

CHAPTER 6

Artists-in-progress

Narrative Identity of the Self as Another

Linda Sandino

Victoria & Albert Museum

Following Paul Ricoeur's formulation of narrative identity as the dialectic of sameness (*idem-*) and change (*ipse-*)identity, this paper explores the trope of incompleteness in extracts from two artists' life stories to suggest that the synthesizing totality of the life history is continually interrupted, or broken, by accounts of new creative directions and the search for symbolic expression which mark the *ipse*-identity of the artist's selfhood. A coherent identity does not just refer to the singularity of that self but must also contend with the ascription of 'artist', the historical and cultural contingency of which is made manifest in the testimony of the life stories. Rather than seeing narrative emplotment leading towards a culmination or conclusion ["I became an artist"], narrative constitutes the means whereby the 'discordant concordance' of the temporal aporia of becoming and being an artist is enabled via the reflective ipseity that marks narrative identity's fractures and disruptions.

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Introduction

This paper draws on life stories of applied artists undertaken as part of an oral history project,¹ focusing in particular on two ceramicists: one who works within a functional tradition, and another whose work is abstract. The project provides

1. VIVA [Voices in the Visual Arts] oral history project is the author's on-going research project based the University of the Arts London, following on from life history recordings held at The British Library National Sound Archive <http://www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/nlsc.html> for Artists' Lives, Architects' Lives, An Oral History of British Fashion, and Craft Lives. VIVA consists of life history interviews with a small number of practitioners in the visual arts whose professional practices includes painting, graphic design and branding, publishing, ceramics, curatorial practice, art writing and criticism. For more information see <http://www.vivavoices.org>.

the occasion for the artists to reflect on their past, and like all historical narratives, “Rethinking has to be a way of annulling temporal distance” (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 146), a means of closing the gap between the self-that-was, the speaking, current self, and the projected self. Life stories occupy a position between autobiography and biography in that they are assisted narratives, the product of an interaction between interviewer and interviewee who engage in a quasi-conversation where one tries to understand the other. From the very outset, the adventure is shaped as a quest in search of a totality (the life), which the dialogic structure subverts by questions, observations, comments. To record life stories means to engage with others, and “an abandonment of the self in a quest to enter the world of another” (Andrews, 2007, p. 15). A text that is created from this encounter, supposedly the life of the artist’s self becomes nevertheless an account of encounters with the world (people, objects, artworks) that show how identity created in narrative (*narrative identity*) is always in process and incomplete.

The two examples below provide an opportunity for seeing narrative at work in artists’ life histories as the means whereby narratives about their objects are, for artists, narratives of identity; to talk about the work is to talk about the self. The two accounts are not presented as privileged representations of the authorial voice, nor am I endorsing “the core assumptions of the interview society” which, as has been argued, assumes that personal narratives provide “uniquely privileged means of access to biographically grounded experiences and meaning” (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997, p. 304). My aim is rather to show how the presumed coherent identity of artists is subject to breaks and re-refraction in stories about encounters with others. Rather than the autonomous, creative individual, these extracts show how artists are situated in a network of relationships with things and people that configure the stories they are able to tell about themselves as artists, as selves that are relational, in terms of others, and in terms of themselves as other in narrative (Ricoeur, 1992). Although the figure of Artist can be said to provide the overall plot which brings the narrative together, the artist-self is never complete and it is in encounters with others in and through their works that that the project of becoming an artist is achieved, but not completed.

Fits and Starts

In his account of an artist’s inability to progress meaningfully in his life story, Mark Freeman (2004) has proposed the concept of ‘narrative foreclosure’. As a mature artist, Freeman’s subject has so internalized cultural scripts about ageing and what

it means to be an artist that he cannot continue as before.² Echoing Ricoeur's emplotment as synthesis, Freeman's study is extremely helpful in thinking about artists' life narratives 'fit', 'understood as that measure of consonance which derives from the retrospective ordering of a life and its ability to be figured into a 'plot' (p. 81). Art History also provides a plot with 'canonical characters' (Bruner, 1986, p. 66) which, for Freeman's subject ('Samuel') has been disrupted by postmodernism's challenge to the linear development of modernist art production. Added to the fact of his ageing, Samuel's story is "stuck". However, this narrative of an artist unable to move forward is a familiar one throughout artists' lives and not unique to older artists. Making art is a constant project, and there is no conclusion or significant ending except in the finishing of actual works, ready to be exhibited, and sometimes not even then.³ Samuel's history, according to Freeman, is "less characterized by a series of meaningful episodes than by a series of fits and starts" (p. 87). This, I would argue, is the danger of adhering to the sense of an ending; fictions may have endings but in life histories plots can more fruitfully be thought of in terms of plotting, points in the journey of becoming. The spatiality of the mapping metaphor might also provide a way for understanding points of reference in a less linear way, while not abandoning the overall sense of meeting points, junctures, cross roads, which mark out life histories' encounters (to be developed elsewhere). The theoretical focus of this paper aims, however, to explore the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse* identity, of sameness disrupted by the 'fits and starts' of the otherness of the other, by drawing on some aspects of the work of Paul Ricoeur.

Narrative Identity

As noted, all life narratives contain stories not just about the self but also about other people and things. By showing how when speaking about and referring to the self, different pronouns are used, Ricoeur proposes the concept of narrative identity, created in a dialectic between a *constant* self articulated as 'I', and a self *capable of change* (Dauenhauer, 2005; Reagan, 1996; Ricoeur, 1988, 1992). The reflective self is constructed in narrative, through

2. 'Samuel' was one of the artists who were part of a large research project at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Freeman explored these case studies in *Finding the Muse: A Sociopsychological Inquiry into the Conditions of Artistic Creativity*, New York and Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

3. Artworks are also often 'incomplete' despite being exhibited, as for instance in the work British Pop Artist, Peter Blake. See my life history recording with him Tape 8 F13771A, The British Library National Sound Archive <http://cadensa.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgiisirs/vFMs6fn8Gd/32140042/9>.

the interconnection of events constituted by emplotment [that] allows us to integrate with permanence in time what seems to be its contrary in the domain of sameness-identity, namely diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability. (1992, p. 140)

Life history narratives, therefore, provide the occasion for an account in which the 'I' of the narrator is constant but in which events and encounters are the occasions for actions which initiate and articulate change in the narrator's self and his/her work which stands for the artist's self but is recounted as a reflexive disassociation in which the 'I' is othered as the self. Significant others, or the characters that appear in the emplotment, or I would prefer, plotting or mapping of the life history function to reinforce the narrator's 'I', but also to signal both transformations, and reinforcements of identity: "Recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*" (1992, p. 121).

Ricoeur's conception of the dialectic of *idem*- and *ipse*-identity as set out in *Oneself as Another* (1992) is especially useful in understanding artists' life histories.⁴ Artists are consistently identified through their work; it is common to talk of them being 'known' for a particular body of work. Damien Hirst, we might say is 'known' for his shark in formaldehyde (*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991). Conversely, when referring to the artwork, people typically name the artist instead of the work, as in "Did you see the Hirst?" This is not just a shorthand reference but evidence of how artists and their artworks are combined, fused together; they signify each other. In 2007 Hirst created *For the Love of God*, a diamond encrusted platinum cast of an 18th century skull. "Have you seen Hirst's skull?" was then the question people asked each other. Satisfying the demand for continual, outrageous, and dramatic reinvention, the synecdoche of *a* Hirst and *the* Hirst conflate person, artist, and work, a totality that narrative is able to break apart and 'bridge' (a metaphor Ricoeur uses frequently).

Ricoeur's definition of *character* is also helpful in unpacking the problematic of artists' selfhood since it is "the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized" (1992, p. 121). These dispositions are two-fold: one is *habit*, which "gives a history to a character... a history in which sedimentation tends to cover over the innovation which preceded it". The other is *trait*, "a distinctive sign by which a person is recognized, reidentified as the same" (p. 121). How does this contribute to understanding artists' identity? If habit is history, then one could argue that it contributes to the consistency of the attribution of 'artist' while *trait* identifies the signs by which we recognize the artist's work and person. However, Ricoeur goes on to

4. The term 'artist' is used here to denote practitioners in the graphic and plastic arts. Although the paper focuses on ceramic artists, Ricoeur's thesis can be applied equally to creative practitioners across the visual arts.

propose that *character* can nevertheless be subject to reinterpretation through “acquired dispositions”, such as “values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes, *in* which the person ... recognizes” him/herself and which become traits by which the person can be recognized *by* (p. 121). The identifying reference with heroic figures, he suggests, is therefore also identifying with a set of values that lead to loyalty to a “cause” (Art) and this fidelity leads towards “maintaining the self”. For Ricoeur this is an important congruence or concordance between *ipse* and *idem* identity, the moment at which trait and habit meet. However, he is not clear at what points in a life history narrative this occurs, and I would like to suggest that the acquisition of traits are not always moments of coherence in narrative, that stories of affinities can be about affirmation but can also resist narrative coherence.

Ricoeur proposes that narrative emplotment is “the synthesis of heterogeneous elements” that is able to bring together and make sense of the “discordant concordance” of temporality, of a life’s experiences, and turn it into a comprehensible story (Ricoeur, 1988, 1991); both the creation of the narrative, and reading or hearing it are sense-making, explanatory activities. As Ricoeur neatly summarizes it: “To explain why something happened and to explain what happened coincide. A narrative that fails to explain is less than a narrative. Narrative that does explain is pure, plain narrative” (1985, p. 148). Explanation provides meaning and, therefore, coherence, but as I demonstrate below, the emplotment of the character of the artist is made up of ‘fits and starts’ rather than describing a coherent, stable selfhood.

Artists Stories of Self and Others

The convention of the Artist’s Statement is a well-established genre. Such documents usually begin with the phrase “My work is about...”. In no other profession is there such constant demand for a declaration that, in effect, conjoins subject and object. Moreover, the increasing pressure to communicate with the public, to make the visual arts accessible and meaningful is becoming an ever more important skill for artists to acquire and as such it forms part of their training with inevitable consequences for artists’ narratives as they constantly articulate self as another, person/subject and artist/object. Artists, therefore, are acutely conscious of themselves in the third person of their work. To paraphrase the statement: “My work is me; it signifies my self”. In artists’ life narratives, the making and meaning of work often provide the plots along which much of the adult life stories are mapped.

Ricoeur’s proposition of the three-fold mimesis of narrative: *prefiguration*, *configuration* and *refiguration* (Ricoeur, 1985) is helpful in unpacking the function

of life stories. Briefly, prefiguration is the competence we bring to a narrative that enables us to understand it as a story and to know what the appropriate questions are such as: Who, What, How, Why? Refiguration is “the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader or hearer” (Ricoeur quoted in Simms, 2003, p. 85), and makes the narrative meaningful for the reader/listener. In between these two figurations lies *configuration*, or emplotment that synthesises the “heterogeneous elements” into a totality — most easily grasped in terms of the novel, more problematic when addressing ‘real’ life histories. In life history work, the narrator must grapple with all three mimetic registers at once: the knowledge of elements which might constitute a life story and an artist’s life story, the ability to gather together, to remember the “heterogeneous elements” of the life, and to make sense at the point of refiguration, rather than at the point of configuration which in the told life story is more a matter of *bricolage*. Consequently, in life narratives the subject “appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life” (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 246).

The theory can also be extended, to encompass the layers of arts production and reception, not just the artwork-as-artist synthesis of narrative identity. All artworks embody the hidden narratives of their conception and making (which these interviews below draw out). Looking at, or rather ‘reading’ other’s artworks, is the refiguration that drives the creation of artworks as well as the re-creation and re-reading of artworks over time. Making an artwork is a process of configuration through the prefigured knowledge of arts practices, but its meaning (refiguration) is never stable but always alive to reinterpretation especially in the life stories. Furthermore, refiguration is also the process, which leads to the conception and production of other, new, different objects/stories.⁵ These new objects nevertheless bear the characteristics of their makers but not their totality, which the stories either reinforce, or break up. As the following sections below suggest, narratives of affinities may be used to reinforce identity (of the work and the self), but they can also function to resist narrative completeness and to uphold the cultural distinction between words and things. Both artists work in the same medium (clay), and were fellow students at Camberwell College of Arts in the mid-1970s, a school with a distinguished history in the field of ceramic art but which also produced some notable ‘potters’ whose work does not claim the status of ‘art’ but leans towards the aesthetics of use most clearly propounded in Oriental ceramics seen as outdated, even reactionary, by the majority of the emerging generation of the 1970s and 1980s. However, as the first example below demonstrates not all students were prepared to reject functionalism. Complementing each other in time and place (and gender, though this is not my focus here) these two life histories

5. I am grateful to Matti Hyvärinen for suggesting this line of inquiry.

shed light on how the symbiosis of the artist/self and work as art/pottery/ceramic is unpacked in narrative.⁶

Towards Completeness

The first extract is a segment within a life history, a turning point for the artist, Julian Stair⁷ as a student at the Royal College of Art in London who had been struggling to locate his position as a *functional* potter in opposition to the dominant *abstract* forms of expression not only of his fellow students, but of the ceramic art world in general (Harrod, 1999; Sandino, 2007). The story concerns a visit in the mid-1970s to the studio of an important figure in the world of ceramic art. The visit was, he says “really interesting”, a “great chance to meet Lucie Rie for the first time, to see her studio, to hear her talking about her pots”. These comments are the standard evaluation of such student trips. However, he goes on to describe “a kind of epiphany”, or “very strong insight” on seeing the work of another ceramic artist who was very much a figurehead to the abstractionists, a point emphasized in the story. Moving from the abstract of the story, and its orientation, Stair provides an evaluation of Hans Coper: “[He] broke with the notion of potmaking, and introduced the whole idea of collage and sculptural forms”; he was “a mentor behind all the RCA [Royal College of Art] graduates ... who were in full swing at the time”, “but *I* realized that that wasn’t necessarily a simple kind of case as it was being portrayed” (JS Track 14/2006). The resolution of the story, is the description of seeing Coper’s work in Rie’s studio full of red tulips:

In many ways it was an absolute reinforcement of the pot not just as a vessel, as a container, in a theoretical or abstract sense but literally as a practical container for flowers ...

You had wonderfully interesting forms which were incredibly, kind of resonant, and made references through to, to all, you know, to history, and to the beginnings

6. ‘Artist’ is used here to include all arts practice especially since both Radstone and Stair both attended art college, the principal means by which professional status is initially instituted. Other terms used can specify material specialisms e.g. ceramicist, ceramic artist. Although there are other current terms such as ‘maker’ and ‘practitioner’, the interviewees refer to themselves as artists and only very occasionally as ceramcists, or ceramic artist, rarely if at all as practitioners or makers. This will be the subject of another paper.

7. Julian Stair is a British ceramicist whose work is in many public collections. See <http://www.julianstair.com> As a former student of ceramics at Camberwell College of Arts, he has taken part in the viva oral history project <http://www.vivavoices.org>, at the University of the Arts London, Camberwell College of Art. All the interviews have been conducted by the author.

of European art with the Cycladic forms in particular. But were terribly modern and were still pots but were also formally incredibly interesting. So *that* was, was a mini-epiphany, if you like, to show that pots *can* actually have, can combine, if you like, all the kind of, the classic virtues but transposed into a modern and contemporary interpretation *and* still work in the domestic environment. So that, *that was something that really has stayed with me ever since.* (JS/Track 14/2006) (Emphasis added)

This emphatic account is an example of the refiguration that can occur for artists on seeing significant works which make a lasting impression, but whose meaning is made manifest through configuration since the narrator is both author and interpreter. Despite the story's resolution focusing on the meaning of the pot, for Stair Coper is reconfigured, or re-identified, able to "combine" "classic" and modern "virtues". No longer outside the "full swing" of the time, the story functions to connect Stair to one of the key figures of ceramic history in which the distinction and hierarchy between the functional and domestic potter, and the art and abstractionist ceramic artist is critical. The conflicting dualism of function *versus* abstraction is resolved but more importantly the significance of the resolution is made manifest through refiguration without which it would have remained simply a mental image or memory. Narrative subverts the opposition between image and word, but not simply as an illustration or caption, but as the intersection where meaning is produced, here through the reconfiguration of the pot as both artwork and domestic object, and the 'I' as both functional potter and conceptual artist.

As a young practitioner, unable to fully identify with the dominant ideology, yet aware of its cultural power, Stair uses this story of a "kind of epiphany" to mark the point that is able to bridge two seemingly opposing art historical categories, or, in Ricoeur's terms, traits, which up until that point had functioned to threaten the artist's identity as a maker of significant, contemporary work. The studio visit story presents the artist with an image (artwork as vase) that resolves the incomplete identity of a maker working in a traditional ceramic idiom but who felt himself to be part of the new, contemporary world of ceramic art practice. It may also be of some significance that at the time, its most successful, emerging practitioners were women. The impact of the visit as something that has "stayed with me ever since" becomes a defining trait of this artist's work.

Epiphanies, as Norman K. Denzin has noted, are "connected to moments of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism" (2001, p. 39). This studio visit story seems to fit in Denzin's terms a "*minor* epiphany, which symbolically represents a major, problematic moment... in a person's life" (1989, p. 71) which for Stair was about how to resolve the duality of art and utility. Denzin suggests that a major epiphany is one, which "which touches every fabric of a person's life" (p. 71), and common sense might dictate that this studio visit cannot fit this description.

However, at the end of the story, Stair states that the image of this resolution was “something that has stayed with me ever since”. Given the synthesis of self and work, it could be argued that this is, indeed, a major event, which has enabled the artist to conjoin an incomplete narrative identity of the object, into a coherent, anti-dualism where utility and art can meet. The studio visit story, therefore, is one example of how an incomplete narrative identity is refigured through an epiphanic encounter with an object and its maker. This story is particularly important in understanding how narrative identity is deployed by an artist to create coherence, in the face of the art world’s consistency in maintaining its binary oppositions.

Towards Incompleteness

The second account by the ceramic artist Sara Radstone⁸ who is of the same generation as Stair, reinforces the concept of interactional refiguration, which intermingles the self, the other’s self, and the work. I draw here on more than one episode in the life story interview to demonstrate further how objects and the lives of other artists can confront and disrupt the narrative flow of artists’ sameness-identity. While the minor epiphany story above functioned to heal the schism, the transformational moments recounted below demonstrate the resistance to coherence in artists’ talk and yet shows how it is nevertheless revealed in narrative. If Stair’s story is evidence of the artist’s search for the coherent expression over time of *idem*-identity, Radstone’s account below demonstrates the tentative reflection of a narrative identity-in-process in which the narrative itself remains incomplete and partial as different ‘canonical characters’ appear in Radstone’s stories.

The extract is from a section of the recording focusing on what drew her to the work of Eva Hesse, a question she counters by saying she will find it “hard to articulate precisely” but then continues by situating it historically, in the past, at a moment when she was “going through a phase of finding my work quite difficult” during the mid to late 1980s. The artist describes being “introduced” to Hesse’s work by a sculptor who suggested: “... you ought to look at this work’ and lent me a book, and I immediately felt quite sort of overwhelmingly drawn to the work that I could see, and reading a bit about her” (SR Track 19/2006). Hesse was therefore encountered through multiple sites through the work and her life in the text.

8. Sara Radstone is a ceramic artist whose work is also represented in many public collections. See <http://www.stubbs24.fsnet.co.uk/> She was a contemporary of Julian Stair at Camberwell College of Arts, and a contributor to the *vivia* oral history project <http://www.vivavoices.org>, at the University of the Arts London, Camberwell College of Art.

In relation to the interpretation of reading literary texts, Ricoeur proposes three dimensions: *referentiality*, which is the mediation between the individual and the world, *communicability* as that between individuals, and *self-understanding* as that between an individual and him/herself (1991, p.27). Ricoeur is adamant in his commitment to narrative as emplotment, or configuration, but artists' accounts show how the reception of artworks and their producers are also subject to these three dimensions. As noted above, refiguration, the point at which the reader's, or viewer's world is brought to bear on the understanding of the text/work, is embedded in these stories about Hesse and her works. Reading or viewing these is transformed "into a *guide* for reading, with its zones of indeterminacy, its latent wealth of interpretation, its power of being reinterpreted in new ways in new historical contexts" (p.27).

Continuing with her reflection as to what it was about Hesse's work that engaged her so, the artist continues:

I think, I think it's slightly to do with a sense of still being tentative. That there was something about a lot of the work that she made that had *evidence of struggling to get at something rather than any sense of "Right. This is resolved"*. That was a very personal interpretation which may be completely wrong but the wonderful sense of the absurdity, in way, of the objects, seemed to bring me back to questioning what, in a sense, I was trying to do in my work and what it was all about, I guess. (SR Track 19/2006). (Emphasis added)

The character of Hesse provides a plot with which Radstone is able to identify and to tell her own story. Although this is more commonly simply described as empathy, this term shuts down narrativity by focusing only on the emotion of empathy, rather than its narrative. Rather Hesse provides the artist with the opportunity to reconfigure her difficulties as an abstract artist, to move on from work that was at the time "a bit tight and contrived" (Track 19).

More than just looking at Hesse's work, and reading her writings, Radstone remembers being struck by

...a particular sentence about *trying to achieve a kind of non-form which struck a chord with me incredibly deeply even though on the surface it sounds like the opposite of what I've been trying to do, because my work was all about form and trying to get it right but it made me realize that actually there was something beyond that I was trying to do that I wanted to achieve which was about being right on the edge, and getting to something that was only just something, which I felt was what she was trying to do. And, about dipping into an imaginative and interior world that you can only do by really getting around the edge of things and being suggestive and not overt* and work that's very sort of physical and provokes a certain kind of, how can I describe it? A sort of very physical response, I suppose, in a particular way. (SR Track 19/2006) (Emphasis added)

The reference to form is particularly important here because it marks the beginning of narrative incompleteness in that it begins to make manifest Radstone's wish to escape the definitive, the categorical conclusiveness of form, the wish to get "something that was only just something". It is also a compelling example of encountering sameness in difference: "the opposite of what I've been trying to do", and the continual project that is art production. As a story of interaction of the world of the text with the world of the reader, this extract articulates how words and images mediate between art-as-thinking and art-as-practice. Out of this encounter, Radstone is able to pursue a visual and imaginative dialogue "lived in the mode of the imaginary" as Ricoeur so aptly describes it (1991, p.27). The artist's interest in Hesse is always in a position of creative interaction; it is not fixed and finite. Just as this interaction is maintained over time, the artist's inter-subjective identification with Hesse as a female artist also continues over time. Reading Hesse's autobiographical writings prompted this observation:

And there might have been something about reading her writings a bit as well and knowing her troughs of insecurity that she went through, and it was reassuring to see the work and that sort of tremendous incredible ideas that were coming out of that lack of confidence very often as much as that sort of sureness I could see around in a lot of other artists... (SR Track 19/2006).

Although such "troughs of insecurity" are evident in male artist life histories (Freeman, 1993a; Mishler, 1999), in this story it becomes contrasted specifically with an aesthetic "of sureness" associated with the later work of Catalan artist Antonio Tapiès (which forms part of the earlier section in the recording describing the space of one of her studios). On being pressed to explain why her interest in Tapiès' work had diminished, and despite not wanting to disparage him/his work, Radstone searches for the reason:

I think I find his work a bit too studied, and a bit contrived now. I think its....oh, it's hard to explain. Something about it that jars with me these days whenever I see it. I don't feel it's quite as true as I used to think it was, or... oh, it just seems... It's hard to put into words, that feeling. I feel it's a little bit mass-produced [laughs]. Not quite true to what it was... (SR Track 14/2006).

Interestingly what Ricoeur refers to as '*aiming at the "good life" with and for others, in just institutions*' (1992, p.172) is extended here into the arts not in terms of being avant-garde and original but as evidence of work that maintains its meaningfulness as art by not being mass-produced when that has not been Tapiès method, (unlike say, Andy Warhol whose tools and concepts drew on the means and meanings of mass-production and popular culture). The hackneyed phrase in life and art of the injunction to be 'true to myself' is evidence of the intersection of *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity since it articulates the moment at which the possibility

of self as another or as the constant 'I' is pronounced. Hesse functions to articulate a becoming self, whereas Tapiès works are used to show the problem of an inauthentic artistic character.

Resisting Completeness

As noted above it was the “incredible ideas” coming out of insecurity that was noteworthy, which led to the attempt to translate things into words by focusing on the impact of one particular work by Hesse titled ‘Hang Up’, described by Radstone as “one of the most incredible pieces of art I think that’s ever been made really. It’s just absolutely staggering... Through its incredible simplicity, it makes me feel that it sums up so much of what abstract art practice is about” (SR Track 19/2006). However, as she reiterates throughout this section: “It’s very hard to put into words”. Towards the end of the recording, in which the discussion about Hesse has turned briefly to the interest in archaeological books also kept in the studio, Radstone sums up the importance of seeing objects which “seem to have a profound meaning and reason for *being*” and remind her “that there’s a point to what I’m doing” (SR Track 19/2006). So, of course I ask “What is the point?”, a question which invites an examination of the who Radstone is an artist, and what it means to make work with these particular traits (form-less abstraction). After some laughter, her reply is:

Terrible question! I shouldn’t have said that. Oh. Well. I think what it always comes back to is *trying to express things that don’t have a language, a spoken language, really*. So really *it can’t be put into words* but trying to express a sense of existence, or a feeling, or just raise a question in an object. I’m always trying to make something that would just have a [pause] possibly make someone walking past it then stop and minute and look again, and think ‘What on earth is that?’ Or, enframe a little bit of space and give it a substance it didn’t have before. But it’s all *too kind of tenuous to really put into words*, somehow. But that point somehow keeps me going (SR Track 19/2006). (Emphasis added)

I think it’s about trying to express a sense of a combination of extreme [pause] fragility, tentativeness, and yet a *kind of*, [pause] *sort of* stoic structure and strength at the same time. So the feeling that there’s a *sort of* element of existence that’s [pause] about, *sort of around that somehow*. [pause] A little, a little, *there’s a little bit of space that’s surviving*. Sounds mad. I mean whenever I try to put these things into words, it sounds completely bonkers (SR Track 19/2006). (Emphases added)

Phrases like “kind of” or “sort of” resurface continually in her description of her artworks. They signify the resistance to narrative completeness, paralleled by

artwork that aims to just *be*, “to enframe a little bit of space”. Rather than deleting these terms of approximation, they are integral to the narrative in its articulation of an aesthetic of tentativeness. The fact that the artist sees this articulation as “mad” and “bonkers” sustains the division. In reflecting on the work as a text for self-understanding, coherence is resisted. This incompleteness is not, however, simply a desire to uphold the distinction between words and things, or that artworks resist language altogether. There is no hesitation or tentativeness in the description (the referential communicability) of ‘Hang Up’: it is composed of “a frame with a big bit of wire coming out of the frame looping down almost to the floor and then going back to the frame again”.

The device of the frame as enframing is key in that it works as a form of *visual* configuration:

I love the fact that it’s, the work is the frame, which is something that fascinates me. It fascinates me in terms of what ceramics is as well because you get, you know, you make a hollow ceramic object, it’s as if the object is the frame, in a strange sort of way, and the subject is inside and you can’t see it. I’ve always sort of had this feeling about it. So she’s made this frame, which is kind of wrapped. So in itself it’s a very kind of seductive object. There’s nothing as such inside it so it’s just framing space and calling into question the whole nature of art. And then by putting this eccentric wire thing coming out, it pushes that idea so much further because it makes the whole sculpture into that, you know, that frame is the sculpture. And it’s looping out into the room saying “Come on”, come into it, and bringing the whole space of the gallery, or wherever it is, around into it (SR Track 19/2006).

This above description is linked to actually seeing it for the first time at an exhibition rather than in a catalogue. As such it returns the artist to the experience of being there emphasized by the use of the historic present tense. However, it also indicates how artworks are constant even though their meanings may change.

Narrative identity, it is argued, is the sense-making capacity of life histories (Eakin, 1999; Freeman, 1993b; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006; Plummer, 2001; Ricoeur, 1990, 1991) but as Radstone’s reflections on her work demonstrate, her sense-making is to resist it. While remembering other artists’ works, coherence is not avoided as she explains un-problematically her affinity with Hesse, and the diminished relevance of Tapiès. The narrative identity produced here at the intersection of *idem* and *ipse*-identity is one that adheres to an incompleteness *through* narrative, the constancy of sameness achieved by narrative breakdown. The story of the encounter with the work and personhood of Eva Hesse can be seen as *enabling* narrative; in talking about one (or several artists), who have appeared as characters in her life, Radstone produces a narrative identity of sameness and change. The Hesse story also functions as a relational story of narrative identity. It recounts the narrator’s sense of a consistent ‘good’ artistic identity

demonstrating the conflation between self and work in which the self-as-artist is articulated as the self-as-other.

Towards a Conclusion

Life stories, as the studio visit story demonstrates, are used to open up the congenital silence of objects in order to make sense of their meanings, not just to listeners but also to the artist-narrator. Makers of functional work can use language to expand the aesthetic dimension of their objects and resolve a conflicted identity. As they appear in the life stories, other artists/works perform an important work of referentiality whereby narrators are able to make sense of their place and their work by reference to another's, achieved within the context of the life story where sense is made of the self and his/her actions through the configuration of episodic narratives which enable a form of temporal reflexivity absent from the Artist's Statement or manifesto.

Another outcome of these stories is that they provide a way of unpacking the linear projection of the idea of 'influence'. Stories about others provide a communicative referentiality that situates the individual artist within a community that makes certain stories possible, one of which is about what it means to be an Artist and identified as such: it is not enough to 'be' one but to be recognized as one. Despite the historical and temporal gap between the narrators' former selfhood and others, the latter are used to articulate a relatively fixed 'folk' concept of the artist as individualist. Folk psychology, as Bruner has argued is significant because it "mediates between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes" (1990, p. 52). This is the psychologist's perspective on the changeable/unchangeable dialectic of *ipse/idem* identity.

In talking about other artists, narrators demonstrate the interactivity of characters in their stories since, "Every character in a story of any complexity both acts and is acted upon" (Dauenhauer, 2005, p. 12). This differs slightly from explaining artists as part of their historical contexts, in that it focuses on *how* artists narrate interaction with artworks and artists to make sense of themselves and their work. Nor is it tantamount to reading the work through the causality of biographical incidents. Narrative is the means by which the works 'live' in stories (to appropriate Mallarmé), through the constitution of the artist's *ipse*-identity, their narrative identity. These stories of encounters with others document the changes effected over time in self and artworks but are also stories of the I as 'the same' and the artist's self experienced through, in, and as other. Ricoeur suggests that this dialectic, achieved in narrative, is how the self is 'made' through stories but it must be kept in mind that identity narratives are always subject to re-tellings, and re-visions

thereby ensuring that identity narratives, like on-going life histories narratives are never final but ever, like art, in process.

The trope of incompleteness is a fruitful addition to thinking through narrative identity in relation to the problematic of life history interviews, which can never be complete. They can only ‘stop’ or ‘pause’. Nor are the stories told within the overall history totally realized or final: “the story of a life continues to be re-figured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about him or herself” (Ricoeur, 1988, p.246). Artists’ lives, bound up as they are with the lives of the work they produce, are situated in a network of other works, other artists, recounting a narrative identity where work and person are enmeshed with one another. Ricoeur’s thesis of the dual aspect of identity made up of constancy and change provides a way to unpack the ‘who?’ of artists’ life stories, the intersection of *ipse* and *idem* identity as it is recounted in the interview. The prefigured character of Artist is configured in the life story but is continually reconfigured through events, actions, and encounters with others and objects.

Initially, my interest was in how stories about others functioned in artists’ life narratives as tales of identity. As Bruner, in another context has noted: ‘Achieving joint reference is achieving a kind of solidarity with someone’ (1986, p. 63). How these allegiances are narrated, I realized, was a function of the two-fold character of narrative identity, the dialectic of sameness and change proposed by Ricoeur. However, emplotment can never ‘complete’ narratives of the self which are broken up into the ‘fits and starts’ of description and reflection. The first example (Stair) confirmed a moment of coherence experienced in the minor epiphany of seeing another artist’s work. The second example (Radstone) demonstrated a resistance to completeness that in some sense can be seen as maintaining the distinction between art and language, but this only occurred in talk about her own work, not that of others. This, as I have proposed, is because the project of being an artist is always a work-in-progress.

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