

## Blurred boundaries: Francis Bacon's portraits

TIMEA ANDREA LELIK

---

Traditionally the genre of portraiture relied on mimetic representation of the unique subjectivity of the person portrayed. Portraiture assumed that there was an implied unity between the sitters' outer expression and their inner essence, an illusion that dictated the construction of the traditional portrait. This meant that mimetic representation of the subject remained the main goal of the genre, attempting in this manner to capture the true essence of the sitter (Woodall 1997, 1). In the late 19th century, avant-garde artists challenged the conventional notion of the mimetic portrait, arguing that physical appearance was not representative of the inner essence of the subject. For this reason, at the turn of the century, portraiture became referential (where the subjects were evoked by referential symbols and not portrayed in a mimetic manner), rather than representational (van Alphen 2005, 25). Nevertheless, the genre still aimed to bring forth the unique subjectivity of the sitter, meaning that portraiture claimed for the subject a clearly graspable identity that could be fully understood by the viewers. This led to a standardized way of interpreting portraiture, where the viewers received concrete, comprehensible information about a stable subject.

When looking at Francis Bacon's portraits, one does not immediately recognize the subjects depicted. Moreover, while there are visible traces left of elements reminding of the subject's appearance (in Bacon's own words he wished his pictures looked "as if a human had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of a human presence" – Peppiatt 2008, 10), Bacon's works are far from mimetic depictions. Through a close reading of selected portraits, I will argue that by evading conventional mimetic representation through the use of specific visual tools, Bacon blurs the boundaries between object and subject, the portrait and its viewer, in order to remodel conventional notions of portraiture which relied on mimetic representation and likeness to evoke subjectivity. I will first analyze the significance of the genre of portraiture in Bacon's works and will further draw on Ernst van Alphen's theory of the "loss of self" (1992) experienced by the viewers when looking at Bacon's paintings. Referencing Gilles Deleuze's book *Francis Bacon: Logique de la Sensation* (1981; *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* 2003), I will re-interpret this theory through the prism of Buddhism, arguing that understanding the works on the basis of Buddhist practices opens up the possibility of a complete transformation of preexisting con-

cepts that traditionally shaped portrait making. I will specifically analyze similarities shared by Deleuze's interpretation of Bacon's works and Buddhist philosophy and how the reading of these Bacon compositions through these lenses exposes a new functioning potentiality for the genre of portraiture.

### FRANCIS BACON AND PORTRAITURE

In this first section I will explain the role of portraiture in Bacon's work by elucidating what it is not. In his book *Face and Mask: A Double History* (2017) Hans Belting clarifies that in a traditional Western portrait the represented face is reduced to a fixed state, and therefore transformed into a mask (78). Diminished to a rigid format that can no longer change expression, the face is exchanged for a façade. He further argues that as the real face is ungraspable, fleeting, transitory, and multifaceted, the mask can never become a living face. When portraits become masks, they reference an outer state that they cannot reproduce. Belting considers that the first time the mask became a self-referential object was at the end of the nineteenth century when the new death mask emerged (78). In this case, the face became the image by referring just to itself, as it had nothing else to represent (given that its original face model was absent after the making of the death mask): "only when the face is transformed into its own mask can it become – and remain – entirely an image" (78). In this way, clarity has finally been reached through a stability that was missing from the face of the living. "The death mask became a totemic object that permitted the creation of a nostalgic cult of the timeless, authentic face" (78). Belting elucidates this concept of the death mask as an object that can become self-referential (and therefore not relying to an outside reality) discussing *L'Inconnue de la Seine* (Unknown Woman of the Seine) (1900), whose death mask was countless reproduced in plaster and photographs around 1900 due to the apparent beauty and deceptive smile it carried. This death mask, again, was not alluding to the deceased but was rather an image of death itself (80). Belting quotes Maurice Blanchot in saying that "in the otherness of the corpse one could also see that of the image, which produces a new kind of similarity, by referring to nothing more than itself" (80). In the context of a time when the face's claim to authenticity was being questioned, this type of self-referential image offered a new refuge (80).

In opposition to the mask, most of Bacon's portraits are painted in (a deforming) motion rather than a fixed state. I will explain at a later moment what is being depicted through that motion in these portraits when discussing Gilles Deleuze's theory about Bacon and the depiction of bodily sensations. Nevertheless, not all works are made through utter deformations. In stark contrast to other portraits of the time, Bacon's series of death masks after William Blake's life mask (mask that has been cast while Blake was still alive) are the only ones that do not seem to have undergone significant bodily deformations. As noted by Belting, Bacon did not change much from the original when painting the mask. However, everything seems to have come out different in his works. In a similar vein, van Alphen argues that Bacon's representation seems to be imbued with life rather than death through such details as expressivity, the mouth slit, and the eyelashes (1992, 105). While Blake's mask freezes

life in a rigid state, Bacon's works revolt against the mask and through his signature style they create the appearance of life (Belting 2017, 156). Bacon's works therefore are not traditional portraits that transform faces into masks, but through motion and blurring, they transcend a rigid fixity on the way to create a new type of portraiture.

To further the understanding of Bacon's relationship to the genre of portraiture, I will also draw upon van Alphen's analysis of *Two Studies for a Portrait of George Dyer* (1968), a work depicting a dressed version of George Dyer posing in front of a canvas that shows a nude version of himself. Van Alphen explains that by presenting the resulting portrait of the posing Dyer as naked and pinned down to the canvas, Bacon hints at the fact that Dyer has been sacrificed for representation. The naked painted portrait in the background seems to suggest the sacrificial nature of portraiture, and hence that of conventional representation (van Alphen 2013, 70).

*Three Figures and Portrait* (1975) is another example which supports this reading. The three moving figures are seen in clear opposition to a nailed down portrait: while the figures seem alive, the representation is static and immobilized by a nail in the wall, figuratively pinning the subjects within the canvas space. These examples seem to suggest that portraiture, through representation, attempts to pin the body down. The nails hint at the sacrificial nature of portraiture, meaning that portrait depictions sacrifice something of their sitter. The sacrifice in this case is that of subjectivity, as traditional portraiture promised to deliver a representation of the unique subjectivity of the sitter. Consequently, the genre of portraiture – with its traditional conventions – is not able to completely render subjectivity. For this reason, portraiture as a genre needs to re-determine the conditions that originally shaped it in order to be able to construct a novel manner in which portraits can be understood.

While Bacon's works critique mimetic representation – and therefore traditional portraiture – as an attempt to annihilate subjectivity, his works still make use of the genre. Why does he fall back on portraiture if portraiture is not able to render subjectivity (keeping in mind that Bacon's aim was to render someone's "emanation")? Bacon himself offers a first hint at how to interpret his works by referencing Diego Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647–1651): "If you don't understand the *Rokeby Venus*, you don't understand my work" (Bacon 2018). He therefore suggests that his works – in a similar fashion to the *Rokeby Venus* – cannot be read in a straightforward manner, but rather require a careful visual contemplation.

To this day there are several interpretations to Velazquez's masterpiece hanging in the National Gallery in London, but it is a well-known fact that at first most viewers do not fully grasp the painting's subtle details. The scene shows Venus lying in her bed with Cupid holding up a mirror in front of her. Given the way in which the mirror is being held as well as the pink decorative elements, there is no doubt that the mirror is used for grooming or vanity purposes. "The problem is that the vantage point from which the scene is represented (as well as the vantage point of the viewer, were they to differ) is different from the vantage point of Venus. Therefore, if we see Venus' face nicely framed inside the mirror, she must see something quite different. If the painter reproduced what he saw, then the model must have seen the painter in the mirror" (Bertamini, Latto, and Spooner 2003, 593–599). This means that Venus is looking at

the viewer who is looking at Venus, thus the whole work revolves around the act of looking and being looked at. This same principle operates in Bacon's works as well. Van Alphen explains the use of the motif of the mirror in Bacon's work through a close reading of *Study of a Nude with a Figure in the Mirror* (1969). While the female nude is exposed to the viewer in a similar fashion to traditional nude representations, the mirror on the right side of the figure is also turned towards the viewer. This positioning seems to create an analogy between the seated figure reflected in the mirror and the viewer. The exposed female nude, however, replicates the same leg position as the male figure, meaning that these two figures share the same feature. The viewer does so analogously, whose function is represented by the male character (2013, 69). Thus, the viewer becomes contaminated and part of the composition, the cycles of looking and being looked at.

This situation is further complicated by Bacon's specific instructions on always presenting his works behind glass (Sylvester 2000, 23–24). When looking at the works, the viewers at first see themselves. It takes effort and good positioning to see the figures behind the glass, and even so, the onlookers are continually confronted by their own reflection. I will refer to this aspect of Bacon's practice (in the same manner as I have done when discussing Munch's hybrid portrait genre) as "framing the viewer" (2019, 133–153). Reflection theory as well as the physical reflection of painting behind glass is a crucial tool for interpreting Bacon's portraits. It is through such devices that Bacon frames the viewers to become part of the compositions and eventually identify with his figures.

In *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (1992) van Alphen explains the identification of the viewer with the figures through the theory of the "affective" quality of Bacon's works in terms of violence done to the viewer by the works: the particular moving quality, in a literal sense (11). Van Alphen argues that Bacon's works oppose narrativity in a story-conveying sense, however they do not fully rid themselves of narrativity. He argues that Bacon's works focus on the activity of the narrative process: "This process is not repeatable; it cannot be iterative because it takes place, it happens, whenever 'story' happens" (28). He further argues that while the paintings are not narrative, they are experienced as such because they appear to be in motion: "Bacon's narrativity, the illusion of narrative his work arouses, does not so much involve the representation of a perceived sequence of events, but the representation of perceiving as a sequence of events, which are embodied, not illustrated, by the figures" (30). Therefore, the viewers experience the figures in motion, in such a way that they are "moved" in the same way as the figures.

The mirror and the lamp in Bacon's works are not used in accordance with Western traditions of representing these elements. Regarding the problematic reflection of the mirror images, van Alphen discusses the possibility of negative hallucination, either from the viewer or the subject itself (75). Nevertheless, the uncertainty about the experience of the hallucination fosters an instability of vision and thus instantiates an instability of identity. "Identity, selfhood, seems to depend on who sees what. When the mirror image is stable, the figure has a demarcated identity. Identity gets blurred when the mirror image cannot be identified as mirror reflection" (75). This

identity crisis is further reflected in the motif of the double, the “Doppelgänger”: because there are two identical figures there is too much identity (van Alphen 2019, 174). “In opposition to the lack of identity between mirror reflection and mirrored object, and the eroded identities of the deformed dissolving bodies, the motif of the double can be read as an artificial strategy for establishing or reinstating identity” (1992, 76).

Identity overall is unachievable for Bacon’s subjects. They are confined to closed spaces and positions that do not allow them to see their own bodily (self) perspective in the surrounding world. Due to fragmentation – bodily and spatial, that of the space that surrounds the body – Bacon’s figures cannot be perceived as whole by the viewers. As wholeness depends on the gaze of the other, as soon as one is seen by the other, one becomes whole. Since in this case neither figures nor viewers can become whole, they both equally experience a loss of self. “He leaves figures, as well as onlookers, with their lack of self, which is paradoxically the only situation in which the idea of self, not defined by others or by the surrounding space, can be felt and kept alive” (162). This suggests that a way of maintaining one’s subjectivity is clear delimitation from the other by “loss of self.” As long as one is at a safe distance from the other’s unifying and at the same time stereotyping gaze, they are able to maintain their own subjectivity. Nevertheless, I propose here an alternative manner of sustaining subjectivity, not by escaping from the other, but rather by *identifying with the other*.

When discussing Munch’s strategy of “framing the viewer” I have argued that through carefully chosen compositional devices such as the insertion of landscape into portraiture, Munch frames the viewers to directly interact with the subject of the composition. The landscape in these paintings is intelligently constructed around the subject in such a way that it propels the figure into the arms of the onlooker. In Bacon’s case when dealing with landscape and portraiture, van Alphen has argued that there is no delimitation between the figure depicted and the surrounding landscape. In works such as the studies for Van Gogh’s portraits, both figure and landscape are executed with large strokes of thick paint, whereas normally Bacon clearly delineates between the figure and its perfectly smooth surrounding. Van Alphen argues that in these compositions Bacon makes the space that surrounds Van Gogh a metaphor of the body – “the landscape is in fact a bodyscape” – where the two form one continuity. The lack of difference between body and space blurs the line between the conceptual categories of inside and outside (142–147). “The space of representation is an ambiguous zone. Just as the line between inside and outside cannot be drawn, so also the distinction between model and representation is fluid” (152). As there is no homogeneous space that could give form and identity to the subject within it (152), a clearly definable and graspable subjectivity cannot be represented in such a composition. I will argue at a later stage however that it is at the convergence of inside and outside where pre-conceived concepts of a stable and depictable subjectivity can be completely re-modeled.

The ambiguity of ontological dimensions in Bacon’s work can be elucidated through a close reading of *Portrait of Henrietta Moraes on a Blue Couch* (1965). In this composition Moraes is depicted on a blue couch that seems to be at the same

time inside and outside of the opening door (a door that is also made of two parts). There is also a circular object on the pillow that could represent a mirror. Even if it does not reflect anything, it could possibly allude to Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus*. Here again we are brought back to the act of looking and being looked at, but in this case the viewers cannot tell whether the subject is inside or outside of the painting they are viewing. As the work is behind glass, the viewer sees his or herself projected on the canvas, factually becoming part of the composition, through his or her representation inside the glass of the picture frame. Depending on the angle, the gallery space where the painting is hanging is also reflected back into the work, creating the impression that the reclining female figure is in the same physical space as the onlooker. Bacon therefore frames the viewers to appear in the same ontological space as his figures: the viewer's image appears next to the image of the figure or the figure appears next to the onlooker. *They are both in the portrait meaning that they are in fact both portraits.*

Bacon sees mimetic representation as sacrificing the subject, therefore he evades this by representing his subjects in motion. In addition to the moving bodily deformations experienced by the figures, Bacon manipulates the way his figures are perceived by onlookers. Nevertheless, he does not stop here, but rather further stages a direct identification between the figures and the onlookers, making the viewers part of the compositions. The viewers become the subjects of the portraits. But what do these portraits depict and how do they influence and manipulate the perception of the viewer?

### GILLES DELEUZE, FRANCIS BACON, AND BUDDHISM

In my argument I will further refer to Gilles Deleuze's book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (2003) to explain the states experienced by the subjects in Bacon's portraits. Deleuze explains that in his works, Bacon avoids the illustrative in order to escape narrative stories that would appeal to the intellectual understanding of the viewer. Bacon appeals instead to the "figural", where he isolates the Figures (when referencing Bacon's works Deleuze capitalizes the word figure in order to make a clear distinction between Bacon's Figure and the figure seen from a representational, figurative approach in painting) in large fields of uniform colors that co-exist on the same level with the Figure. Their common limit, the Contour, is the place of double exchange between Figure and Structure. This exchange results in movements that are real passages and states, physical and affective and which constitute sensations and not imaginings. Bacon's goal therefore consists of recording the fact, what Deleuze names the "sensation", which is transmitted directly to the senses, avoiding the detour of the story which passes through the brain. When the Figures experience sensations, a zone of indiscernibility arises. According to Deleuze this creates a moment of deep identity with the Figure, more profound than any sentimental identification, which is the process of *becoming*. He concludes that what is rendered in Bacon's works are invisible forces made visible and which need to be acknowledged and accepted rather than being distracted by them. Through this visibility the body affirms the possibility of triumphing over these hidden forces.

There have been previous attempts at reading Deleuze's philosophical writings through the prism of religion. Few studies have made a parallel with Buddhist philosophies however, Simon O'Sullivan traces similarities between these two philosophies in his article interpreting Deleuze's reading of Bergson and Spinoza (O'Sullivan 2014, 257–261). He starts by explaining that Deleuze and Guattari's collaborative book *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (1980; *A Thousand Plateaus*, 2004) has explicit resonances with contemporary Buddhism. With the emphasis on pragmatics, as “*A Thousand Plateaus* is a book to be used and not just read, advocating for the subject's transformation which affirms *Becoming over Being*” (257). O'Sullivan's definition of Buddhism builds upon concepts such as the ontological conditions of existence and the transitory state of beings, rather than a strict religious doctrine indebted to a Buddha (or any other form of God or Divinity). “Buddhism offers an ethical programme aimed, ultimately, at a kind of self-transcendence, at least of a self that is fixed and set against the world” (258). O'Sullivan links this *modus operandi* to Deleuze's ideas from *Différence et Répétition* (1968; *Difference and Repetition*, 1995) and brings these ontological terms together under the concept of immanence: “In Deleuzian terms we might say, Buddhism provides instruction on how to access – and in a sense determine – this groundless ground of our being: meditation, for example, that allows for a contact with an infinite potentiality that lies behind our habitual, and finite, being” (259). He further states that Buddhist meditation allows access to an outside realm from which our subjectivity has itself been formed and it is at the convergence of the inner and outer domains that meaning is produced. In Deleuze's reading of Bergson it is suggested that this point can be accessed through the gap between stimulus and response.

This in-between point – between action and reaction – is the key moment when the cycle of self-repeating unsatisfactory actions can be broken. Meditation cultivates awareness of the bodily sensations occurring continuously and at any given time, and the mindful observation of events called insight or *vipassana* is what leads the meditator in liberating their selves from an ongoing world-process (Prebish and Keown 2010, 120). By not reacting to the sensations, or “hesitancy” to reaction in Bergsonian terms, a certain creativity replaces the old impulsive-reactive modes of behavior, liberating the organism from predetermined patterns of action.

Buddhist meditation, this time as insight practice (*vipassana*), allows an experimental encounter with this other place – of forever changing relations of intensities – that in itself produces a self-overcoming [...]. This “knowledge” – of impermanence–insubstantiality–interconnectedness – is not solely intellectual but is, precisely, bodily. It is a direct experience, registered on the body – of the rising and fallings, the comings and goings, of sensation (Prebish and Keown 2010, 261).

Deleuze interprets the bodily deformations in Bacon's works as reaction to sensations experienced by the body. Buddhist practices always advocate for a conscious engagement in the observation of the sensations acting on the body. In Deleuze's reading, the experiencing of these sensations creates a zone of indiscernibility which has a transcendental potential (between man and animal, but also between the viewers and the Figure, as the viewer identifies with the Figure, meaning that the viewer

has the same experiences as the Figure). Similarly, in Buddhist practices, meditation allows an experimental encounter with another place that in itself produces a self-overcoming. Thus far, Deleuze's reading of Bacon's works shares many similarities with certain Buddhist concepts.

In another essay comparing writing on art and the Buddhist *puja*, O'Sullivan proposes a case study of what the *puja* *does* rather than what it is (a concept similar to Deleuze and van Alphen's understanding of Bacon's works in terms of what they do rather than what they mean) (2001, 115–121). The *puja* is a ceremony centered around an arrangement of objects related to the figure of the Buddha. It is a ritual but also an immersive space, where all senses are engaged, and one that attempts to operate as a portal to other worlds in which the invisible (that which lies outside the human register) can be made visible (116–117). Besides sensations, the *puja* also involves becoming. Buddha, understood as a presence, “works as a border guard/guide between worlds and also as a manifestation of the possibility of moving into these other worlds. [...] The Buddha then is the possibility of what we can become (a vision and aspiration). [...] Human but also *transhuman*” (117). Meditation, the grounds for the arising of “Enlightenment,” leads to self-overcoming that is the goal of the *puja*. In this ritual there is a certain surrendering of one's self to that which lies beyond oneself. The *puja* “celebrates this line of flight from the self as an affirmation of the potentiality of all beings to become more than what they are (to transform themselves)” (118). What the *puja* and Buddhist practices add then to the possibility of self-overcoming is the potentiality of complete change/transformation, a moment of complete creativity that allows re-writing and re-determining of the old self.

To return to Bacon's works, Deleuze's identified state of indiscernibility achieved in Bacon's works corresponds to the key moment in meditational practices between action and reaction when the cycle of self-repeating unsatisfactory actions can be broken. Both refer to a self-transcendental (self-overcoming) potential. In Buddhist practices, this point between action and reaction goes a step further, asserting that this is the moment when pre-determined conditions can be re-determined. At this point one can create him or herself anew, no longer accepting previously created and accepted values or assumptions. As Bacon's works are mostly portraits, it is the portrait in his oeuvre that offer the possibility of self-overcoming for both subject and object. What is added to the genre of portraiture in Bacon's works when reading it through the prism of Buddhist practices is the opening up of the potential of complete transformation of pre-determined conditions of the genre.

### FRANCIS BACON'S PORTRAITS AND BUDDHIST MEDITATION PRACTICES

If we analyze Bacon's works through Deleuze's interpretation and its similarities to Buddhist practices, we understand that the figures' bodily deformations are a result of their experiencing the continually arising and passing sensations which occur in all beings at any given time. The deformations, just as the sensations, are continuously changing and therefore materialize as diverse bodily distortions. The whole body – or “emanation” as described by Bacon – is a continuous flow of energy.

The body, as a mass of energy, is in continuous interaction with the outside world through its sense organs – interactions which trigger a bodily reaction. Once a sensation has occurred – of aversion or pleasure – and has been interpreted as positive or negative, an immediate reaction will follow (I hit my leg and as a result I will scream out in pain). If this reaction were to be represented in painting, it would be narrative, a narrative sequence, as whatever would be painted would be the direct effect of a cause. The reaction would entail a movement that would lead to a logical course of action. As Bacon's figures seem to be in movement, they are interpreted as reacting to a situation that they are experiencing in the moment. Bacon's figures, however, are not responding to external actions. As explained by Deleuze, the movement they are undergoing is due to the sensations exerted upon them from the inside. Nevertheless, they do not engage in coherent action. The facial expressions and grimaces the figures display inform the viewers about the type of sensation they are experiencing.

Bacon seems to have depicted a great number of figures experiencing sensations that create aversion, hence the screaming and grinding of teeth so often encountered in his paintings. Nevertheless, these expressions are in fact motionless: they are mute screams; screams that only mimic the action of screaming. Deleuze explains: "What fascinates Bacon is not movement, but its effect on an immobile body: heads whipped by the wind or deformed by an aspiration, but also all the interior forces that climb through the flesh. "To make the spasm visible" (Deleuze 2003, XI). In such works as *Landscape with Pope/Dictator* (1946), *Fragment of a Crucifixion* (1950) or *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953) – the scream is immobilized on the figure's face through the act of representation. When one screams in pain one's face will be contorted to accommodate the very physical action of screaming. Bacon's figures however only open their mouth to show the way a scream would occur. These figures seem to receive the sensation, they evaluate it, yet they do not act out fully the reaction. Moreover, at times Bacon's figures seem to experience positive sensations as well. In the portrait *Study for Head of George Dyer* (1967) the depicted head has a peaceful expression. Numerous forces are acting upon this face, creating contortion, deformation, and movement, nevertheless the head seems to be at peace in this moment, with the eyes closed, in what seems to be a serene moment of contemplation on the forces being exerted upon it. Regardless of its positive or negative nature, it is this moment of intense sensorial experience and observation that is depicted in Bacon's works.

The question certainly remains why such figures in *Study After Velazquez* (1950) or *Study for Head* (1952) seem actively engaged in the act of screaming, with contracted facial muscles completely absorbed in the action. Deleuze explains that "in the end, Bacon's Figures are not racked bodies at all, but ordinary bodies in ordinary situations of constraint and discomfort. A man ordered to sit still for hours on a narrow stool is bound to assume contorted postures. The violence of a hiccup, of the urge to vomit, but also of a hysterical, involuntary smile..." (x). When comparing this reading to Buddhist meditation practices, one knows that while complete awareness and equanimity are desired in meditation, physical pain, even if closely monitored,

can still act out. These are the moments during meditation when one changes position, sneezes, coughs, cries, or laughs. These works could therefore be interpreted as studies that capture the moment of distraction that escapes close scrutiny and allows for the acting out or experiencing of the sensation exerted upon the body.

As one advances in the meditation practice and becomes more familiar with the technique, one gains more control over the reaction process and becomes less distracted by strong sensations. In the 1940s and 1950s, Bacon's figures seem to be at the beginning of their meditative process, as they are depicted blurrier, murkier and agitated. By the end of Bacon's career his figures become much clearer in execution (such as *Study for a Portrait of John Edwards*, 1988, or *Two Studies for a Portrait*, 1990), with less distortions, contractions, and movement. It seems that with the passing of years, Bacon depicted figures that have more control over their reactions and can remain neutral despite their bodily sensations. Deleuze explained this as the affirmation of the possibility of victory over the deforming invisible forces that are now visible, and therefore graspable: "When the visual sensation confronts the invisible force that conditions it, it releases a force that is capable of vanquishing the invisible force, or even befriending it" (62). Befriending, therefore, can be seen in Bacon's case as an acceptance of the forces acting upon the body at all times.

### BLURRED BOUNDARIES

To further develop my argument, I propose considering this common moment of in-betweenness the figures are caught in as the very moment when transformation can occur. The instance that Deleuze identifies as the moment of becoming and which in Deleuze's reading of Bacon's works concerns a deep identification between man and animal/Figure and viewer, in Buddhism corresponds to a point of maximum awareness, where self-transcendence can be taken to a further level. This is not only a self-transcendent moment of interaction with another, as Deleuze suggests, but also a moment when one can access an outside realm from which subjectivity has itself been formed; it is at the convergence of inside and outside where pre-conceived concepts of a stable and depictable subjectivity can be completely re-modeled. When one looks at a portrait, one tries to understand this based on a pre-supplied set of rules for understanding a portrait. Nevertheless, in this moment of becoming there is a possibility of re-determining the way a portrait can be understood. The re-determining begins at first at a formal level where the Figures are neither figurative nor abstract; they are rather in a state of indiscernibility. Before Bacon there were no portraits where the subjects were captured in this in-between moment, which transforms the work into what Deleuze also calls neither subject nor object. In Bacon's works the figures are not presented in a moment that speaks of their individuality, neither are they caught in a moment of complete absence of individuality, but rather in a state of transition, of becoming. As neither subject nor object, the portrait enters a state of in-between where its pre-determined parameters can be re-determined. In this moment it does not need to represent or evoke for the viewer, nor to solely engage and interact with the viewer. The portrait does not now consign the Figure to immobility but, on the contrary, renders apprehensible a kind of progression, an

exploration of the Figure's potentiality. In this moment of re-determination the portrait in Bacon's works does not fall back on the concepts of clear distinction between portrait and viewer, rather it becomes one with its viewer.

In his essay "Making Sense of Affect" van Alphen explains that the invisible reality made visible in Bacon's works touches the viewer as much as the Figures, through affects: "that is, by the surface layers, which are senseless as such, but are put into motion by the painter in such a way that they touch us" (2013, 67). Affects and percepts activate and stimulate the viewer's senses to a point where the "viewers are touched directly and almost violently by the material presence of his paintings. It is as if our skin is penetrated by affects generated by the presence of what we see: not a mediated story, but the material reality of the painting" (66). The deformations going on in the painting are therefore not only directed to the Figures, but also to the viewers, where the deformations are brought onto the Figures and the viewers alike. Van Alphen further explains that "how he wants to affect the viewer imply that the figures in Bacon's paintings can be seen as representing viewers: the bodies in the paintings exhibit the kind of responses that the viewer is also intended to have. His figures are hit by sense perception in the same way as the viewers of Bacon's paintings are" (73). Bacon's works therefore become portraits of the viewers who are intended to experience the same bodily sensation as the figures depicted.

Consequently, the portrait does not just represent – it creates. Through entering the painting (similar to entering the puja) both the viewer and the Figures have the capacity to transform themselves – to become more than what they already are. The portrait is no longer a fixed point, a reassuring mirror of (one's own) subjectivity, but an experiment in exploring what lies beyond a fixed subjectivity. The portrait is a zone of transformation, an aesthetic zone in which boundaries between subjects and objects are blurred. In Bacon's works as well as in Buddhist practices, interest lies in affects rather than meanings, experience rather than understanding, and transformation rather than representation. All of this is a call for participation in accessing something outside one's own boundaries of subjectivity. This does not limit the de-coding of the portrait but rather opens it up for further interpretation. The portrait becomes an *event*, where determinate relations between the portrait and the viewer disappear.

Subjectivity is therefore rendered in the process of transformation as one has no stable identity. We can only hint at the changing nature of identity through change – one needs to transform, to become, in order to realize this. One can only grasp transformation via transforming oneself: through the process of becoming, while viewing these portraits. Portraiture therefore does not remain a stable composition that can render certainty, rather it becomes a fluid process that adapts alongside the viewer. These portraits show subjectivity in transformation in order to reflect reality. There is no such thing as a portrait that fully encapsulates inner features or characteristics. The portrait is something in continuous change, which cannot be pinned down. The only way to create a truthful portrait is to render the change. The only way to understand the change is to identify with it. Through becoming – in a Buddhist sense – one transcends his or her own self. One no longer perceives subjectivity as something

stable, belonging only to oneself, but rather understands it as being ungraspable and in continuous change.

## LITERATURE

- Alphen, Ernst van. 1992. *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Alphen, Ernst van. 2005. *Art in Mind. How Contemporary Images Shape Thought*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Alphen, Ernst van. 2013. "Making Sense of Affect." In *Francis Bacon: Five Decades*, ed. by Anthony Bond, 65–73. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Alphen, Ernst van. 2019. "Reading for Affects: Francis Bacon and the Work of Sensation." In *How to Do Things with Affects: Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices*, ed. by Ernst van Alphen and Tomáš Jirsa, 163–176. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Bacon, Francis. 2018. *Bacon's Women*. New York: Ordovas.
- Belting, Hans. [2013] 2017. *Face and Mask. A Double History*. Trans. by Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bertamini, Marco, Richard Latto, and Alice Spooner. 2003. "The Venus Effect: People's Understanding of Mirror Reflections in Paintings." *Perception* 32, 5: 593–599.
- Deleuze, Gilles. [1981] 2003. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. by Daniel W. Smith. London and New York: Continuum.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Felix. [1980] 2004. *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. by Brian Massumi. London and New York: Continuum.
- Lelik, Timea Andrea. 2019. "Framing the Viewer: Edvard Munch's Hybrid Genres." In *Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference* 7: 133–153.
- Peppiatt, Michael. 2008. *Francis Bacon: Studies for a Portrait*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Prebish, Charles S. and Damien Keown. 2010. *Introducing Buddhism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- O'Sullivan, Simon. 2001. "Writing on Art (Case Study: The Buddhist Puja)." *Parallax* 7, 4: 115–121.
- O'Sullivan, Simon. 2014. "A Life between the Finite and Infinite: Remarks on Deleuze, Badiou and Western Buddhism." *Deleuze Studies* 8, 2: 256–279.
- Sylvester, David. 2000. *Looking Back at Francis Bacon*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Woodall, Joanna. 1997. "Introduction: Facing the Subject." In *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. by Joanna Woodall, 1–25. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

## Blurred boundaries: Francis Bacon's portraits

---

Portraiture. Francis Bacon. Gilles Deleuze. Buddhism.

In his oeuvre Francis Bacon hints at the fact that portraiture sacrifices the subject for the sake of representation. For this reason, portraiture as a genre needs to re-determine the conditions that originally shaped it. Through an analysis of the manner in which Bacon depicts his subjects I will argue that his portraits blur the boundaries between object and subject, portrait and viewer, in order to remodel conventional notions of portraiture. Through Gilles Deleuze's theory on Francis Bacon, I will reinterpret Bacon's works through the prism of Buddhism, arguing that understanding the works through Buddhist practices opens the possibility of a complete transformation of preexisting concepts which traditionally shaped portrait making.

---

Timea Andrea Lelik, MA  
ASCA, Amsterdam School  
for Cultural Analysis  
University of Amsterdam  
Turfdraagsterpad 15  
1012 XT Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
t.a.lelik@uva.nl