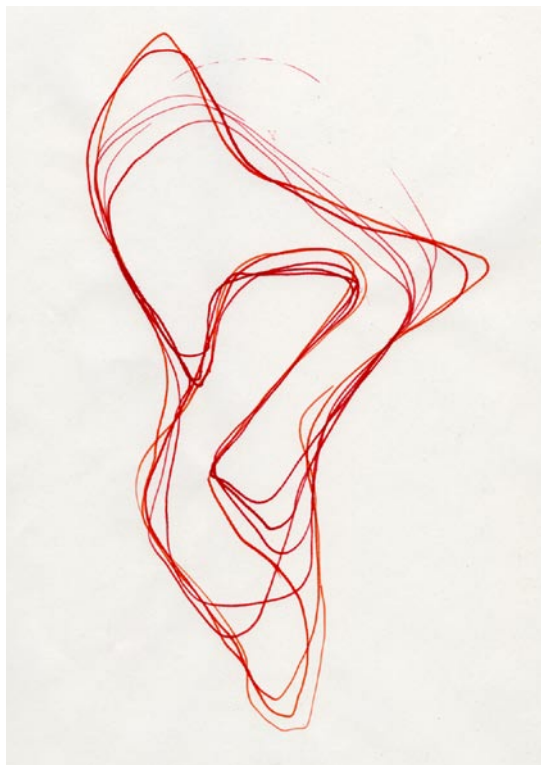
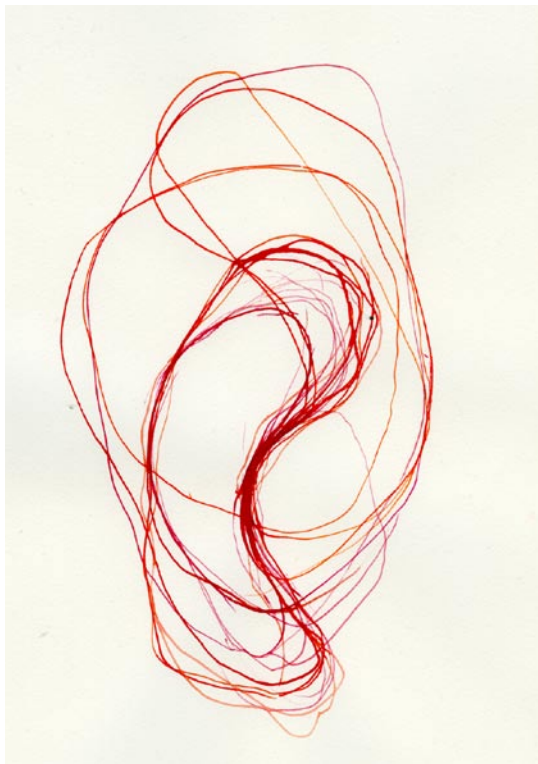
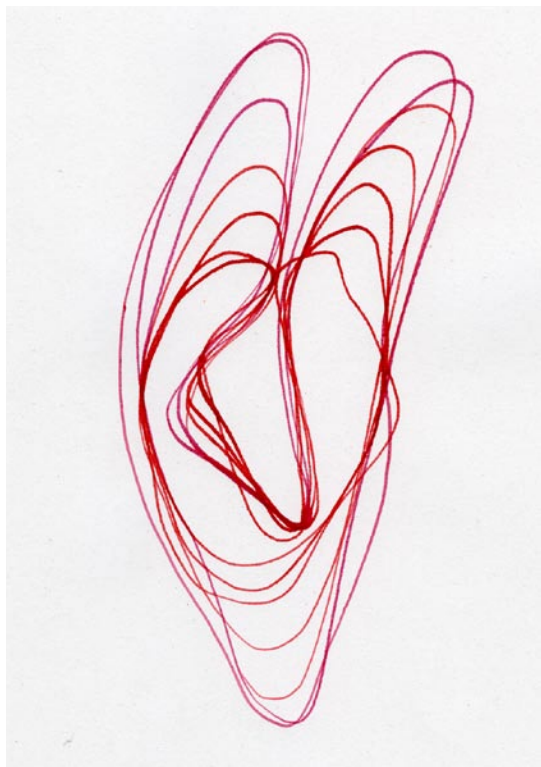




FIELDSTUDY 11



WIEBKE LEISTER: LOVERS, LIARS AND LAUGHTER





She used to know a man who used to appear as a clown. Once, when she anxiously enquired who he *really* was, maybe confusing a fictitious with a real encounter, he revealed with a seemingly dismissive gesture that there was absolutely nothing (personal) behind his (nice) mask – similar perhaps to the disguise used in his former shows that never quite *hid* the clown but actually *made* him. At first her loving eye did not want to believe his ‘postmodernistic’ remark. She simply did not wish to see his face as a mere façade – a reflective surface for any audience. At the time it did not stop her desire to read *into* it, as well as his desire to display what seemed like a well-protected sensitivity. Thinking back to his remark today, she thinks that somehow he was right, though in a different way.

People would say about him: “*He is such a lovely person*”. How did they know? – anyone can be smiling on the front cover. Personally, she never got to see his ‘true persona’ (if there is such a thing at all). Like the living cliché of all actors and magicians, he delivered disjointed fragments of character to her one-sided inquiry, which never quite matched up with the pieces he had presented on other days, cancelling each other out. Nothing was ever valid for more than twenty-four hours; he was just playing games. What if he never *really* existed – was his face just a mere delusion? What if he used this game consciously, because he was actually hiding emptiness (like a flat surface), not an ever-changing content (like a vessel)?

Then, when she started taking him for his mask only, so to say lending his masking a *reality*, it did not get any better, but worse. Because it meant taking him only for what he had actually said and done – without speculating why he might (or might *not*) have said one thing (or another), might (or might *not*) have done something else, based on what appeared to be his complexity, demanding interpretation. Unmasked as a mask, he started insisting that he did not trust *her* – trust *what? Her face? Her words?* – so that she stopped believing his mixed messages. After that, there was silence; no more words to re-enact, no means to link up his multiple faces. It occurred to her that some people just keep their face still to appear enigmatic. Yet, how to recognize the false pretence of a person to whom clowning had become second nature?

when I looked
round, you smiled.

Nothing had ever hurt her as much as his indifference – silencing her wishes, making it ridiculous to voice her needs (a structure that didn’t allow any daydreaming). Given his fairly non-committal response, it became all too clear that *she* was the one in love, because she was the one waiting for answers she could have acted upon after he had ignored her proposals. A mimic of what had been, she went over their conversations time and again up to the point where he had voiced his impatience about getting ‘thrown back’ on himself. With his emotional *reality* kept at arm’s length – paralysed behind his disguise and safeguarded beyond her reach – it remained something opaque, intangible for both of them. Accordingly, he had long since developed a somewhat jokey method of non-communication, using amputated words which meant everything and yet nothing. This verbal mask conveyed its circular meaning rather vaguely; but she could not dissuade him, however much she quoted him word for word. Stalling for time, he kept insisting on phrases such as “*men don’t plan*” or “*let’s talk about it another time*” (which obviously never happened). As a result her attempts to initiate a dialogue little by little turned into internal monologues, subtexts revisiting their laconic encounters.

“*Didn’t you know that love is impossible?*” Thus his only answer: a question. But what, in fact, what *exactly* does it mean when we say ‘love is impossible’? That it is impossible now, at this very moment?; or that we love the impossible (*incomprehensible*) aspects of love?; or that we merely consider loving when it is actually impossible (*illicit*) to love; or that only in impossible (*illegal*) encounters love can develop (outside the tedious intimacies of everyday life)?; or that love as such is not possible, a philosophical impossibility (*imaginary*)? Or that it turns love into desire sustained by non-fulfilment and therefore a complete impossibility (*inaccessible*), marked by a loss yet to come, based on the impenetrable fact that two people can never fully merge (*integrate*) and that one can never fully represent (*imitate*) the other? After all, does this render love ‘beautifully impossible’ (*irrelevant*), a distracting pastime in itself, turning it impossible (*impracticable*) by the act of making love rather than falling in (and out of) love? What if love is not utterly impossible (*insignificant*), but just ‘utterly’: utterly *everything*, utterly *nothing*? But he did not say what he meant by “*impossible*”; and she did not ask him.

I
had to leave your beautiful
eyes and amazing smile

Similarly, she had never quite dared asking him what she meant to him. “*I love you, but I am not in love with you.*” Thus his only indication: simply designed to keep things up in the air. It should have stopped that very moment, instead of dragging on for any more forlorn months during which she went through all sorts of compulsive patterns of behaviour, such as cutting out imagined smiles from ads and dating columns, doodling piles and piles of never-ending lines. “*But how could it be a matter of complete indifference for him, when it seemed so ‘real’ to me? Maybe there is, after all, something in the old saying that passion’s agent is also its victim,*” she considered. Outside his clownish wonderland it had become time to question the whole thing, as she reiterated to herself: “*I have often seen a smile without a clown, but a clown without a smile?*” Though it is almost impossible to find a cure for lovesickness, it was time to disturb the excruciating impassivity of his mind-games.



And even though it was only a brief encounter with a rather clownish character, his outward show remained as an internal image, and a touchstone for ongoing reflections. She still did not know what happens when a clown does not wear his clowning mask: is he no longer a Clown? Though he may have worn it inside himself, albeit there being no *‘beyond’* in all his double-faced appearances (or because of it). As soon as she had successfully stripped away the first mask, the next one emerged – as if the reflections of his self-images had been on these surfaces only. At the same time, their varied encounters might have been about an inversion of space, *marking* rather than *masking* the space between lover and loved one. “*So, which was the ‘reality’ I had to live with?*” she kept wondering. Moreover she came to think that she might have been interested in the indefinite plasticity of his mask-like face itself – not so much in the actual person *‘behind’* his mask, but rather in the form and reflection of its surface and its apparently significant contortions. She started reflecting on what his appearance had been to her: “*Did I see him as he was, or as he appeared to be?*” Paradoxically, his impassive smile had become an indication that love itself is a constant flux, while her intentions to make it more logical were in fact failing attempts to stop its ongoing stream. Nevertheless this logic kept escaping her in crucial moments, exposing him for what he had been: (*just*) a mask.

Speaking in the face of pointlessness she got distressingly bored with deciphering his ever-elusive attitude and his all-evasive actions. When his seemingly open-ended image became reality – a static mask without an inviting screen to project on, without depth *‘between’* him and herself – he revealed himself strangely empty: no mixed messages, no floating meanings, no more valid phantoms. Had she made up his make-up herself? Was it rather part of her *own* make-up? What if *she* was the mask *he* wore in this slightly sadistic game? Ruining the suspended belief, suddenly his many faces ceased to be intriguing. Desire lost? Funny, how she used to miss his image almost physically. But: didn’t she know that images have their own realities, and that seduction and believing are in the eye of the beholder? Or was she mistaking a mask (or a mime) for a mirror? “*At the end of the day the (sur)face of his image was most interesting, because I could not double-check it, comparing it with his ‘real’ reality, but only with the inexhaustible reality of my own imagination,*” she pondered. “*It was true to its surface being its depth – no depth whatsoever.*”

“*This is probably what usually happens with clowns,*” she continued her thought, “*they remain unresolved images strangely reminding us of ourselves.*” Since it somehow was the only thing left of their failed relationship, she decided to take a closer look at the clown’s mask. Trying to peel it off his face, she remembers how difficult it was to loosen the skin around his eyes and his mouth to keep the mask in one piece. Slowly, little by little, the mask came off, at the same time growing back on his visage. Finally it lay resting in front of her, leaving little holes precisely where those facial openings had been which had established the main difference between the clown’s face and its painted smile. Somehow depersonalized, still part of both skin and disguise.

Turning the clown’s mask over, its vessel-like opening attracted and held her gaze rather than covering the clown’s face. Revealing its mould, she applied his mask to her own face. She was now enacting his face, putting it on *like a mask*, seeing the world almost as if seeing it through *his* eyes – a childhood fantasy come true? It was like looking through a pair of field glasses, enhancing the world’s ‘imageness’ through framing it with a shaded view. Wearing her lover’s mask was like imprinting his physiognomy and perspective onto her own, slowly moulding it after his image. This process had promised to turn his world into hers, but obviously the clown’s mask did not fit her properly, since it was cast on his bone structure. Seeking to impress his facial image upon her consciousness, it remained part of *him*, rather than supporting *her* understanding of his point of view when wearing it herself. Still, this (almost pathological) attempt at gaining an empathic insight into the mask’s impressions and depressions did not get her any closer to comprehending his hurtful emptiness or inability to love. “*Where there was nothing, nothing could have become,*” she decided; his image had turned into a deserted stage.

Following a sudden impulse, still trying to convert this mentally abusive experience into something productive or constructive, she took off the mask, first tenderly stretching out the thin layer it was made of, then inverting it *inside out*, before putting it back on her face. She remembers her effort to recognize what had changed: now she was not in his place *‘behind’* his mask any longer (trying to reveal his perspective, getting under his skin), but rather *‘in’* his image – again on the side facing his make-up, now feeling it on her own skin. And here, suddenly, she remembers how, very slowly, it started disclosing its magic: an *imaginary* trace impressed upon her psyche, it no longer was part of him and his point of view. Instead it was supporting her *own* view of the world – like a reminder of something forgotten, a remainder that had lost its origin. Displaying it as a layer on top of her own skin, slowly moulding it after her *own* image, this inverted mask could still display a smile as well as hide it – just as smiling used to change the sound of his voice and not just the shape of his mouth. This smile transformed what he said and how she perceived his talking face. And even if inherently deceitful, his smile had made what he said more persuasive, and hence more ‘believable’. How laughable this seemed now, herself having experienced how his smile had provoked closeness and distance, intimacy and aversion. “*Maybe it is not simply love that paints smiles on lovers’ faces, obscuring the meaning of a lover’s smile,*” she considered, “*just as the behaviour of this clown had also been embarrassing, intrusive and even violating.*” – “*Nevertheless, there are probably as many different ways of feeling as there are of seeing; so, if love comes by looking, perhaps fear comes with not being able to see? Some fear of losing oneself, becoming a stranger to oneself by falling into the abyss of someone else’s image?*” After a while she started realizing that her mental image of his face had never been a ‘pre-requisite’ of love, more exactly a sort of *‘post-requisite’* left after the show. Not all that different from an after-thought, the inverted mask had produced a *semblance* of love – an appearance or impression, a façade or veneer, not love itself. A masked sign.

You had a great smile.

I wish I'd smiled or said hello to you.

I cannot forget the smile you gave me when you drove off.



Nevertheless, outside the ‘reality’ of their rather unhappy liaison, the mould of his mask had become a place of ambivalent possibilities. “*And since every partial revealing is also a partial disguising, ultimately there was no escaping from the inherent dynamics of its continuous withdrawing,*” she reconsidered. “*Lending itself to experimental identification, this inverted mask reflected the space between myself and my former lover into the viewing space between me and his image, establishing a rather strange triangle of meaning involving his mask, an imaginary lover and my own interpretation of both.*”

Leaving him behind as a point of reference, reversing his mask into a promise, it seemed as if his ‘real’ image had effaced itself, only to enhance her unsatisfied desire to connect its fleeting presence with her latent wishes in a process of imaginary montage. “*This blurring of the distinction between sign and referent was close to a ‘photographic’ experience,*” she told herself, “*in which my mental image of his face had slid over the visible face, in my mind’s eye transforming him into a captivating vision of an ideal lover dragging me into its circuit of many masks.*”

And even if the clown himself certainly lacked the talent to excite love, somehow she had become enamoured – of *what? His image? The mask of his image?* – wrapped up in an endless chain of images hiding ever more images. So, if his white clowning mask already had been a negative imprint of *his* face, she had inverted it back into a positive one by mounting it onto *her* face. Then, forming it after her own face it had become the reversal-print both of him *and* of her. Collapsing the two into the composite of an imaginary lover was pretty much a reversal-image of the clown’s mask, she realized – identifying the *negative* of his mask as an image of her hopes, casting her desire in the shape of what was lacking (or what she was looking for).

“*In converting me into an extension of the inner workings of his image, his inverted mask had grown into a portrait of my needs,*” she explained to herself. “*Throwing us back onto ourselves by forcing us to make sense of them, these are in fact the kind of images that leave their imprint on us, rather than being imprints of a sitter. This is why trying to discover their former indexical origin could only ever happen at the expense of a disillusion instead of getting anywhere closer to their ‘reality’.*”

At this stage, she had become convinced that any kind of longing was not directed at something ‘beyond’ a person, but rather at something ‘between’ two people: some kind of depth or a *mutually* reversed mask.

Becoming aware that she had turned the meaning of his mask back onto herself, she continued: “*is this what we mean when we say that someone is ‘as wise as an image’?*” And although she was certain that images as *such* are never quite enough, seen in this way she realized that there are no ‘unreal’ or ‘false’ images, since these sorts of images remain only ever faithful to their own unstable selves. At the same time, the disembodied mask made it only too clear to her that reality as *such* is never quite enough – just as the body of an imagined lover is never quite there to ‘be’ with you. Still searching for the missing link between his ‘image’ and his ‘reality’, it was as if her imagination had kissed his unlike mask into a new life, or yet another life.

“*If one usually smiles before kissing, closing ones eyes, here this had not been the case,*” she recalled. Having become the imaginary bearer of his smiling mask, a mime herself, she started grasping that the thing in question had *not* been a meaningful kiss, but rather what to think of a kiss that was nothing *more* and nothing *less* than a kiss: a kiss that meant nothing ‘beyond’ itself. Perhaps it was simply about holding the pleasure of the moment, a small compliment, nothing complicated, and certainly not a promise. “*We are just playing,*” he used to say, their tongues not quite in search for one another, not quite crossing the deepness between them. Again: (*just*) a mask, a visual trap? “*That’s presumably why the few kisses we have shared became silent metaphors of our relation, speaking of misrecognition and marking boundaries, showing the rather impossible features of love,*” she concluded. *Nothing* had happened, (*just*) some kissing and some rather circular thoughts.

Not that she remembered an actual photograph of his face, but she was now guessing quite rightly that she had been in love with a somehow *photographic* mask of the clown, a reverted image she had overwritten in her imagination with the quite abstract face of a future lover. Apart from her own wishful thinking, this imaginary likeness had no tie with ‘reality’, rather encouraging her to project herself into a fantasy dialogue of love, pre-visualizing a decisive love encounter yet to come.

Meanwhile he, the clown, had ultimately disappeared into the void of his image, leaving its inexhaustible mask as a synonym of her desire. Entangled in itself, at the same time coming to a life of its own, his mask was fusing with both future and past, looking back and forth, waiting to find the lover that actually fitted the imaginary person it portrayed – at the same time turning the *impossibility* of his image into a space of open-ended *possibilities*.

Now, thinking back to the extended time she had spent trying to figure him out, suddenly made her laugh: “*Meeting him was like a puzzle picture, an optical illusion. At times focussing on our embracing profiles, at others on the space between us; flipping foreground and background, reversing the negative space into a positive one, a third figure to be negotiated.*” Losing touch, at some point the shadow fell between the adorer and the adored – a shadow that, by appearing other than itself, seemed to hold a certain depth, while it was nothing more than a mask folding in on itself. Just a surface devoid of any limit of interpretation, always shifting in relation to other (sur)faces or other encounters on other days.

No longer the shadow of intimacy, of lovers approaching one another, the shadow started indicating the gradually increasing distance between them – finally drawing the curtain. Bringing her thoughts full circle, describing an elliptical curve with her own lips as she took off the mask, she had to laugh him off: “*He was simply the wrong lover.*”

I smiled
and you smiled back. I
hope I find you.

You
caught my eyes, we
stared then smiled





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Wiebke Leister: *Lovers, Liars and Laughter*, November 2008

This issue of *Fieldstudy* deals with the rather impossible aspects of love and kissing. It extends Wiebke's earlier research interest in the mouth and the photographic portrayal of laughing and smiling, at the heart of her cycle *Unjoyful Laughter and the Non-Likeness of Photographic Portraiture*, which was completed in 2006. The case study of laughter allowed her to look at the open mouth, stilled by the photographic process, and to revisit it – perhaps as a scream, perhaps as a sigh, perhaps as an expression of joy. Her investigation into kissing and being kissed places the lips, which do not only smile but kiss, as a central but also absent presence, similarly about our boundaries and how we recognize ourselves and others. Specifically, the work looks at the kiss as a metaphorical structure – as a gesture of exchange, desire or demand, telling stories of potential intimacy between giving and taking, rejection and recovery. It addresses the lovers' kiss as hidden, concealed by the very anatomy of two faces. Tracing the shadow between the embracing profiles, her work plays with the invisible and unattainable features of love, including the promises and failures of visual representation.

This issue of *Fieldstudy*, which was conceived by Wiebke as a part of the ongoing series of issues devoted to the work of individual Research Associates of PARC, includes the photographic series *Ever After* alongside the story *Lovers, Liars and Laughter*, plus the set of drawings *Days on End*, and the text-based work *At a Glace*, all made in 2008. Issue 11 of *Fieldstudy* was launched at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London on 14 November 2008.

Wiebke Leister is a German artist living in London and Düsseldorf. She studied photography at the University in Essen and at the Royal College of Art in London, and now teaches on the photography programmes at the London College of Communication and at the Folkwang Hochschule in Essen. She has exhibited and published her work internationally, receiving several awards. Her research investigates the nature of photographic portraiture beyond the limits of individual likeness.

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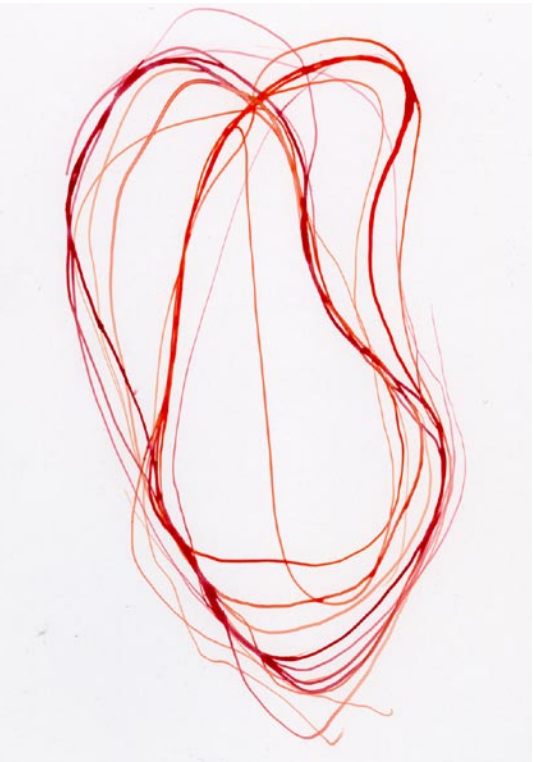
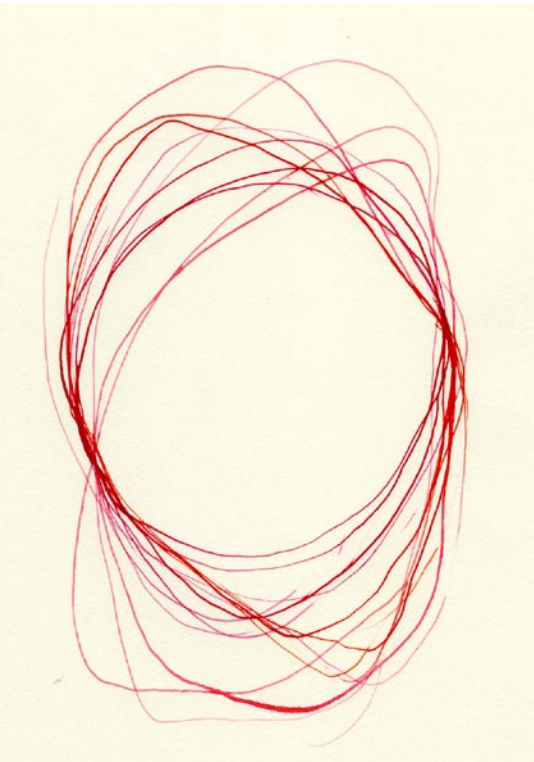
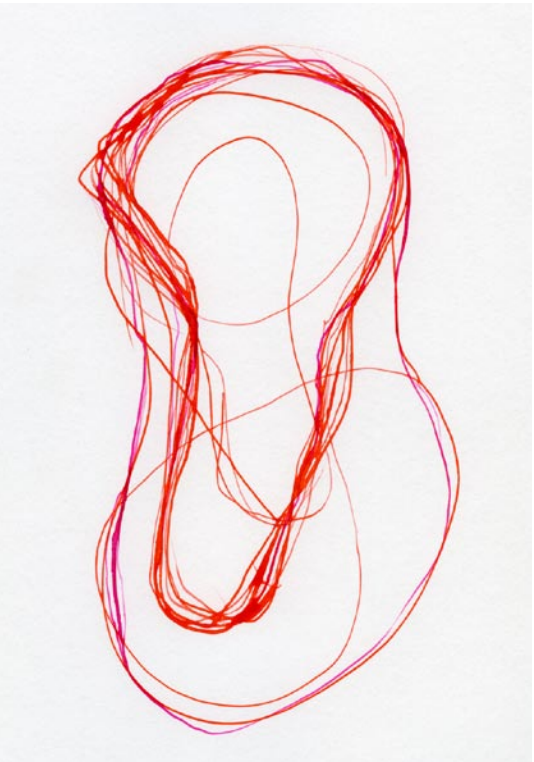
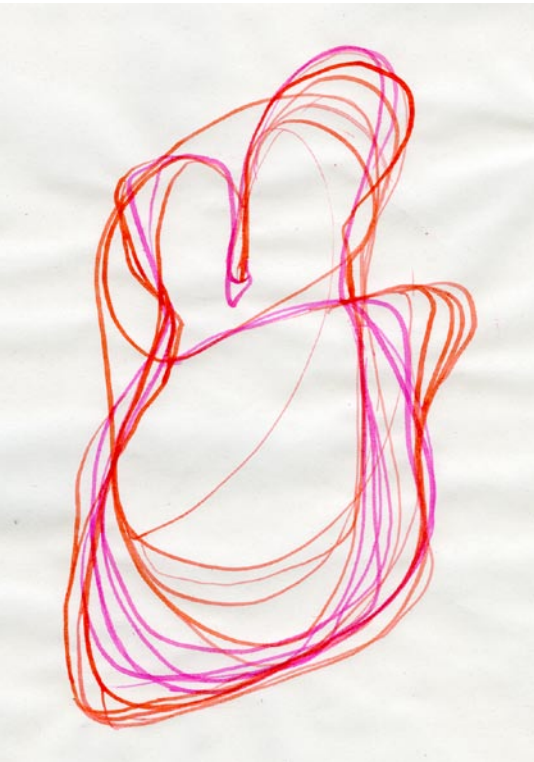
This is a work of fiction, of imaginary montage. Conceptual similarities with existing persons are, of course, purely accidental. Still, without quoting directly, its process was greatly enriched by my reading of many love-works, text and image, as well as many exchanges with colleagues and friends.

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I'd
like to see that smile again.
Is it too late?