

There and Not There

There and Not There
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Fine Arts
Gerrit Rietveld Academie
2020



Astrid Noack at work on the sculpture *Anna Ancher*, ca. 1939



George Eliot, circa 1860



Agnes Martin, still image from *Gabriel*, 1976

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Vija Celmins *To Fix the Image in Memory*, 1977-82

Introduction

I have been thinking about time in connection with my working process and artworks for a while now. I have worked with time as a memory, a story to be told in the murky tint of time past. I have used the medium of video but never really liked the idea of a fixed story, something with an end and a start. My voice. My voice, I share what seems to be a universal dislike of hearing one's voice. And yet it is effective, there is a lot of information in expressing yourself that way.

We, artists, give away our stories in our work, we choose to share experiences, feelings and leave behind traces of our lives. Artists can leave behind their voice in their work, it is somehow more understandable with books. They literally capture the voice of an other person. When reading a book you have another person's voice in your head and when seeing images you are allowed to see through another person's eyes. I appreciate this look into another's reality and I like the detective work that comes along with it. My research quite naturally took me towards a historical perspective on being a female artist, using their work to get to know them better while looking at the broader perspective of the society they worked within.

In my artworks, I take pieces of information, stories, and imagery and try to make it into a combination of possible stories. I get excessively bored with stories that do not have any room for my mood. An object, a piece of art or something else can be extremely captivating in their own beauty or ugliness. What if that object could be a prism and remain on its own a complete thing.

With this act of leaving our voice behind it is possible to create a space. The voice can function as something that ties two points in time together, making minds meet. The space we need can be a physical space that makes us create differently than what we otherwise would have or maybe it is a space of mentality where it is possible to create under an assumption of equality.

Does our understanding of an artwork become better because we know of the artist? I will not have an answer to that question. What I know, is that very hard to separate the artist and the artwork in the process of creation. That must leave an impression on the work itself. I will take walkabout trying to put words to artist stories however, they express themselves, word or image.



Virginia Woolf, 1927

“She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history“¹

When I started shaping this text I had an idea that we leave behind traces for others to see. Traces are complicated because it is not only the person leaving behind a trace that influences what this trace will look like. A trace is influenced by the environment of the artist making the trace and there is an ongoing exchange between the trace creator - the storyteller - and the person viewing it. When reading the story of a person or when getting to know them through their artworks, there will always be an interpretation, a tinted view of past experiences from the reader that is imposed on top of the story.

I expanded from this point, beginning to examine the more general idea of working with one's own identity as a part of an artwork. I have chosen to focus primarily on female artists, because as a female artist myself, I want to know what I am building upon. As artists, we are taught a version of art history that has been primarily focused on male artists. There have been women practicing their art throughout history but there has been a tendency to forget them. Perhaps because there have been so few well-known female artists and many have been criticized and unaccepted by society, they have chosen to use an alias in the form of a man's name under which to create. During the last ten or twenty years, history has begun to be told from other angles than the traditional male one that has been customary in our society for so long.

A couple of years ago I found Frances Borzello's book *Seeing Ourselves, Women's Self-Portraits* in a museum shop. It was an eyeopener to see female artists working and expressing themselves as part of our history. In the book Borzello goes through history, slowly and deliberately giving time to explore the moments made by women that have otherwise been forgotten. Working with identity in my art has become increasingly important. I have been looking at previous generations of my family. I have been working with the house that has belonged to my father's family since 1924. The house has transformed into a symbol. Instead of talking about a specific event that happened, the house has become a mediator, a character of its own. Infusing into the house, overlaying ideas of dreams that I have dreamt of my family and facts told by my father and half-remembered by me. I am getting to know the lives lived by past generations because I know the space they lived in.

In my research of self-portraits and the artists behind them, I have come to understand more about a different time with different lives. And through the question, I am dealing with myself in my own practice. I am putting something of myself into my works, so when other artists have done the same, can I read it in their artworks?

¹ Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own" (pp. 557–630) In: *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf* (Herts, United Kingdom: Wordsworth Editions Ltd; UK ed. edition, 2007) p.586

The gestures of a self-portrait have evolved with the rest of art history. Going from a literal depiction of the artist to a more fluent action in newer times. An evolution happened with the female artist's portrait around the same time as the second-wave feminism was furthering equality between the two genders, which meant more freedom for women. At this time female artists began a more experimental approach to viewing themselves through society's eyes. With this in mind I have chosen to look at work made by Cindy Sherman and Nancy Kitchel. I have also chosen to look further back in the history of self-portraits, where it is very rare to find examples of women artists and maybe even rarer that we know of them. Artemisia Gentileschi is an artist I am shocked not to have known about until very recently. She has a very individualistic approach in her work. An excuse for my ignorance is perhaps that her life and her work lies so far back that she was friendly with Galileo...

How we frame ourselves is a matter of voice. Storytelling is a tool for expressing your inner world, your thoughts and telling the story of your life. As artists, we can use this in many ways, in the art itself or in the surrounding discourse about ourselves and the art we make. Agnes Martin is an example of an artist that has shaped her story through publicity rather than telling it directly in her paintings. I will expand on her story further in the chapter 'Telling a story' (page 17).

I have chosen to incorporate the idea of storytelling into the way I describe encountering artworks that have been important for me. Jay Defeo's work *The Rose* has become a myth because of its disappearance. It was lost in a pocket of time and she was rediscovered as an artist when the work was reestablished as part of the storyline of American art. Another artist that is working with storytelling but in another way is Joan Jonas. Through her videos and installation she invites us into a corner of her life.

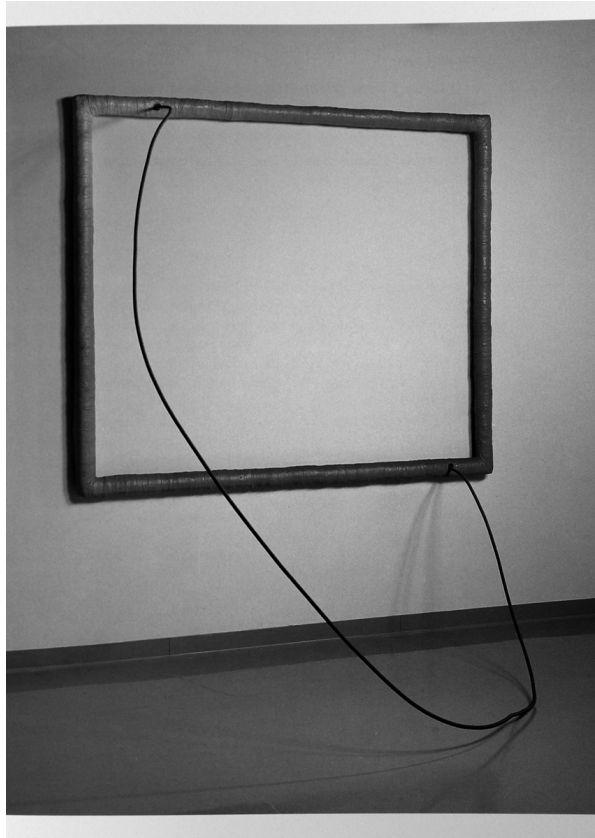
When looking at storytelling as an idea it has been a very easy to jump to literature. I have been drawn to classic British and American literature since my early teenage years, I was first introduced to works by Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. Although the picture is painted with words, the idea is to make something whole, a capsule for others to unpack. Giving them something else to live by, giving them a story with new people, places and traces. When I later discovered *Middlemarch* by George Eliot or Mary Ann Evans, it was less like a fantasy. I knew more of the historical connection to feminism and I was more aware of the unique voice of someone like George Eliot. I wanted to know about the person creating the universe, because I could read less contentment in the statement behind *Middlemarch* compared to what I read in similar books. Reading *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* and researching the story of her life it is easy to see that she had trouble conforming to the general sentiment of how women were supposed to be. She chose to live differently from what society dictated and chose not to equate herself with the perception her gender gave her and kept writing. Mary Ann Evans chose the male pen name George Eliot as a cover, maybe believing it would be easier to be a creative man rather than being herself.

When choosing, as I stated before, to look at female artists, it is because I wanted to spend time looking into the lives lived by other women while they were practicing their art. I have grown up with examples of male artists. This is not a bad thing, after all, I have chosen to become an artist myself regardless. But when when I now, grown up and with a broader view, look at the history of art I want to know more about my fellow female artists. And it is not about being 'female'. Being female is one part of a whole complicated identity. But, wouldn't it be a nice world if it was entirely equal and we did not need a 'focus' to be noticed?

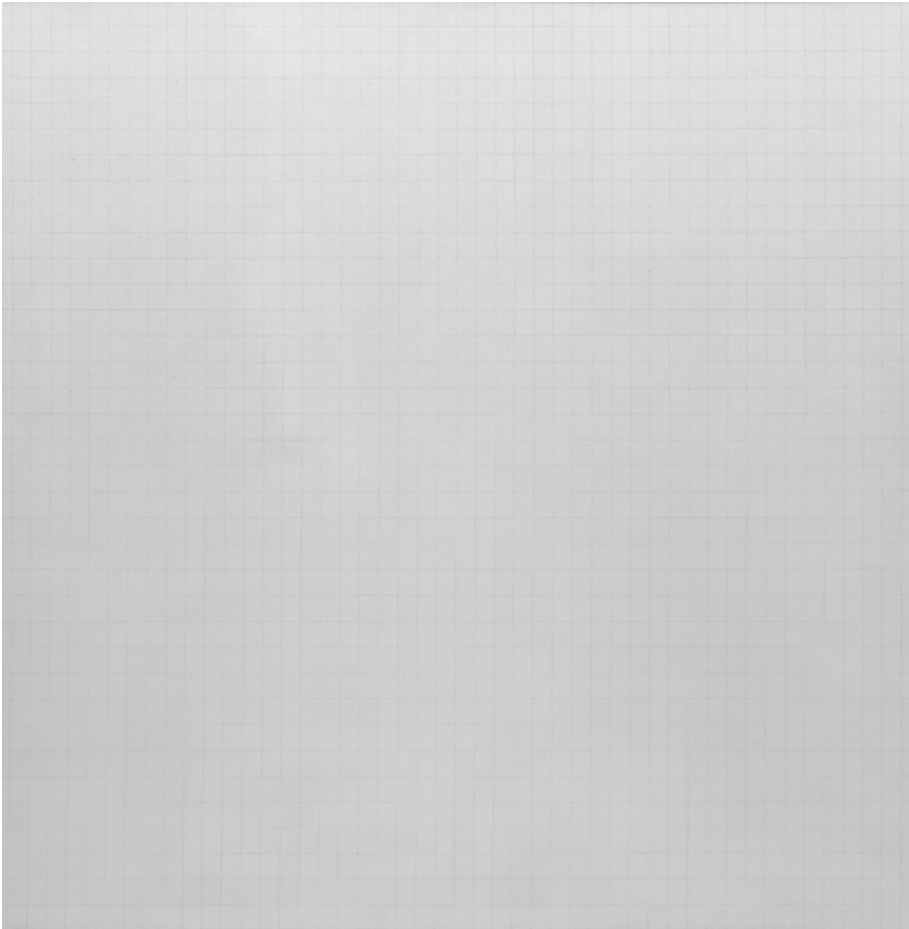
To be female is not a good thing or a bad thing, it is just a part of a whole identity with multiple facets. Being a female artist have different experiences and other opportunities because of their gender. Virginia Woolf lays this out beautifully in her text *A Room of One's Own*. And Linda Nochlin argues in her essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* that gender issues should be an institutional critique rather than an individual one. As an artist I have an urge to see as much art as I can. I go to museums and see what was deemed the greatest art of the period. I am fascinated by the thoughts of the many people that have been there before us. As artists we try to mirror the past, trying to getting to know it and after that we can build on top of it. The act of 'adding upon' demands an understanding of house was already already built. We need an understanding of where the walls are crooked and where the floor is corroding.



Andrei Tarkovsky on the set of *The Sacrifice*, 1986



Eva Hesse *Hang Up*, 1966



Agnes Martin *Rose*, 1966
(figure 1)

Telling a story

Seeing an Agnes Martin painting in real life is an experience. What she offers does not translate well to a reproduction by a camera. I recently encountered the Agnes Martin painting titled *Rose* (figure 1), made in New York in 1966. The painting measures six by six feet. This is an infamous measurement that Agnes Martin used for her paintings throughout most of her career. Six feet is about 183 centimeters, a substantial surface. Although Agnes Martin paintings are abstract, this measurement corresponds to the general height of a person, it creates a space. The canvas is grounded in an off-white acrylic gesso type paint, that has a slightly yellow tint, and a grid made by pencil running on top of the acrylic. The grid is rectangular, longer in height than in width and I would estimate that the longer (the height) side is about five centimeters and the shorter side is a little bit less than four centimeters.

Rose is not the first painting I have seen of Agnes Martin's I have seen maybe seven original works of hers in multiple collections and exhibitions around Europe. The first work I saw of hers was a pencil drawing on paper in a frame behind glass. It was a very big moment for me, I had just started reading and learning about minimalist art and the surrounding era. But honestly, from that exhibition in Malmö, I mostly remember a purple Frank Stella painting, that edge where paint meets the raw canvas, absolute magic. Meeting that type of fascination is really like a shock wave for your thoughts, it propels everything else away. Looking back, I realize that I had that same reaction when afterwards I encountered canvas pieces by Agnes Martin. I feel the same attraction to the edge of the material.

A painting by Agnes Martin reads in layers. You can take it at face value and move on to the next work or you can let it wash over you, feel it. I have felt sucked into the surface, of the possibility that the canvas was endless. Horizons after horizons. Because of the void my eye seeks out the tiny weave of the canvas, the pencil line and its smallest deviation. My eye jumps from line over gaps to the next line. Suspended and waiting for the next gap wholeheartedly. Your understanding of the scale of what you are looking at becomes multiple. The world is in-between the size of the weave and in the gap of the lines and within six by six feet.

To me, my body is very much a part of experiencing a painting of hers. It is something like being in a room with a Robert Morris nineteen-sixties 'caporal' (minimalist) sculpture. It is a bodily experience. You feel your size from the bottom of your feet to your arms hanging awkwardly away from your body, filling up space and the weird gap that is your head (because that is where your eyes are).

During my experience of seeking out art by going to museums and even when discovering art pieces I was not looking for, there are works of art that speak, almost intuitively, to you. It is probably

not intuition but an instant reaction of feelings and experiences shaping memories and preferences and draws us to specific works or a way of working by an artist. The praxis by an artist, can tell us a story of a life being lived while it pulls a track through the artist. A story is something that can be shaped, edited, it is a repetition and at the core of a story is time.

Agnes Martin is an artist that has worked actively with moulding the story of herself. As mentioned above, I only had limited knowledge of what the minimalist art movement was before I actually saw a work of hers, but I had no comprehension of her background. And now when I read about her story, I end up with the facts of her life in one hand and in the other, the mythology she spins around her persona. I am absolutely not advocating for the straight story. I think it is an art piece of its own, to be able to create a figure the way she has. It is not a performance, it is more akin to branding, but in a very quiet self-conscious way and yet she has a clearly defined stage.

Early in her career Agnes Martin was not very outspoken about her work or herself. Maybe this was natural as it was the very beginning of her career and while she was still experimenting with her style of painting, from Surrealism while slowly turning towards her systemized grids. At that point she was located in New York and she lived around other artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Ellsworth Kelly, along with others.² She was a part of an exhibition showing a group of minimalist artists. In the documentary *With my back to the world* she notes that she regretted doing that show because of the association her painting would have with minimalism, from this point forward. She goes on to tell us that she would much rather have been in the company of the Abstract Expressionists.³ With today's view, looking back, it is clear that she stands with a foot in each camp, with a central point in the body. While the Abstract Expressionists were making art with the body in action, the minimalists were making art to be experienced with the body. She does both. At the same time Agnes Martin's paintings are made to elicit an emotional reaction and evoke the same in the viewer, like the Abstract Expressionists, but she also adheres to the strict systems thinking of the Minimalist artists.

In 1967 she moved away from New York, and traveled in Canada and New Mexico before settling in the latter. She started painting again around five years later. She was seeking something, she does not choose to give us a hint as to what. In her writing she circled around some of the big existential themes of her life, it is very much about feeling. She gives the reader hints at her love of women, her scenes about nature reveals her study of Taoism and Zen philosophy and she preaches happiness, maybe to combat the heaviness of her mental state.⁴

From the 1970s onwards Agnes Martin lived in a secluded life in New Mexico. On one of her trips to New York for a series of lectures and a signing of a new painting of hers at Place Gallery, she did an interview with John Gruen. He described how reluctant Martin was about doing the interview and how she was already then a mythical figure.

2 The New Yorker, article on Agnes Martin, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/agnes-martin-a-matter-of-fact-mystic?verso=true> (accessed 1 December, 2019)

3 Mary Lance, (Director) *Agnes Martin, With my back to the world* (New Deal Films, Inc. 2003)

4 The New Yorker, article on Agnes Martin, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/agnes-martin-a-matter-of-fact-mystic?verso=true> (accessed 1 December, 2019)

Actually he calls out the art scene critics because of their worship of Martin.⁵ She was certainly managing the situation tightly but from John Gruen's description of Agnes Martin at the beginning of the interview, we get a feeling of discontentment and her uneasiness rather than a cold manipulator.

Even if Agnes Martin was reluctant about speaking publicly, there are other ways of getting information without asking the artist herself. In the book *Agnes Martin*, edited by Lynne Cooke, a series of essays exploring the life and work of Agnes Martin are brought together. In the essay written by Jonathan D. Katz, he uses an interview with a fellow artist, Mary Fuller (McChesney). She lived and worked in New York at the same time as Agnes Martin (in the 1960s). She describes calculated behavior from Agnes Martin, that she was goal oriented about her success from the beginning and that she was telling other stories about her background from the start. According to Fuller: "Yeah. She's re-writing this whole history. [laughs] Why not?"⁶ Agnes Martin's story is walking on the knife's edge between being humility itself and aggrandizing. This illuminates an account of Agnes Martin from someone other than herself. It is hard to distance yourself from yourself and it also gives us an idea of a human in evolution, someone who is building up to the image we are see of Agnes Martin today.

Agnes Martin actively created a discourse, mostly around herself and her role as an artist. It has been speculated that she was a lesbian and she has hinted at this herself. This line of questioning might not be easy to answer given the old-fashioned value system of the Southern States of America. It could be a layer of protection against the world for her to be controlling interviews and the narrative around her. She goes about this controlling in different ways, sometimes elusively and sometimes quite obviously, like in this interview by Joan Simon: "AM: you can ask me for my definition of art if you want. JS: OK, I will. What is it please? AM: Art is the concrete representation of our most subtle feelings."⁷ Agnes Martin is directing a question, that is personal for an artist but not her private person and Joan Simon is happy to let herself be steered. And Agnes Martin tells us what she believes to be the truth, when you are confronted with a painting of hers you are left in no doubt that it is made and meant with feeling. Even with the truth in her statement, I am left with a hollow feeling, something is missing.

When Agnes Martin exploits her speaking time this way, she is having a one sided conversation. She is left in her track, stuck in the way she is thinking. There is no further input. She is shouting out into the universe and no one dares to speak back. As if it was not a sign of respect to engage in a dialogue. It is probably a weakness of hers that express itself in this extreme control and that does not mean that she actually was this way in real life. But that is how she choose to portray herself as an artist.

Agnes Martin died at the age of 92 in 2004. She had a long life as a working artist, and she left many stories for us to untangle. In the years before she died, three documentaries were made,

5 ARTnews, article on Agnes Martin on Her Meditative Practice from 1976, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/07/31/what-we-make-is-what-we-feel-agnes-martin-on-her-meditative-practice-in-1976/> (accessed 1 December, 2019)

6 Jonathan D Katz "Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of ABbstracstion" In: *Agnes Martin* ed. by Lynne Cooke, Karen J. Kelly (New York: Dia Art Foundation; New Haven, 2011) p. 180

7 Jonathan D Katz, *Agnes Martin* p. 182

With my back to the world (2003), *On a clear day* (2002) and *Agnes Martin: Between the Lines* (2002). She participated in all of them. Quite a departure from an otherwise quiet woman. There could be multiple factors for this uncharacteristic openness, many of them perhaps reflecting on her state of mind in old age, or maybe a sudden fear of not being remembered. What is pervasive, even in the documentaries, is the sense of a creator, a woman creating her own story, deciding every step along the way, creating space where she fits in history.



Agnes Martin, with my back to the world (documentary, 2003) still image

A Voice

I recently listened to a podcast about the work of Lee Krasner. It also went into depth about some of the interviews recorded with Lee Krasner herself. The artist Lari Pittman commented on what he picked up in one of the recorded answers from Krasner: "I'm trying to find my voice." And it goes on to explain that this type of statement is something he recognizes from his female students but never hears from his male students. He sums it up as a "heartbreaking gender breakdown".⁸

Finding one's voice might be an over-used idiom within creative circles, but clichés are clichés for a reason. The idea that we need to get closer to a fruitful truth that is unique to only us, that there are an essences that can help us out is very human to believe in. It is almost religious, trusting in a higher power. And if the the voice is something that can be found, then it can also be lost. What history tells us is that if we as female artists persevere, work hard and make smart choices then maybe we can tell a story of our own.

Agnes Martin is an example of an artist whose paintings are personal without being explicit. She paints using inspirations of landscapes from her childhood and she lives a rich emotional life within the creation, she is layering her philosophy of happiness together with the controlled systems of her grids. You need to know her story to elaborate on her paintings in this way. She is controlled and private throughout most of her career but at the same time she participates in interviews that might tell us more about her than what she actually puts into words. She led a complex life of words and paintings. She comes across as a hard nut to crack in the way her story is told but she is very available in her poetry. In Agnes Martin's writings, we find a window into the way she thinks, it is simpler and less calculated.

The silence on the floor of my house

Is all the questions and all the answers that have been known in the world

The sentimental furniture threatened the peace

*The reflection of a sunset speaks loudly of days*⁹

How we choose to express ourselves becomes complementary to the story we are telling. When Agnes Martin chose her oeuvre of systemized grid paintings, everything else she tells us will be read in light of those. This light comes in many shapes.

When George Eliot writes *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* it affected our understanding of the rest of her work. It illuminated the critical thoughts she had regarding her own gender and how much she was willing to compromise her own identity in her quest to be taken seriously. And in our knowledge of the stream of consciousness writing style of Virginia Woolf, we are willing to be guided down the path of her thoughts. In Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* she starts out by taking us on a walk, she fishes out a thought in the shape of a little fish that she is not ready to let us know so she lets it go again.

⁸ Helen Molesworth, *Recording Artists a Podcast from the Getty on Lee Krasner*, <https://www.getty.edu/recordingartists/season-1/krasner/> (accessed 1 December, 2019) p.7

⁹ Agnes Martin, Dieter Schwarz.. *Writings = Schriften* to accompany the Exhibition: Agnes Martin: Paintings and Works on Paper, 1960-1989 at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur, January 19 to March 15, 1992 , (Stuttgart: Ed. Cantz, 1991) p16

She tries to look up historical information but she is denied entrance because of her gender. This happens at the library of the university where she happens to be, but it is not meant for her. In her very accessible way of writing she explores metaphors that shows us, in almost absurd ways, how society has been built to favour the male identity. *A Room of One's Own* is laid out so that we follow her in the process of the task she has been asked to do. The text was originally two lectures on women and fiction. Another story she makes up, along the way, is one where Shakespeare has a sister, or maybe Shakespeare was the sister. Her name was Judith and she had the talent of Shakespeare but in the shape of a woman. She would not have had the opportunities that her brother had, she was not able to attend school like he did and she would not be able to travel and establish herself the way he did. How could a woman of that time, in the later part of sixteenth-century possibly have the same freedom or choices as her male counterpart? Woolf ends this part of her story by concluding that if Judith had made the same life choices as her brother, trying her luck in London's theaters she would have been ridiculed. It would have been a very hard life and possibly a passionate early death from a poet's mind trapped in the female body.¹⁰

In the last lines of her text, Virginia Woolf once again mentions her imaginary heroine, wanting the women she was lecturing on that day to treat Judith as a real predecessor, for her to be a platform to build upon. Can we find some inspiration in Judith, even if she is imaginary.. Is it so scary to be the first? that it is easier to continue in the footsteps of an imaginary, ill-fated Judith, and perhaps bravery is amiable and the past makes us wise. Woolf values the idea of a platform so highly that even an imaginary one is inspiring enough to build a real future upon with actual equality for women.

When reading *A Room of One's Own* I cannot help but think that it is a version of a self-portrait of its author, Virginia Woolf. We get an in-depth view of how she thinks of her own world and the history she comes from. She mentions her author colleagues Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and George Elliot and she reflects on their processes of writing as mirrors of their lives. Can we do the same for *A Room of One's Own* and understand it as a reflection of Virginia Woolf's own person, to use her words, voice and thoughts to see her.

A self-portrait is defined as being a portrait of an artist created by that artist (herself). In a traditional sense, the portrait is a depiction of somebody, a recreation of the way a person looks. And it is very logical for a painter or a photographer to recreate somebody like that, making them into an image. The urge to create does not only belong to color and light it comes in voice and words too. It is an act of relating oneself to something bigger and working with the reflecting of yourself into what surrounds you. In Virginia Woolf's case, she uses her medium of words to 'paint' a more or less metaphorical world and quite literally walks through it. She is talking about a subject, in her lectures, that she must have some authority within otherwise she would not be asked to speak about it. And as she is describing her own life in *A Room of One's Own* the comings and goings and the practicalities of being self-sufficient it becomes a diary but with the changed quality that it is meant for others to consume, like a self-portrait is.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own" (pp. 557–630) In: *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf* (Herts, United Kingdom: Wordsworth Editions Ltd; UK ed. edition, 2007) p. 589



Joan Jonas *Lines in the Sand*, 2004



Jeff Wall *Picture for women*, 1979

A self-portrait

According to Frances Borzello, author of *Seeing ourselves, Women's Self-Portrait*, there are historically different purposes for making a self-portrait. Among them are displays of craft, a statement of the artist's religious and inspirational beliefs or paying homage to the masters before and making a path for the future to tread. There is a difference between how men and women inhabit the role of being an artist to produce this specific image. The reasons for making a self-portrait outlined above were mainly, if not to say only, men's motivation for creating their likeness, because there was almost no female artists back when this tradition started.

In the 1920s, along with the burgeoning independence of women there was a tendency for female artists to shape out their own spot within the artist scene, mirroring the changing role of women in society. With the female artist came a version of the self-portrait that was an embodiment and exploration of female identity. There are self-portraits made by women from earlier than this time. I will mention some examples of this later. These very early self-portraits are mainly from an individual standpoint, whereas there was a general zeitgeist starting in the late 1960's and going through to the 1970's involving the creative disciplines, authors and artists in exchange with societal changes.

As far as I can piece together the idea of embodiment in self-portraits, this is predominately a feminine trade. The idea comes in a verity of shapes from society-based gender roles, like incorporation of motherhood in the self-portrait or the female (artist) also being accomplished in other pursuits, like music. Therefore the function was to enhance their own image as a woman with their self-portrait. This goes back to the time before the female artist was a socially accepted idea but where women could take up homey crafts as a pastime diversion.

There are also examples of female artists using the conceptual idea of a role in their self-portraits. In Rosalba Carriera's work titled, *Self-portrait as Winter* (figure 3) made in 1731 her delicate brush strokes and translucent color pallet work together to make an image, that to me looks like new frost on an early morning. Frances Borzello draws the interpretation of an older woman. Carriera was fifty-five when she painted this, making an image of herself in the metaphorical 'winter' of her life.¹¹ *Self-portrait as Winter* is a very traditional portrait in its composition, framed from the breast area up. Carriera's impersonation of winter is in her choice of clothing and emphasized by her style of painting.

An even earlier historical example of an artist playing with the idea of embodiment is Artemisia Gentileschi. She wanted to be the painting, with her work: *La Pittura* or *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (figure 2).¹² And in opposition to Carriera's enactment of Winter, Gentileschi activity uses her body to compose with in the portrait.

¹¹ Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits* (Farnborough: Thames Et Hudson, 2016) p.20

¹² Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves* title on p. 8, image on p14



Artemisia Gentileschi *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, 1638
(figure 2)



Rosalba Carriera *Self-portrait as Winter*, 1731
(figure 3)

She is turned away from the viewer, in the act of painting her own self-portrait, making her arms and her body frame the bottom right corner of the image, mimicking the shape of the canvas. She becomes the painting, as she is painting. Artemisia Gentileschi made the painting in 1638, which I find extraordinary. In this era we do not expect women to be artists and in this specific painting, Gentileschi she shows that she values the idea and the craft of painting before promoting the beauty of a woman, becoming an object to be looked at, in the process. *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* is extraordinary because it is a testament of what can be accomplished when you are not allowed to do the same as others i.e. Gentileschi was a woman in a part of history where only men are remembered. It is clearly the unique situation of Artemisia Gentileschi that enabled her to make a self-portrait. Her personality still shines through even after all this time. We can see the process of making, we can, even after many many years, emphasize with the artist at work.

When looking at history now, it feels rather comfortable being a woman. I am lucky, I can look back and find women at different stages of equality and see how they have dealt with their own identity through their art. It is possible for me to draw a line from the few outliers, like Artemisia Gentileschi though to Virginia Woolf to the second wave of feminism. The increased equality inspired many and various self-portraits made by women in 1960s, 70s and 80s. It led to an artistic exploration of the changing role of being a woman as a personal terminology but also in wider relation to society. A woman defining what a woman is, instead of being shaped by outside forces. I can see the stepping stones leading to where we are at this moment, each stone was laid by a woman trying to get closer to her own truth. Every portrait defining the fragment she was missing to make a whole image of herself.

A small, but very personal aspect of expressing who you are, is in the clothes we choose to wear, it is like a layer of a shell. Our body is a vessel for the essence, of what makes us, us. The body is changeable to an extent, but the shell of cloths and objects we surround ourselves with are moldable. We can mold and reshape ourselves and we can shed it like a skin. Is the skin, our outer layer, any less true than the essence within us? Perhaps. But at the same time it is also not only something for ourselves but something we present to the rest of the world.

Sometimes as artists we want to work with ourselves but we get scared by the direct touch, even if it is our own. A way to distance the touch is to work with a mediator, like inhabiting someone close to you, that maybe had an influence on the person you are today. Nancy Kitchel used her mother and grandmother in her work *Covering My Face (My Grandmothers Gestures)* from 1973. She tells us a story in two parts, the first about how her mother reprimanded her as a child for always having her fingers in and around her mouth. The second part is about how Nancy Kitchel's grandmother taught her that by hiding her mouth she could hide her feelings. This story is told on the last panel out of twelve, the other eleven are showing images of the gestures meant to hide. The panels are set in a four by three grid making a square and are black/gray photographs documenting a performance. It is a self-portrait that is aware of its' play on feminine roles in society. She is building upon the behavioral traits that her mother and grandmother installed in her as young child.



Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Still #35*, 1979
(figure 4)



Cindy Sherman *Play of Selves*, 1976
(figure 5)

This exterior shell can be manipulated in many ways. Between 1977 and 1980 Cindy Sherman made a photography series with more than seventy portraits of herself in costume. The series is called *Untitled Film Stills* (figure 4) and Sherman transformed herself into the stereotypical female roles shown in 1950s and 60s Hollywood movies. Before this, while still at university, she made a work called *Play of Selves* (figure 5), which she has herself described as autobiographical.¹³ This work is also based in photography where she created a play with 16 cutout figures. All the characters are different versions of herself played by her in costume and then photographed. The photograph cutouts then interact in the individual set up scenes. Her characters have names like 'A Broken Woman', 'The Actual Main Character (the woman as she actually is)', 'The Character as Others See Her', 'The Ideal Woman' and 'The Ideal Man'. It all ends in 'Madness', this is the final character.

In the two works made by Cindy Sherman there is a difference in the angles used to look upon herself. In the work *Play of Selves* she is separating out and analyzing her own personality traits to make each urge precise and motivated with its own persona. Working with yourself in this way is tough, and it only becomes harder because it is meant for others to consume, in the way artworks are.

When compared with the later work *Untitled Film Stills* Cindy Sherman is still working with her own image, but it is about a reflection of society. She examines the representation of women in Hollywood movies, a version of women made by men. In her enactment of these women she is holding up a mirror, seeing if she somehow fits into this role assigned to her, because she is a woman. In the growing gender equality throughout the twentieth century I can only imagine that it would be obvious for an artist to question the image of her own gender in society and who the creator behind that image is.

13 Cindy Sherman, *Cindy Sherman: A Play of Selves* (New York: Hatje Cantz, 1982), Introduction



Gustave Caillebotte *Floor Scrapers*, 1875

SPACES

A physical trace, body surface and tool

A trace is something we leave behind, it is a mark of something that used to be here. Starting with a line, drawn with a pencil, a tool designed to make marks. On a surface. There is no trace without a face. A piece of paper made for embracing every mark, ready for a print.

Joan Jonas is a performance artist. She has started working in front of her video projections so she uses her body as part of the screen. The work of hers I am most familiar with is a bit older, where she was performing for the camera. The video pieces are often shown in a square wooden funnel so that the video has its own little room. In the video performance *My New Theater III: In the Shadow a Shadow* (figure 6) there are parts of it where she is reclining in a chair wearing a white sheet over her face and her body. She is using her body as a surface with a topography of its own, the sheet is adding another layer of materiality - a blank surface. She draws an outline of herself on herself, blind, feeling and limited by the drawing hand's position. She makes a map of her body, that in the act of filming also becomes a story of a self-portrait.

My New Theater III: In the Shadow a Shadow has an element of something mythical, this notion comes to mind because Joan Jonas is repeatedly working within the same setting, with herself as an actor and with her dogs as watchers. And on top of this idea of familiarity, she tells us a story of broken pieces through her actions. The actions are bizarre, she knows what she is doing - we just do not know. I find the play with non-narrative storytelling compelling and it is an example of where I, the viewer, am invited along her journey without having all the pieces and I am not missing them. The image of her drawing upon herself has particularly stuck with me, the play on scale with a connection to a body is very literal in its method.

The translation usually made in scale when an artist is conjuring an image is not present. What comes to mind is the story of Jorge Luis Borges, about an empire that made a map of the actual size of their empire.¹⁴ The work *My New Theater III: In the Shadow a Shadow* is a play on how to take measurement and the reproduction of reality into something graphical, from volume to flatness. While in some of the techniques Jonas draws upon I can see a shared terminology with map making, other parts of her work come from a tradition of portraiture, a twist on the reclining nude model with a gaze upon her. Joan Jonas transforms the traditional functions within that synergy. It used to be the male artist drawing the female object, instead Jonas uses video as an electronic representation of her own gaze. It is a gaze to be acted out in the future. She is in control of the view and with the installation of the work she delivers the gaze to us. Jonas documents the process of making an imprint of herself, with the touch of a surface to another surface.

¹⁴ KWARC, article on *Exactitude in Science by Jorge Luis Borges*, <https://kwarc.info/teaching/TDM/Borges.pdf> (accessed 1 December, 2019)



Joan Jonas *My New Theater III: In the Shadow a Shadow* movie still, 1999
(figure 6)

Joan Jonas uses her body as a base for her own creations to build upon. Surfaces to draw on comes in many variations and we can use our own body as both surface and tool. Moving our bodies across our earth leaves a trace. The earth is a very immediate medium. There is no in-between when drawing on the ground you stand on. The translation that happens when you look at a space, in an image: a drawing, a photography or in a painting, if you want the space to be readable you need an indicator to give us a scale. It is very easy to get lost in spaces.

In the moment when size becomes relevant there is a connection between the real world, something touchable, physical and the illustration of it. It is like an eclipse where versions of the same world overlap.

Earth as a material is heartbreakingly familiar, as a place can mean so much to us and be the vessel for so many memories. Earth and landscape can conversely also be freeing. It can be wanderlust and give opportunities for creation. Michelle Stuart has actively practiced her art outdoor in the landscape since the 1970s, she has used different landscapes in their own specific way. She has made interventions in both large and smaller scale, often with white paper interacting with the dirt or plant matter from the site-specific place she is working with.

One of the elements that keeps coming back throughout her career is rubbings of dirt on paper, the color of the nature site brought into the gallery, bringing two spaces together with the medium of her tedious work. She copies the landscape onto her paper, using her body to fuse the trace of the outdoors to a surface. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, published in 2019, she talks about the transitory part of her pieces, as when she was working with big pieces of paper outside and a strong wind takes charge and claims it, or when one of her earth-books dissolves, taking with it its secrets.¹⁵ That her art is part of a lifecycle where nature provides the possibilities of expression but also makes it frail, adding a touch of time upon her work. And while time is a big part of the material she has chosen to work with, it is her body traveling through spaces that she reacts to and then again, how the place interacts with her presence.

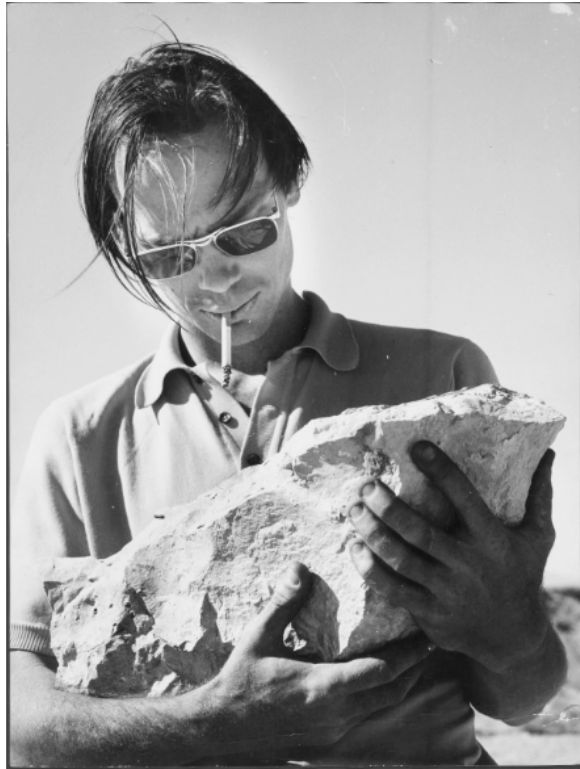
¹⁵ *Michelle Stuart in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist* "Shredding of ephemeral gestures" Mousse, 2019, April p-263-266



Abelardo Morell *Camera Obscura: View of Landscape Where Galileo Died in Exile*, 2009



Michelle Stuart working on one of her *Color/Time/Landform Transformations* at a quarry, 1977



Michael Heizer, 1973

Being Imprinted ((upon))

What we touch, we leave an imprint on. And the opposite is true as well. The spaces we live our lives in have an impact on us. Frances Borzello writes, in her book *Seeing Ourselves, Women's Self-Portrait*, that there is a mirroring of women finding their place as artists in the beginning of the twentieth century, and the general beginning of independence of women in society.¹⁶ Borzello shows paintings made by female artists depicting their own studio space or bedrooms and attributes them the same quality as a self-portrait. It is an expression of self-acknowledgement of their own existence as an artist, as someone who can mark out their own space.

Around the same time as we date these paintings, Virginia Woolf writes *A Room of One's Own* an argument for women's need for their own space and money to be able to create artistically. Virginia Woolf's essay is not only about physical space. It builds upon notions of gender equality, she gives us a glimpse into her world where there are an abundance of traditions and wealth connected to the old universities meant for men. Throughout history it has been a normality for men to raise money for their own projects. They had the ability to be independently wealthy. Whereas women were only just beginning to create their own story and with it the possibilities of education and self-reliance, with the trouble that comes along when there is nothing to build upon.

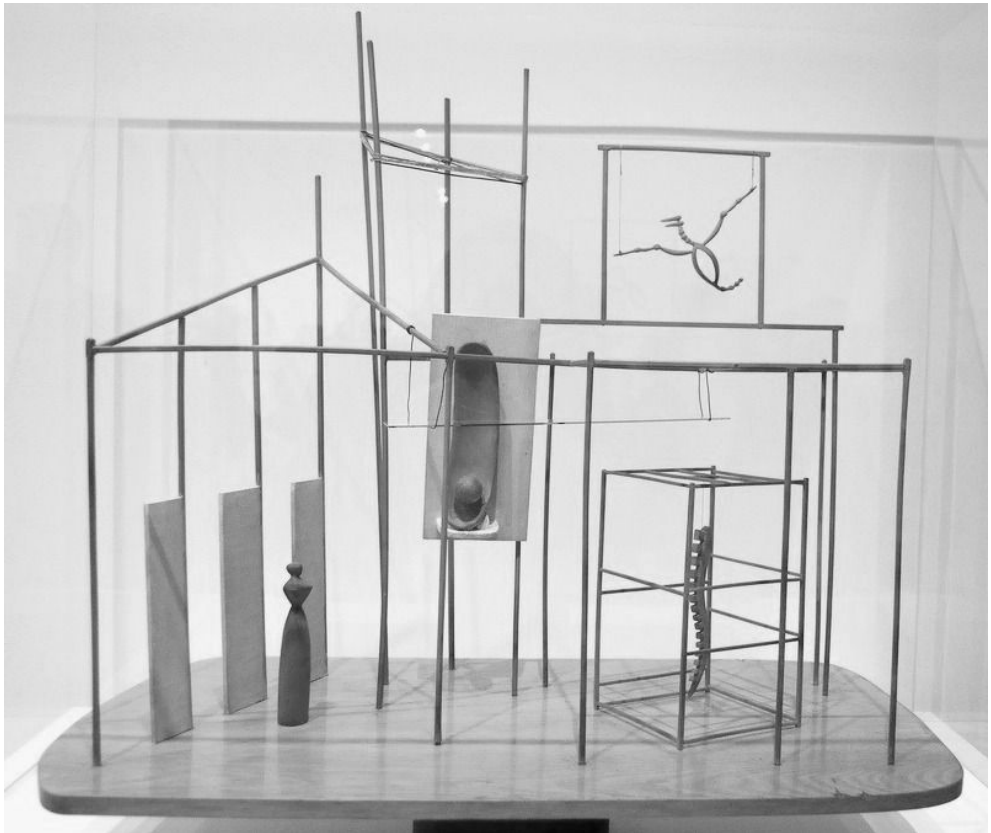
A house - A dream where he and the woman he loved would build and rebuild, only to see it vanish again.¹⁷ *The Palace at 4 a.m.* (figure 8)

It is definitely a house, although it does not have any walls, it has a network of frames that define the space. Well first of all, the house has a floor, of nice polished wood, like furniture wood. It is warm yellow and shiny, reflecting the framing elements on top. The whole miniature installation looks very well-made, it is almost an abstract scale model. The frames are made of a round sticks, they are handmade, not perfectly straight, and attached into the surface acting as the floor.

Inside the house there are rooms with different elements. In the biggest space, on the left is a female figure. She is facing, right towards the rest of the house and behind her is tree wood rectangles. I see them as mirrors. Almost in the middle, a little towards the left, is an abstracted figure, an oblong shape with a ball, a bit like a mussel with a big pearl. It has a light brown background surface, defining its own space. Its placement indicates a stairwell leading up to a tower and next to the tower, is a bird skeleton in another frame. On the ground level of the house but in the space on the right, is a spine, the same size as the female figure, it is suspended in a box. The spine faces left so that it and the female figure are facing at each other. The whole model is made from wood. The frames, the female figure, the mussel and the spine are a darker brown than the flat surfaces. The different figures have passive placement, each of them is made to be in isolation in their own part of the house. As the title indicates Giacometti thought of this as a palace, not as a house or a home. Making it a palace means that it is something grander, it is more of a wish. It is a dream captured in time by its lack of motion.

¹⁶ Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits* (Farnborough: Thames Et Hudson, 2016) p142

¹⁷ MoMA's collection, Alberto Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80928> (accessed 1 January, 2019)



Alberto Giacometti *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, 1932
(figure 8)



Gwen John *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1907-9
(figure 7)

Alberto Giacometti made this sculpture in 1932, in symbolism it feels much like something belonging to the surrealist movement. The column and spine are used frequent in works by Frida Kahlo, where it is broken but also the center of her body. The bird, mussel and the female form are all well-traveled elements within Freudian psychoanalysis, which the surrealist movement gravitated towards to explore the unconscious self.

The framing of the space in *The Palace at 4 a.m.* hints at a dream and space yet to be defined. Like a maquette or scale model, this sculpture has enough defined space in it, so that we can project ourselves from our body, and understand the space. At the same time it is also a toy house, something to play with and reshape. And here we come back to his story of the creation of *The Palace at 4 a.m.* (figure 8). He had a dream building something with the woman he loved. In 1932 Giacometti was thirty-one years old and it sounds like he was concerning himself with creating a life with someone he cared for. A shelter is a basic need but also something we can shape with intentions of what you want your life to be. It can be a vessel for a network of thoughts, it can be something tangible instead of being air.

In my opinion, there is some undefinable yet engaging quality in the mesh of a place depicted that is also a person, that then again also leaves room for me to assemble pieces like a detective. This work pokes out of my thesis like a sore thumb because it is made by a male artist. It was not my intention to only write about works by female artists. It just happened that these are the works that interested me in my research, and now this work by Giacometti interests me. And I have not been able to find an artwork by a female artist, from this period of time that has the same qualities. I have earlier on in this text mentioned a work by Gwen John (figure 7) that talked about the space she occupied from around the same time as Giacometti made his work. Giacometti's sculpture plays with space as a character on its own with inbuilt duplicity, whereas Gwen John's painting is more a definition of a stage for her as an artist.

Linda Nochlin mentions in her essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* that Giacometti comes from a family of artists.¹⁸ She argues that the traditional father-son system of handing down craft, skills and maybe even a thought process meant that it was easier for men to even unconsciously take advantage of the hard work of past generations. To be able to do so is a benefit. It means that you do not have to start from the beginning with every new generation. Linda Nochlin is answering the inverted version of her title question, Why have there only been great male artists? She addresses this on an institutional level, the system favours the male gender because it seemed to be the one that actually counted.

Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? was written in the early 1970s as a part of second-wave feminism. And while Linda Nochlin concludes that there has been no great female artist at that point in time because of the “..total situation of art making..” in which she means, including but not limited to: “..the development of the art maker.. the nature and quality of the work.. social

18 Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” In: *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. by Vivian Gornick, Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971) p10

structure....institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator.. the artist as a he-man or social outcast.”¹⁹

This idea can not totally be transferred to today, but that is a subject for another time, another thesis. It is just to say there is a reason why only Giacometti could have made *The Palace at 4 a.m.* and why nobody else other than Virginia Woolf wrote *A Room of One's Own*. They are a reflection of their time and gender, they were looking at their past and what they made was the next step in an ongoing evolution. Art that is made today rests on the platform of *A Room of One's Own* and *The Palace at 4 a.m.*

19 Nochlin *Why No Great Women Artist?* p11



detail of tapestry at the Louvre (picture by me in 2019)



winter buffalo hide in KLM magazine (photo by me 2019)



unfinished print (by anonymous print maker) of the self-portrait of Karel Dujardin, 1834



Jay DeFeo *The Rose*, 1969
(figure 9)

Conclusion

There is a story of an artwork called *The Rose* (figure 9). It took eight years for Jay DeFeo to complete, she finished the painting in 1966. And a couple of years later it was brought to the San Francisco Art Institute. This might be the right place to tell you, if you do not know, that the work weighs more than a metric ton and is made as a relief in thick layers of paint. This work was made in her own home and a hole had to be made in a wall to remove the work with a forklift truck. At the San Francisco Art Institute, *The Rose* was placed in a conference room. It hung on the wall there for about three years before it started to corrode. It was not stable, pieces start to fall off. What is meant to be a temporary conservation method was put in place. This method also covered up the entire front of the painting and in addition made the work so big that it could not be removed in the same way it was put in place. Five years go by and no further conservation happens, the Art Institute builds a wall in front of the work. Years go past and the artwork becomes a rumour, a myth. Something trapped inside a wall for fifty years, not known and not seen. The work in its whispers becomes synonymous with the artist herself. *The Rose* inhabits space and pervades time like only a true trace could.

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BA Thesis

Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Fine Arts

July, Amsterdam

Teachers: Jay Tan, Frank Mandersloot, Jean Bernard Koeman

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