

RETURN TO INQUIRY

Karolin Meunier

1. WHATEVER YOU HAVE DONE AND EXPERIENCED, YOU CAN BE QUESTIONED ABOUT IT. TALKING ABOUT YOUR THOUGHTS AND YOUR ACTIONS BECOMES A RECURRING TASK. THE TASK TO INVOLVE YOURSELF AND TO OBSERVE YOURSELF AT THE SAME TIME.

2. WHY WOULD YOU BRING YOURSELF INTO A SITUATION WHERE PEOPLE COULD ASK YOU QUESTIONS? JUST BRING YOURSELF INTO A STATE WHERE YOU ANTICIPATE THEM. IT DOESN'T MATTER, IF THESE ARE THE QUESTIONS THAT PEOPLE WOULD REALLY ASK, IF THEY WERE GIVEN THE CHANCE TO DO SO. QUESTIONS ARE ALWAYS THE SAME AND THE SAME IS THE EXPERIENCE TO ANSWER THEM.

3. YOU KNOW THAT THERE ARE THINGS THAT YOU SHOULD REMEMBER. BUT YOU REMEMBER ONLY THESE OTHER THINGS THAT WOULDN'T SERVE AS ANSWERS.

4. THINK OF A SITUATION WHERE PEOPLE BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU ARE SAYING WHETHER THEY REALISE, WHEN YOU ARE PRETENDING OR NOT. YOU WOULD ONLY LIE TO THEM IN ORDER TO AVOID OFFENSE AND IT OFFERS SOME BENEFIT TO THEM AS LISTENERS. THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY TO DO SUCH A THING. TO LIE. AND NOT TO SHARE.

Write it down! You'll see yourself whole! Try it! ▷

Self, stake, disclosure

I would like to give you the response that you deserve, I want to open myself up to you entirely, but I do not know how I am to set about it. ▷

The desire to disclose oneself thoroughly, the attempt, as it says here, to open oneself up to others completely, whether as an offer or concession, seems like an infinite endeavour. So the most fitting approach must be to immediately create a distance to one's own openness, as if one could wrest a last deferral from one's words and their tendency to produce all-too-definite narratives and identities. In the best-known of Hofmannsthal's fictional letters, a young author turns to a friend to justify his withdrawal from writing. In it he articulates not only his own lack of ability but also a deep-rooted scepticism about language. The opening sentences proclaim and promise that he will strive to be honest, and qualify this at the same time. He writes that he has entirely lost the ability to think or speak coherently and that the abstract words disintegrate in his mouth. What is disintegrating here is perhaps the idea that the system of language could do justice to one's diffuse knowledge of oneself. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's much cited opening sentences to his *Confessions* on the other hand, written more than a hundred years earlier, evoke the immoderate nature of his intention: "I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself."

This quotation and those that follow are linked only in that they all stem from texts and conversations, each associated in different ways with an autobiographically motivated artistic or theoretical practice. The quotations also point to a literary genre which has created exhaustively wordy and detailed, narcissistic and manifesto-like, confessional and fictional writings about the 'I' and the self – self-aggrandising, self-mythologising, but equally infused with doubt about the ability of language to represent an inner condition. The relativising phrasing can be read as moments of problematisation, as a reaction to the task of describing that which one carries around as one's own experience without being able to comprehend it fully. The self-reflexive stuttering and hesitation that ensues when a person begins to talk reflects uncertainties about the autobiographical testimony's claim to authenticity. The transitions from hidden to public, from thinking to speaking, from internal to external dialogue produce interruptions whose extension, formalisation and exaggeration I would like to interpret here as techniques that highlight the constructed nature

▷ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "A Letter (from Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon)", 1902

of such self disclosures, as well as the difference in position between speaker and listener. If going public is always an act in which utterance can be estranged from speaker, this is even more evident if one attempts to speak about oneself. One has to observe oneself, detach from oneself, objectify oneself, while still insisting within this movement of abstraction, on having a significant voice.

A.F.: What are you surprised about? That I mix?

Woman from the audience: *Yes– yes, that you bring yourself in, in fact.*

A.F.: In fact, I would be happy to bring myself in more. ▸

In a discussion that followed a symposium presentation, the audience's questions revolved around the artist's practice of quotation in which she also presents herself as emotionally involved. In two performances she had described her work and frequently seemed to be fighting back the tears. Neither in the performance nor in the conversational situation that followed did she abandon her position of oscillating between acting and confession. In neither case could the audience determine which of her gestures and propositions were credible as personal statements and which were conceived for the performance. The various ambivalent reactions she provoked in the audience, whether of empathy, embarrassment or disapproval seemed equally calculated. In the scene cited here, there is a further discrepancy. While one audience member expresses her surprise at the way the artist Andrea Fraser brings herself into the performance, publicly, and within the art work, Fraser claims that this is not actually happening to the extent that she would like. The artist's deployment of herself is discussed as though a border were being crossed, at an unexpected point, although the crossing would not have been possible at an arbitrary point, or indeed without restriction. But what does bringing oneself further into play imply? More emotional outbursts, either real or simulated? It is probably more about ceasing to be surprised that artists are always involved in their work on some personal level, and that they also lay open the problems that this entails. Acting and non-acting are deployed in order not only to analyse genuine misgivings about a situation that is perceived as aggressive – standing in front of an audience and fielding questions – but also to redouble and display it: "Acting is necessary [...] to be 'convincing' in some way; to produce a layering of conflicting positions that I think of as a kind of grotesque."

There are plenty of other and much more dramatic scenes that spring to mind in which the border to the personal is claimed, crossed and negotiated, and yet there is much about this conversational fragment that exemplifies the way in which people present themselves publicly, and the range of options available for such presentations. Someone is asked to explain themselves and they can say too much or too little; someone asks and can discover too much or too little; and both parties display an ability to make an issue of this exchange. It is so common for people to disclose information about themselves and their actions, and it seems to be performed as a matter of course. The inflationary practice of disclosing personal information both professionally and privately will certainly also have a structural influence on the way the practice is perceived and the manner in which it is deployed, if sentences become formulaic, revelations predictable, and confessions forced. The present text will consider the phenomenon of self-disclosure as a question of the contradictions in which the speaker becomes entangled when deciding to speak this way, and less in concrete everyday terms. Who or what triggers such speech, and how can one choose it as a form? What I am interested in here is the model of writing and talking about oneself as a means of abstracting one's own experience. But what kind of an activity is this? What consequences does it have for one's concept of truth, if one is trying to put oneself into the position of observer? The feeling of distance that opens up to one's own experiences perhaps explains the sense of unease that accompanies this speech. At the same time it is possible to experiment with the outsider perspective and introduce a position that is neither arbitrary nor controllable: not arbitrary because when dealing with one's own speech one is not at the mercy of something completely foreign, and yet not controllable, because it is directed towards others and is part of a cultural dispositif. It always positions itself in relation to an outside, to both a motive and an addressee. The usual effort to locate and identify the self, at once shifts into considerations about its deployment. The vocabulary used here introduces a spatial as well as economic perspective by addressing the positioning of the self internally or in relation to others, and also represents a value which can be invested and jeopardised. Memories, convictions, and feelings could be regarded as material which is accessible yet not entirely quantifiable.

In the discussion cited above, Andrea Fraser speaks of the tension in her performance between the two poles represented as 'I' and 'not-I', pointing not only to her speech but also to her nakedness on stage as a quotation, while insisting on the undeceivability of one's own present body: "I used to joke that I'm not really nude because I'm in quotation marks. But it's not the body of any of the people I might be

quoting standing there, it's my body standing there." This is probably an old trick actors use, claiming that it's not their own nakedness on stage, but that of the role they are playing. In Fraser's performances the supposed protective function of the quote loses its effect when shame, anger and resistance towards being exposed is invoked and reproduced simultaneously. On the other hand, in this extended function quotation has the potential to highlight the conventionality of public appearances. As to the form such disclosure may take, Fraser's double reflection forms a hermetic loop, in which she speaks as 'I' about the 'I' on stage, and reports on herself without clearly leaving the quotation marks. The non-arbitrary choice to talk about oneself is speculative because though it may appear to offer the possibility of intentional action, this always stands in relation to other, non-intentional and perhaps not even visible options. How one presents oneself to others swings between the basic fulfilment of expectations within a limited set of possibilities, and the over-fulfilment, erosion and deferral of such offers. What's at stake here does not necessarily lie in the possibility of shedding tears in front of an audience. Rather it lies in giving in to the demand (not least in the context of art) for the instigating of a public discourse about oneself. In doing so one runs risk of feeding this as an action into an economy of self-presentation. But it remains perhaps an inherent symptom of such speech that the tension between the various positions cannot simply be absorbed by the prejudice that the person talking about themselves in public is automatically creating surplus value for themselves. After all, contrary to the available possibilities for voicing and bringing oneself into the work, the ambivalent desires for self-expression of the speaker are left equally unfulfilled. The outcome is open, if one understands this deployment of oneself not only as competing for attention but as a critical gesture of revelation.

At some point there was a crisis because I didn't know who I was anymore. But everyone else seemed to know. They kept telling me 'Don't worry, this character, it's you'. But if it was me, they shouldn't have told me. When I saw the film I thought, no, don't tell me it's 'La Chinoise'. That's not me at all. ▸

If in this text I exclusively give a voice to individuals who are well-known and whose works are readily available, then it is because, among other things, their statements take into account or thematise their own distribution. The self-reflexive stance bespeaks a familiarity with the fear of being exposed as well as the desire to be. The

▸ Anne Wiazemsky in "Sois belle et tais-toi", documentary film by Delphine Seyrig, 1976

presence of an audience is presupposed and firmly established as part of the presentation and the conflicts articulated within it. When an actress, for example, talks about not always being able to distinguish between private and cinematic persona, while everyone else wants to see the two converge, those insinuations may be more disconcerting for her than the feeling of temporarily not knowing who she is. The crisis evoked here seems characteristic of the dilemma of wanting to be recognised in public appearances but not wanting to be reduced to this. Anne Wiazemsky does not want to merge seamlessly with her film character, or at least she wants to establish differences. She makes this point in a film, and within this framework her comments are also aimed at the conditions under which she becomes the person who is giving the account. Ultimately the basis of the acting profession is to be watched while speaking. To incorporate oneself is a type of service, which at the same time is linked with the task of taking on a role.

Delphine Seyrig's film *Sois belle et tais-toi* shows excerpts from a series of conversations she conducted over an extended period of time with female film and theatre professionals. The women talk about their work in front of and behind the camera, relationships between actors, directors and the limited choice of roles available to them. A spiralling account ensues of what happens within the context of this specific form of visibility, yet lies outside its usual parameters of representation. One can infer from the answers that Seyrig's questions, which are not always heard in the film, stem from an overtly feminist position. The amused and furious reactions testify to the film industry's absurd expectations of actresses, and how their bodies are expected to be put into the service of the image: "In any case, they didn't change my jaw or my nose, but I did wear false breasts, dye my hair and eyebrows for 10 years. Which meant that, I, Jane Fonda, was here and this image was there, and there was this alienation between the two." When the actresses repeatedly mention how rarely films show friendships between women, portraying them as rivals instead, they are criticising the atmosphere of isolation and voicelessness inherent in this professional field. In *Sois belle et tais-toi* the opposite happens, as Seyrig's editing indirectly engages all the speakers in conversation with one another. She is expressly siding with the protagonists and their stories. And the question-and-answer game of the interview is shown as a situation in which people influence one another as well as the attention of the interviewees to the educational nature of such a project: "You're asking such fantastic questions! I have to write them down in order to think about them more."

What is interesting about the crisis of representation and its depiction in Seyrig's film is that she neither aims to rehabilitate the withdrawn, protected self nor does she insist on it as a mere social construct. The insistence on the meaning of the private and everyday as narrative – particularly as a feminist concern – has always also been a political instrument: to cultivate public speaking about one's own experiences and circumstances as a situation, to learn this, to propagate it and above all, to see it as an opportunity to develop a distinct vocabulary. To explain oneself to another implies belonging to a community through the inherent audience of the others. At the same time the translation of personal experience into language is a decisive act in becoming visible as a singular person. Participation is thus always also about being exposed, and in a double sense: to expose oneself within a conversation to the gaze, response and judgement of another occurs in the knowledge that “the ‘I’ is the moment of failure in every narrative effort to give an account of oneself. It remains the unaccounted for and, in that sense, constitutes the failure that the very project of self-narration requires”. These sentences stem from Judith Butler's series of readings *Giving an Account of Oneself*. In it she refers to the attempt to disclose oneself whilst having to resort to a normative discourse “which has a temporality other than that of a first-person perspective, a vector of temporality that disorients one's own. Thus, it follows that one can give and take recognition only on the condition that one becomes disoriented from oneself by something which is not oneself”. The audience is at once an offer to explain oneself, and an interruption. To be dependent on this recognition, in other words to talk to others and to be heard by them, knowing that in doing so one has to resort to pre-existing forms of expression which are not one's one – that is a conflict which cannot be kept at bay: “I cannot give it away, for it is a feature of my very corporeality and, in this sense, my life. Yet it is not that over which I can have control.”

I have stated what propelled me toward writing a memoir, but I am still a little uneasy about my motives. ▸

The textualisation of one's own story is mostly influenced by a high degree of self-reflection about the processes involved. In the prologue to her memoirs *feelings are facts* Yvonne Rainer described not only what compelled her to write and publish her memoirs, but also her misgivings about the confessional genre. “Do I wish to make claims to a hearing and in so doing seek, in Peter Brooks' words, ‘a catharsis

▸ Yvonne Rainer, “feelings are facts. a life”, 2006

of confession'? As he points out in *Troubling Confessions*, in our talk-show saturated culture 'without confessional talk we simply don't exist'. No, I must remind myself that my existence does not depend on some kind of secular redemption through self-exposure. Though it may prove no more reliable, rather than confession I prefer to think of this enterprise as a more guilt-free kind of testimony to a life, to the products of life, and to its public and private interplay." Despite dealing openly with intimate experiences, her text is characterised by an effect which, though not fictionalising, undoubtedly dispels identification: arranged as a montage of autobiographical narrative, quotations from letters, diaries and film scripts which in turn are based on personal experiences, as well as descriptions of her dance pieces, Rainer applies a process of laying down parallel narrative strands similar to that used in her films and works for the stage. Using the principle of placing various equally-weighted material and documents along side one another, she casts doubt on both the idea of a linearly memorable biography and the notion of an imperturbable position from which to evaluate a life. The text delivers no seamless overview, and as befits her critical attitude towards confession, the author is not interested in seeking absolution from her readers. The motivation seems to be more about using the process of writing and assembling to mediate between the various stages and contradictions of her own autobiography and to make this communicable. By describing her experiences as "the products of life" which emerge in an ongoing "public and private interplay", she marks a distance that aims to neutralise all sentimentalising references. At the same time the role of the public in the production of these stories comes into view, and not only because Rainer's own work makes explicit the social and political relevance of personal experience. The fascination of melodramatic narrative styles also stems from the knowledge of similar stories and their entertainment value – and that these in turn impact the lives which they are actually narrating.

The reference to Peter Brooks' *Troubling Confessions* is to a text that traces the history of confession in law and literature. Brooks describes how the a priori formulaic act of religious confession trained people to reflect their deeds in language, how this act became habitual, and how access to individual experience is today accomplished through cultural practices: "Western literature has made the confessional mode a crucial kind of self-expression that is supposed to bear a special stamp of sincerity and authenticity and to bear special witness to the truth of the individual personality." Rainer invokes this problematic subtext of confessional literature only to immediately distance herself from it. When in the prologue she refers to self-disclosure as a "tes-

timony”, she imperceptibly changes sides. The view from the outside starts with her as author. The report becomes a singular testament to a possible view of one’s own biography and not to the spectacular truth about a person. What it communicates is not so much a fixation with one’s own sensitivities, as an attempt to experiment on oneself using the outside perspective. Honesty as a convention has very little meaning here – compared with the ability to speak one’s mind unreservedly. This contradictory desire is expressed in the everyday entanglement of self-censorship and compulsive talking. In *feelings are facts* there is a precise description of the mania of having to tell everything. Rainer describes a domestic argument that was triggered by a casually uttered confession of a sexual adventure: “Why did I tell [him] about it? What that confession points to is my long standing mania for ‘telling’. Telling my parents about things of which I knew they would disapprove. Telling friends embarrassing secrets that might be turned against me. Blurting out my opinion about others. I live with a weird compulsion to betray myself, to reveal everything, under the guise of a disingenuous ‘openness’.”

The term ‘confession’ (*Bekanntnis*, as used in a broader sense) is associated with certain specific speaking situations such as the confession of legal guilt (*Geständnis*), the religious confessional (*Beichte*), and psychoanalysis, which take place at such diverse locations as courts, hospitals, churches and TV studios. But ‘confession’ (*Bekanntnis*) also evokes more general moral ideas of sincerity, unfeignedness, truth and guilt. Despite its manifold meanings and contexts, I want to make use of the term and the communicative framework it marks out, in the attempt to examine it as a format. The category of the format points beyond disclosure as a practice or a genre to specific social structures which have developed as a reaction to the ongoing request to talk about oneself. Confession (*Bekanntnis*) may be regarded simultaneously as a manifest structure and an instrument to put to use, precisely because of its cultural and historical over-determination, its exaggerated focus on results and effects and its complicity with institutions. Michel Foucault investigated confession and its history epistemologically in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality (The Will to Knowledge)*. “Next to the testing rituals,” he wrote, “next to the learned methods of observation and demonstration, the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth.” Foucault’s interest in confession primarily regards its control function within specific power relations. He finds in the discourse of sexuality the twisting of the relation between censorship and coerced speech that characterises confession (*Geständnis*). The “internal ruse” here lies in seducing the confessing subject into

speaking, through the appearance of confession itself as a defiant refusal of a prohibition to speak and think, a prohibition from which one must free oneself. An effect of this ruse is the belief that a decision in favour of honest speech is an expression of freedom, when in fact it has long been an internalised command, says Foucault: “The formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is not thinking.” It does not matter whether the occasion for this speech appears as a need, an invitation or an act of enforcement, or as one of these things dressed up in another: in confession a format is being used, subject to certain limitations determined by its occasion and setting. These limitations correspond to the promise of a result, to the effect of healing, attention, absolution. And yet not every self-description is written in stone. One is not ordained to be disciplined by the confession. One is not at its mercy. When one talks of oneself, the circumstances and intentions do make a difference, changing the text and the personal risk and position of the speaker. Yet the examples in this text also partake of “truth production”, even though – or perhaps because – the speech manifests a changed idea of the truths at stake. An approach, which instead of claiming that secret keeping, concealment and obfuscation are expressions of freedom or subversive acts, but which from the margins of the autobiographical format gives short shrift to the cathartic function of confession, is an approach that can also be understood as critical of a concept of confession that limits it to an instrument of control.

Do I feel guilty about reading what was not intended for my eyes? No. One of the main (social) functions of a journal or diary is precisely to be read furtively by other people, the people (like parents + lovers) about whom one has been cruelly honest only in the journal. ▸

How does it even happen that one ends up disclosing information about oneself so comprehensively? Can the beginning of this move be located? Am I being asked or do I bring myself into the picture, do I want to be asked or do I struggle for an answer? A confession is not always demanded, but often hits the listener unasked-for and without mediation. It can be a place of undisguised criticism, or banality, in a private conversation, or a public appearance.

The statement by Susan Sontag comes not from her theoretical writing but from her early diaries, private notes she nevertheless designated

▸ Susan Sontag, “Reborn: Early Diaries 1947-1963”

as text that must reckon on being discovered. The cited passage, however, was written after she had indulged in some clandestine reading herself. She describes reading the diary of a former lover and discovering in it a scathing assessment of her character. In justifying her behaviour she indirectly reveals the contradictory nature and defining characteristic of the diary, being at once a secret and solitary place as well as an inner dialogue with others. It contains the danger and thrill of being read and raises moral issues when this happens covertly. The experience prompts her to speculate on whether the truth of confession can be differentiated from that of our actions, whether the mere fact that the writing in a diary is secret makes it more honest, or whether the confessional gesture is not more formulaic after all than our behaviour: "There is often a contradiction between the meaning of our actions toward a person and what we say we feel toward a person in a journal. But this does not mean that what we do is shallow, and only what we confess to ourselves is deep. Confessions, I mean sincere confessions of course, can be more shallow than actions." Sontag herself neither apportions blame nor admits guilt; the passage evinces the pleasure of describing personal constellations and the exigency of rendering their complexities accessible in writing. It is a self-ironic clinging to the diary, our own and others', as a place that can be occupied without compromise. To this extent the confession does not stand contrary to the idea of action but, in its dialogical structure and as writing about others, it is also something "that we do". Sontag's *Early Diaries* contain a whole series of imperatives and lists about how she thinks she should behave, long lists of words, lists of things to do, books read and yet to read, film titles and pieces of music. She writes: "Superficial to understand the journal as just a receptacle for one's private, secret thoughts – like a confidante who is deaf, dumb and illiterate. In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself."

Foucault describes confession as a technique and a ritual "which unfolds within a power relationship in which truth is corroborated against the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external circumstances, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it". This can initially be applied to speaking situations in which examination, listening, questioning, manipulation and expectation take place. The role of the questioner incorporates not only the desire to elicit truths but also to name and thus reify internal conditions. In the course of the potential categorisation of the knowledge gathered in this way a discourse is established whose origins frequently border on compulsion. One element of con-

fession as a scenario of revelation is the hidden and secretive, as well as the fascination for interpreting such empty spaces. "Privacy produces secrecy and that produces a gap in our knowledge," writes Peter Brooks, and he refers to the confession made under interrogation as the "story of a closed room", and to its questionable neutrality. The supposed discretion of these rooms becomes as much a part of the text as the uncertainty about whether and in what form what is expressed there should be disseminated. The presence of another who, Foucault says, is "not simply the interlocutor, but the authority", calls for a specific form of speech. And although we are dealing here with the speech of an individual, this can only be thought of as a monologue within a dialogue. The confession comes into being in relation to someone who is listening or reading and will make a judgement, someone onto whom one's own speech can be projected. The anticipation of further questioning by an interlocutor, the opportunity to share an experience or account for an action, or the option or obligation to make what is experienced public, sets off a process which later develops its own momentum. Whatever I have done and experienced, I can be questioned about it. Perhaps I start to anticipate the question, because talking about what I have done and experienced has become a recurring task. As a ritual this activity thrives on repetition; the impulse to overcome the resistance to self-narration becomes habitual, and the power relation within which this happens loses its contours in the course of the routine. Foucault's description of the potential of such speech to be deployed strategically as well as to get out of control sounds less like a mere root cause analysis of internalised control mechanisms and more like a description of the motivation for conducting a self-experiment. He speaks of "the invention of pleasure in the truth of pleasure", the "pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing and telling it, of captivating and capturing others with it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out into the open". In the sexual confession Foucault refers to and in confessional language more broadly, truth becomes a contentious field, where exhibiting and concealing alternate with and determine one another.

The perspective changes, however, when confession is interpreted as an ambivalent desire, a reluctant and fascinated border-crossing in the hope of some change or reality-altering effect which the speaker may notice within him or herself. This does not diminish the violent dimension of hidden or openly expressed and institutionalised demands for disclosure about oneself, but nor does it underestimate the quality of confessional speech as performance, as a scene where one represents, disavows or invents oneself, and one which may be provoked, observed or ignored by others. The presence of another

takes shape in the anticipated question and can represent power as much as control, coercion and invitation, attentiveness and being exposed, structure and openness; it creates dependence as much as obligation. The autobiographical text and the interview – as professional conversation – also take place between these poles and thus, too, the subjectivity displayed in each of them. In terms of format, it cannot be reduced either to a literary genre or to a formal confession of a deed. Instead it demonstrates the structural connectivity of the various contexts, as well as the ability of both sides to actively engage in the performative dimension of confession. If a certain awareness of the constructed and manipulated nature of confessional or honest speech is assumed to be present in autobiography, interview, etc. as forms of expression, then the attributes of construction and manipulation function as a sort of hinge for whatever intentions are involved.

He started out proudly and enthusiastically, believing that with this autobiography he would forge a new instrument, a new means of apprehending the world. Now he doesn't know anymore. ▷

To link the terms self-disclosure and technique is not exclusively motivated by the formal conditions under which confessional statements are produced or by the rhetorical practices of the questioner in an interview or interrogation. An inverse movement is described if 'talking-about-oneself' – the often disturbing and exposing attempt at truthful speech – is conceived as a technology: the confession certainly represents the desire to describe oneself, and ideally reveal in the process hidden and unknown elements. However it is always already an expression of a ritualised act of speaking and of value judgements that is confirmed or thrown into question. The attempt to talk about the motives behind one's actions with some objectivity while necessarily retaining the greatest possible proximity to the matter at hand implies a dual task of making oneself the subject of the narrative and at the same time allowing the 'I' to talk as undivided in order to reveal the subtext of one's own behaviour. To retell is to produce an abstraction in which something the narrator experienced beforehand is presented in relation to an outside. This unavoidably entails decisions about structure, not just in terms of what medium will be used but also about the way that which is spoken of is arranged.

In *The Traitor* André Gorz writes about himself in the third person without really producing a fictitious alter ego. He talks about him-

▷ André Gorz, "The Traitor", 1958

self as another, in order to avoid all forms of complicity with himself: “This is because, aside from all theoretical considerations, he has a horror of ‘I’”. The novel marks the beginning of his career as a writer and journalist and is permeated by attempts to allow the narrative of his own life to emerge in the course of writing, while systematising it at the same time. Experiences from childhood and youth are described in relation to political events and philosophical concepts, perceptions are listed like propositions and analysed. To describe this literary exercise as an “instrument and a new means of apprehending the world” also shows a desire to systemise his interaction with others. “Once again he has an absolute Rule which he wants to define him entirely, to relieve him of facing his own existence, to protect him against other people’s requirements.” He describes the limits of such systemisation and yet designates them as his praxis: as if he could shed responsibility for anything linked with identity, stylise subjectivity, submit to rules and protect the self from the grip and the questions of others. In *Letter to D*, a love letter to his wife which he wrote and published decades later, he comments on the concept behind *The Traitor*. He describes it as a “clinical portrait of his way of being and functioning” and a “refusal of existence”, the publication of which, however, prevented him from succumbing to this refusal. The realisation of the text forced him to transcend the person he perceived himself to be, to pursue goals he alone had not defined. His intentions exceeded themselves. Thus the melancholy of the text, which consistently declares its own failure, is overtaken by the success of its publication. For Gorz the textualisation of his own story is a means of objectification – less so to record objective truths, than to question former certainties, in that the work itself becomes external and challenges him.

The idea of self-disclosure as a game and technique is constantly reflected in the invention of rules, the fulfilment of tasks and a methodical approach. It is linked to a loose promise to practise certain modes of behaviour, to examine and thus be able to improve oneself. In one of his later texts, *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault traces this connection historically and analyses the shift to the Christian moral tradition whose increase in knowledge took aim at the forbidden. By comparison the ethical exercises of antiquity still conveyed a culture which made a daily task of taking care of oneself, of education, the body and inter-personal relationships. In his text he writes of “truth games related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves”, of “care of the self” as practice, dialogue as method, the culture of silence and the art of listening, the forms of “how an individual acts upon himself”, such as the regular evening practice of remembering the day’s events in letters to friends. Alone this simpli-

fied list shows that the activity of questioning oneself and explaining oneself to another person is a social and cultural construction, closely connected to notions of how one can influence oneself and one's own thoughts and actions. There were question-and-answer games and exercises to be completed while walking, which involved testing one's reactions to walking. Their purpose, according to Foucault, was not to decode the truth but to train oneself in order to influence one's own ideas, expectations and behavioural patterns by comparing them with direct experiences. At another point he writes that the rule is a means for doing something correctly and not something to be used to judge past events. However, he also calls this "a pre-Freudian machine of censorship". If self-testing improves the memory and mistakes "are simply good intentions left undone", then disclosure follows another concept here than that of Christian confession, which is already searching out false thoughts. The techniques of antiquity were applied to help recognise deviation from one's own principles rather than to force an admission of guilt.

To examine confession in the tradition of various techniques of observation, description and interaction that are coded socially and historically in various ways, also means to embrace it as optional, transformable and adaptable. What does it mean when the idea of ritualised speaking confronts an acting person and his or her unpredictable present speech? Should these not exclude one another? Is it possible to rehearse confession and become better at producing truths? Do criteria exist for the right way to talk about oneself? Andre Gorz's concept was to essentially move passively within a set of rules and to allow his story to be generalised in order to outwit himself by shifting the attention from himself. Precisely that which transcends our own ideas and intentions, which presents itself as a "negative, ineffective side of our action" has the potential, he believed, to correspond to the contradictions between one's own requirements and those of others. The tendency to systematise experience which is the methodological underpinning of *The Traitor*, and of the other examples in this text to a lesser extent, contains a double twist: The systematising effort involves an attempt to detect certain patterns in something previously experienced – to give half-conscious intentions the status of rules – while conversely, the idea of technique, in the sense of aesthetic principle, is applied to actions, and confession itself is understood as action in this sense. More is expressed here than a merely instinctive obedience to prevailing norms and expectations. To submit to extreme rules can also be an expression of withdrawing from the false option of a free speech.

There is no experimental theatre in sadomasochism. That's why I like it. Character is completely preordained and circumscribed. You're only top or bottom. There isn't any room for innovation in these roles. ▸

To accept clearly defined roles as specifications for one's own behaviour, for movements and acts of speech might establish a distance to familiar patterns of activity. These, however, neither throw into question the intensity of what is experienced, nor do they cancel out its performative effect – even invented or stylised self-disclosure can provoke relief and shame, or conversely the sensation of self-empowerment and rebellion. Chris Kraus, who in her novels and art critical essays expressly made the private realm the starting point of her thoughts, is also a counter-model to the concept of confession. In *Emotional Technologies* she writes, alternating constantly between first and third person, about the everyday life and observations of an artist and art critic in Los Angeles, whose perspective could obviously be that of Kraus herself. The question of how much truth or biographical reality these revelations contain becomes irrelevant. When, in another article (*Stick to the Facts*), Kraus describes candour as willingness “to speak to the present with a certain presence”, the focus is on the reciprocal dynamic between artistic-literary practice and personal engagement: how the personal changes as soon as it becomes public, and what happens when, conversely, one begins to understand it as an experimental set-up, organising it according to certain criteria. The expectation that sexuality and artistic work – and talking about these things – will involve authenticity is suspended if specific rules are followed. The counter-project staged by Kraus, in which subjectivity is dissolved by the fixed roles of sadomasochistic practices in order to eliminate the obligation to experiment and innovate, is certainly a thought-play as extreme as it is bold. It could be argued that there is indeed an experimental approach in the decision to act according to fixed rules for a certain amount of time, still more so when the decision is made from an aesthetic and self-reflexive perspective. Yet the example really does show the ambivalent relationship between, on one hand, sheer exposedness to a situation controlled from outside, and on the other, the intentional creation of an experience of exposure to control. The latter remains an experiment because the scene entered into remains bound to an individual and his or her specific context. But the more rigid the rules, the more minimal are the possibilities for variation, making self-observation easier. The less one seems to appear in what one does – the smaller the stakes – the greater the risk of delivering oneself to something over-

whelming. The exclusion of subjective, contingent gestures bespeaks a need – or amounts to an attempt – to delineate (or disrupt) those gestures’ hidden correlation to certain norms.

Essentially, the question concealed is how to trick the truce, how the imperative to produce a discourse about oneself can be appropriated deceptively and technique be revoked and rededicated. How can the question one begins to direct towards oneself be located as coming from outside – as an institutionalised structure and cultural convention. How can it then be tied back onto this outside, so that an answer is less a reflex than a positioning. In her chapter *Foucault’s Account of Himself* Judith Butler describes how Foucault himself behaves when questions are put to him. In an interview situation he avoids giving “causal explanations for why he came to think and act as he does” and, according to Butler, articulates his position in response to his interlocutor’s assumptions. She compares this approach to the shift in his concept of confession from a mere instrument of self-control to “self-examination as a practice of externalizing or publicizing oneself”. Butler is interested in the performative dimension of the “verbal and bodily scene of self-demonstration. The subject speaks itself, but in the speaking, it becomes what it is.” It would be possible to be quite comfortable inside the format of confession if the speech ultimately said as much about the listener as about the speaker, and any attempt to derive an unequivocal story from it had to fail. The truth created in this process would always be the truth of the situation. The act of describing experiences and the conditions under which the description takes place, themselves become an experience, and as such are more than a means to the end of delivering the content of the speech. To return to an economic and spatial vocabulary, the transfer of what has been experienced – which on one hand entails the outward projection of interiority through speech, and on the other the act of bringing oneself into the game – may be impossible as an immediate gesture. As a technique, however, that can be strategically deployed in order to meet the demands of both public and private summons to self-reflection, or indeed to rid oneself of them, one can make an offer or occupy the available offer with one’s own desire.

This book is a reply that I would otherwise have been forced to give. And I only demand that I shall be granted it; that one grants me now what then would have been an obligation. ▷

▷ Louis Althusser, “The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir”, 1985

SPACE

- This is where we meet.
- I like the fact that we have left our homes and are using a public space. Although I wonder if we're going to get into trouble with the camera.
- People are quiet here. Their movements are somehow restrained.
- I can see an older man at the other table, he's sleeping.
- I can see the orange wall behind you, it makes me aware of where we are.
- The branding colours of the building: orange and concrete.
- Are we looking for a background?
- I was thinking about locations where conversation takes place, where people are supposed to talk to each other.
- So we are using the surroundings of the building as a setting for our speech.
- It functions more as a separate element that remains external... however, it has an impact on the other elements of the image, like the words that we say.
- It sounds quite arbitrary. We could find that anywhere.
- Yes. Still it makes a difference.
- We could mention other aspects. It's not a neutral space. You remember when the guide who offers tours through the Centre explained how the textural surface of all these concrete columns had been made. The workers finished them off with pick hammers - no one could get that today, because of health and safety regulations. They had hand-held tools, and physically it's very strenuous for your body. We should count these columns.
- He also said they mixed in something in with the concrete that is actually darker, granite, in order to have a far more dominant monolithic approach. And as a result the whole scheme is much more unified and heavy and monolithic.

SPECULATION

- Do you think one could draw a parallel between the production of form and the production of the self as a form, the nexus between abstraction and confession, so to speak?

- In a way all attempts at knowledge have to do with getting out of yourself and going into something else, and in that there is a kind of paradox of an economy of speculation. On the one hand throwing yourself into the realm of the possible, but then trying to make it controllable and predictable. Financial speculation, for instance, can only work, if the future is the same as the present. Speculation can only work under certain social conditions. You can speculate on everything except the end of the conditions which make it possible to speculate. In a sense you can't really speculate on a future that's different from the present. So you have to have faith in a certain continuity. It is a self-undermining speculation.

- Yes, a kind of emptiness, no point of reference. It reminds me of other improvised situations in public, when one doesn't have much to start with or to relate to, only using what's there, the conversation, the space, the audience, but not a particular subject.

WHAT WE DO

- "It's interesting for me to think about it and also I am trying to analyse why I in my relation to you, why it is interesting to think what ..., because in a way I think in our conversation it is possible to have ... to just really ... or this is what I have felt... so then there's this question about what the listener and what we understand as also being a set of expectations about what is communicable in a certain situation or what you want to play with somehow and present. And I feel like it *is* possible to have these words and notes and situations and recordings and discussion in my relation to you, because I feel it's been clearly communicated that we could work with that material and that's enough in a way and then I have this feeling oh, if I would make it ... I was to say, well, actually now in this relation or this conversation I don't need to have this other object that would fulfil... that I want to work with in relation to this particular situation and what it should be, and what would be a kind of interesting effect of action or concept thing to introduce..."

- You're not saying anything! Although this is really the most interesting part for me.

- And then these gaps. I have to fill in these parts. It's as if these parts of the conversation got erased, as if I've censored saying it in some way, because I don't know exactly what it is I am trying to say.



LOOK

- I like the part about the look of grammar as an unconscious tyrant: "The exclamation mark, a direct annotation of tone, is uninteresting because it is blatant, but other marks which are not such overt signals of emotion still quietly operate as such – the arch of the apostrophe, the theatrical hesitancy of the dash, the demurring bracket which may hedge its bets, the self-important or nagging italicisation – whilst the very look of a semicolon is Nietzsche's walrus moustache in profile."

- I thought this could be a suitable comment in relation to your interpretation of the typeface *Marianna*, where you ask whether an alphabet could develop a hidden personality. I liked the whole paragraph: "'Invisible' traces to which a viewer might be sensitive; traces that are apprehended for later reference. More often than not, this is how we come to understand, or react to, a style. We receive a signal before we start reading." The alphabet as something that could be both used and designed and these two actions as being separated from each other.

SPACE II

- It's confusing to walk around here, guessing the underlying system of paths and walls, buildings and platforms, but not being able to decipher it just by walking.
- There's a yellow line on the floor that leads visitors from the subway through the whole complex. As if it could substitute an individually recoverable coordinate.
- This reminds me of the topographical metaphors that Denise Riley makes fun of. The idea of language as something that's shifting between one's inside and outside, and the undertaking to get to know yourself more deeply!
- It really is a curious convention that depth should be the measure of profundity and that literal superficiality should be synonymous with shallowness, don't you think?
- I know. There does appear to be some link between such spatial and consequently temporal figures of speech, and the strains inherent in selfnaming. How can I take on an identity?
- How to take on identity, but also how to repel it, or better reverse it – names, professions...

THEY

- I met a person who chose 'they' as their preferred pronoun. So one should say 'they' rather than 'she' or 'he' or 'it'. It was interesting what it produced in terms of confusion, because 'they' implies a plural, but ambiguously gendered rather than a single genderless person. It was a new experience to speak about or with a person, a change in your point of reference. It set up quite a different relationship in terms of their or my kind of understanding of them as a gendered person. I can't think of them in any other way than 'they'. I can't think of them as male or female.

DISGUISE

- And the concept of borrowing someone's experiences, which could either be filling up a lack of experience or a lack of competence, or both. Like being in disguise in order to distract attention, identification...

- Think of Echo, the echoing voice, which adds another aspect. When I link it to the act of quoting, its paradoxical status, namely the performative moment of repetition, becomes obvious: Echo as a figure needs the speech of the other to come into language/speech. Her position is one between appropriation and expropriation. She could never sincerely give an account of herself, unless confessing could be considered an echo in itself, an act of expropriation.

TRUTH

- The approaches to this vary across different historical periods. Certainly the 1970s and 80s were strongly affected by that which Foucault has described. At that time people felt an enormous pressure to say the truth, but each time they made the effort to perform this task they walked into the same trap. And then they were unable to pull themselves out of that pitfall. They felt forced to talk about their real feelings, and thus it was as if they tripped over a carpet, losing their selves in the process. This prompts the next question, how truth-telling is experienced today, and how it has been postmodernised.

- Still, the question arises of how to deal with language. What happens when something gets so stylised that, in a way, it becomes so divested of its content that it doesn't evoke any associations with anything any more, wouldn't that deprive oneself of the possibility of speaking and truly saying something? Indeed, sometimes one really means what one says and says what one means.

- I can sure do that.

- Yes, but what about the instance of constantly insisting that one's own speech is actually something different, or that it is already someone else who is always speaking through me, etc.; am I not thereby depriving myself precisely of the basis...

- You mean the basis of a language with which to convey a political statement?

PRONOUNS

- The use of 'I' produces a particular atmosphere in what you want to say. It works structurally, and it produces something in these very particular structures in terms of what a performer/speaker – listener relationship can be. How could one avoid using 'I'? This fragment of a text addresses the question of the 'I' as having a more subjective perspective. How can one produce a text that isn't consciously so self-aware or self-consciously trying to display oneself, regardless of what we think the possibility for presenting or what this presentational self is? I am also aware of this being a mode of performing, because the presentational self is not the same as what another self might be. I am interested in how to work away from using this more personal language or language that seems to be personal.

- Your interest is 'to work away', you said, to work yourself away?

- Yes, to sort of work out or work out and away. That could be something we could do together.

PRODUCT

- I want to think about confession as a sort of formalisation, a pleasurable self-alienation, a mode of distancing or abstraction through a supposed retrieval of the real which becomes the production of the true – the fascination of this production is inexhaustible since the self is always changing in every articulation that attempts to capture or carry out its realisation.

- Yes, a moment of not saying anything by saying everything, of not avoiding, but exceeding expectations, exceeding the ritual. Speech as coming into visibility or into a field of vision, and the addressee as always imaginary, the void that elicits speech, the incitation of the fantasy!



Works

(cover, inside) *Timing and Consistency*, two-channel video installation, 7:30 minutes, 2010; film location: Radio Eins, Berlin; cinematographer: Olaf Mach; *Timing and Consistency* (16 February - 26 March 2010) was the first part of the solo exhibition series *Group Picture* at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein curated by Kathrin Becker and Sophie Goltz.

(pages 2-4) *Sentence*, digital print on reflective foil, variable size, 2009

(pages 7-24 and 37-56) *Write it down!*, written and translated for this publication, 2010/2012

(pages 27-35) *blog like texts*, based on recorded or written conversations with David Bennewith, Stephan Geene, Emma Hedditch and Marina Vishmidt and include quotations from Denise Riley.

All other images document performances in different places, involving different people.

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Karolin Meunier

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Karolin Meunier © 2012
karolinmeunier@gmail.com

Jan van Eyck Academie
Academieplein 1
6211 Maastricht
The Netherlands
www.janvaneck.nl

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JVE