, Frieze, Frieze d/e, Art & Australia, Photofile, Broadsheet, Eyeline and Art Monthly. He currently lectures in Theoretical Enquiry at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.}

Wes Hill Interviews Julie Fragar, 2007

Julie Fragar's work is firmly based on the ground. She isn't a fantasist; she deals with the immediate world around her yet with enough objectivity from her subjects to avoid both pathos and alienation. There are many qualities in Fragar's practice that I like. I like her seductive application of paint. I like her use of black as a colour. I like the fact that some of the photographic imagery seems arbitrary - as if in copying a random image she might find something that she didn't know about herself or the people that surround her or both. I like how she isn't weighed down by art theory or history yet paints with such intelligence. I like that her work doesn't seem like art but like a conversation. I like all of these things about her practice yet I wondered where it all came from. To find this out I conducted the following interview with her in August 2007 to coincide with her exhibition 'Man'.

Wes: Julie, your practice seems to be more gestural than didactic. I can see this conceptually in your solo exhibitions as well as in isolated works - through your particular style of paint application and the emphasis you place on interpreting photographic sources rather than literalizing them.

Julie: When I started using photographs, I liked the slavishness of copying, the redundancy of the act, probably the virtuosity of it too. I was quite hung up on those American West Coast photorealists like Richard Estes and Robert Bechtle. But when I saw these paintings in the flesh I figured out that these 'Photorealist' painters weren't all the same breed, the good ones, like Bechtle and Estes, really dealt with the paint. You wouldn't think it from reproduction but Estes' works are quite painterly, the colour is pure and the brush is still very evident. From this point I changed focus, from as you say, literalizing the photographs, to playing with the contradictions and crossovers between the paint and the photograph.
W: Your work seems to avoid the rhetoric surrounding the death and renewal of painting perhaps because of the sheer sincerity of your approach, which you couple with only the slightest amount of skepticism about the image.

J: You are right about the sincerity. I have affection for the subjects. I am sincere about painting too, I still believe in painting- because it is defeated over and over and carries on regardless. I am not sure what exactly you mean by skepticism about the image, but perhaps you mean a disconnection from the subject- I don’t hang on to the human subjects like a mother. If I paint a picture from a photograph of my daughter, I don’t see it as a sort of family portrait; I’m not making a painted autobiography, at least not in the traditional sense. I take more distance from the subject than that- and yes, using the photographic representation of the subject and reinventing the image as painting is one way that this occurs. There is a more general conceptual distance as well in that I see in the work - and the whole practice actually - as a curiosity, the idea that a female artist decides that she would make paintings of these diaristic images for years and years.

W: The diaristic aspect of your practice does provide a rare intimacy between yourself and the viewer. Can you tell me then how this exhibition fits with that idea?

J: Every heterosexual woman when she is thirty, starts thinking about men. I have been thinking a lot about what a man should be like. I married someone quite different from my father, who is something of the old school man; decisive, authoritative, and a bit arrogant. So you think in some deep sense that this is what a man should be, but women of our generation can never be married to men like that. Sometimes I think we are in a bit of a predicament ... So of course, this stuff is of personal interest to me and so there is some sense of a proposed intimacy between myself and the viewer. But this really is a false intimacy; there is too much between the artist as a person and the viewer's perception. I am interested though, in what it is to present the 'personal' in painting, and about the relationship that is imagined between this authorial subject and the viewer. Someone like Marlene Dumas is very good at playing with this.

W: Your relatively open-ended approach to art-making means that this exhibition might be read as a homage to men, a satirical take on feminism, a sincere feminist statement or simply a thematic device to generate an exhibition of paintings. Practically speaking then, what were you most concerned with when formulating this show?

J: I wanted to create a sense of an individual thinking critically about how they relate to the men that they know, and that this thinking was done at the same time as thinking about the problems of painting. I wondered if it was possible to make a painting show about men by a woman that was neither political or a homage, but the objectification of an artist's present concerns- both psychological and formal. I was interested in the point at which form or an idea of the process, would start to challenge the loadedness of the content. To do this, I thought the painting had to remain visible, it had to fluctuate across the series, reinstating itself by way of contrast, at different points the painting would dominate and then recede. If there was an overriding concern in making 'Man', it was perhaps to explore the oppositional values inherent in paintings of men made by a woman; the work is quite consciously aporetic.

W: The American artist John Currin said that "The subject of a painting is always the author, the artist. You can only make an illusion that it's about something other than that. I think that's what the function of representation is: to give a painting the illusion of a subject". Whether you agree or disagree with that statement, I'm interested in how you feel the interview process contributes to the perception of your work, which is in some way the perception of yourself as a person. Are you wary about what sort of perception your responses will generate and how it will affect the work?

J: Its funny you mention that Currin comment, today I just finished a Courbet painting- my painting of the artist at the centre. So yes, I do agree with what Currin says, in reality my work is no more personal than anyone else’s; I’m just playing into the idea it. As for the interview process, the work is already out there, and the artist at some point has a responsibility to say something about it.

(Exhibition catalogue for MAN at Peloton, 2007).
Clockwise from top left: *HOWAMISUPPOSEDTOLOOKATYOU*, oil on board, 60 x 40cm, 2007; *David Thomas and Gustave Courbet*, oil on board, 60 x 40cm, 2007; *David Thomas and Nicholas Chambers*, oil on board, 60 x 40cm, 2007; *Wes Hill*, oil on board, 2007.
DADISLIKEITTOO
March 2007
QCA Galleria, Brisbane.

DADISLIKEITTOO derived from a familial phrase that connected my own personality and behaviours and those of my father. In DADISLIKEITTOO I wanted to perform myself as an author character in relation to masculine influence in life and in art. This nexus was perhaps most successfully achieved a self-portrait diptych entitled A Couple of Tricks (2006) in which I ride two motorbikes toward each other; motorcycling being one of the first significant patriarchal influences. Formally these works also fuse (feminine) autobiographical content with (masculine) large-scale colour field painting. A series of twenty ink drawings, and three large scale motorcycling paintings were also included in the show, all of which underscored instances of masculine identification in my life and work.
CURRICULUM VITAE

Julie Fragar
b. 05 03 1977, Gosford, NSW, Australia. Lives and works Brisbane, QLD.

Education
2006-Present - Doctor of Philosophy Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane.
1995-1998 - Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney Bachelor of Visual Arts, Honors (Class 1).

Prizes and Awards
2013 - Pine Rivers Art Award
2009 - Australia Council for the Arts Studio Residency (Barcelona).
2006-2009 - Griffith University Graduate Research Scholarship
2005 - Winner 2005 ABN Amro Emerging Artist Award
Winner 2005 ABN Amro Employees Choice Award
2002 - NSW Artists Marketing Scheme Grant.
University Post-Graduate Award, University of Sydney.
2001 - Freedman Foundation Traveling Scholarship for Emerging Artists.
Roche Contemporary Art Prize, (2nd Prize).
University Post-Graduate Award, University of Sydney.

Solo Exhibitions
2013 - God and the Universe or Whatever, Bruce Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.
Marathon Boxing and Dog Fights, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.
2012 - Poking the Ghost Skin, Block Projects, Melbourne.
2011 - The Albatross and a Mountain Man, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.
2010 - Meet Me At An Arms Length, Bruce Heiser Gallery, Brisbane.
2009 - The Oracles, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.
2009 - Your Place and/or Mine, MSSR Projects Sydney.
2007 - DADISLIKEITTOO, Griffith University College Gallery, Brisbane.
2005 - NOWNONOTNOWNOW, Mori Gallery, Sydney.
Julie Fragar, Mori Gallery, Sydney.
2003 - Julie Fragar In Thin Ice, Mori Gallery, Sydney.
2001 - Julie Fragar, Boutwell Draper Gallery, Sydney.

Selected Group Exhibitions
2013 - Special Moves, MOP Projects, Sydney.
The Imperceptible Something, Caboolture Regional Gallery, Brisbane.
2012 - Animal Human, University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane.
2011 - Australia Felix, Crane Arts Centre, Philadelphia.
O, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.
Femmes and Hommes, John Buckley Gallery, Melbourne.
Moran Portraiture Prize, Sydney.
2010 - PV10, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.
WILDERNESS: Balnaves Contemporary Painting, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
Twenty/20, UTS Gallery, Sydney.
Gaze: People, Relationships and Places, Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland.
The Brisbane Line, The Narrows, Melbourne.


Art out of Water: The Fish of Art, Lismore Regional Gallery, Lismore.

BBW, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.


New Order: Emergent Queensland Artists, Redcliffe Regional Gallery, Brisbane.

2008 - New Moon, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

Rimbaud/Rambo, Neon Parc, Melbourne

OPTIMISM: Contemporary Australia, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane

2007 - The Heavier We Get, curated by Wes Hill, Raw Space, Brisbane. Artists: Matthew Bradley, Julie Fragar, Mark Seibert, Peter McKay, and Ben Landers.


Painting in October, Project Gallery, Queensland College of Art, Brisbane.

Charge To Slow (Fiona Lowry and Julie Fragar), MOP Projects, Sydney.

2005 - ABN Amro Emerging Artists Award, ABN Amro, Sydney.

Idiosyncrasy, The Queensland Centre for Photography, Brisbane.

Checkpoint: Zanny Begg Placard Project, Mori Gallery, Sydney.

2004 - Adrift, Queensland Centre for Photography, Brisbane.

Blur, (in collaboration with Paul Wrigley), curated by Steven Alderton, Redland Art Gallery.

Two For One, MOP Projects, Sydney.

ABN AMRO Emerging Artist Award, Finalist, ABN AMRO, Sydney.

2003 - Group show, curated by Rochelle Allan, Mori Gallery, Sydney.

Collaborative painting project curated by Jess Macneil, MOP, Sydney.

Archibald Prize 03, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Michael Zavros, Susan Norrie and Julie Fragar, Mori Gallery, Sydney.

MiniLab, curated by Emil Goh, Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney.

Working From Home, Grunt Gallery, Vancouver, Canada.

WYWH, curated by Emil Goh, First Draft Gallery, Sydney.

2002 - Untitled group show with Matthys Gerber, accompanied by Paul Donald, Rachel Scott, Alison MacGregor, Huseyin Sami and Oscar Yanez, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

Briefcase 50, Boutwell Draper Gallery, Sydney.

Deskjob, curated by Julie Fragar, Fiona Lowry and Piers Greville, Mori Gallery, Sydney.

Blue Lotus Project #4, curated by Kyle Jenkins, Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney.

2001 - 1m x 1m, Boutwell Draper Gallery, Sydney.

Parallel Structures, curated by David Pasterius, Brisbane, 200 Gertrude St, Melbourne.

Box, Gallery Wren, Sydney.

Portia Geach Memorial Award, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney.

2000 - Sharper- 9 x Paintings, 3 x Artists, Michael Zavros, Julie Fragar and Matthew Ryan, Gosford Regional Art Gallery, Gosford.

Cia Guo- Quiang Project, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Biennale of Sydney.

Sebastian: Contemporary Realist Painting, Curated by Alison Kubler, 9 artists included David Ralph, Anne Wallace, Matthys Gerber, Stephen Bues, Christine Morrow, Lindy Lee, and Kieran Kinney. Gold Coast Art Gallery and touring to six regional gallery in QLD, NSW and VIC.

2000 Archibald Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.


Al Eisen Inventor, Curated by Michael and Michael Project Management, Herringbone Gallery, Sydney.

Shiny, Curated by Julie Fragar, Gallery 132, Sydney.

1998 - Matthys Gerber, CBD Gallery, Sydney

1998 Portia Geach Memorial Award, S.H Ervin Gallery, Observatory Hill, Sydney.

Boring, Julie Fragar and Alison Ritch, Gallery 19, Sydney.

Collections

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art;
UQ Art Museum; Australian National Credit Union; Gold Coast City Art Gallery; Artbank; Ferrier Hodgson, Sydney; UBS Warburg; Griffith University, Brisbane; and numerous private national and international collections.

Selected Bibliography


Burke, K *Natural or Nurtured, the Designs are on a Seriously Creative Career*, Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), 23rd Nov 2001.


Girdham, R *Young Mix of Medium*, The Sunday Mail, 6 February, 2011.


James, B *Bets on Three of a Kind or a Dealer*, SMH, 14 March 2003.


James, B *Archie’s Sea Change*, SMH, 25 March, 2000


Kubler A *A Gaze: People Relationships and Places*, exhibition catalogue,


Tovey, I. *JULIE FRAGAR*, Sydney Morning Herald, May 17-18, 2008.


