

ART, MIMESIS AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Aspects of a philosophy of difference

Andrew Benjamin



London and New York

BETRAYING FACES: LUCIAN FREUD'S SELF-PORTRAITS

PREAMBLE, REPRESENTATION

The self-portrait cannot help but raise the question of its own status. Clearly it falls within the purview of representation in so far as it re-presents. And yet does representation delimit its specificity and describe what is unique to it? Part of the difficulty in dealing with the self-portrait or indeed with 'representation' in general stems from the growing recognition of the inability of representation to provide an adequate interpretive mode in which to analyse paintings (if not all purported 'representations').

Representation involves presence. It gives presence to what had hitherto not been presented. It is of course this formulation that marks the problem representation poses for itself. Any representation must lack authenticity in its striving to be authentic. A painting of a bowl of oranges can never be the same as a bowl of oranges. Consequently a representation must try and capture an essential quality. The representation must recognize the impossibility of camera-work and try therefore to present the reality of the object. If the reality cannot be captured by the camera then it is neither simply the empirical nor the material but also the essential (an essential quality which, as shall be seen, has materiality).¹ Linked to the essential is the question of authenticity. The strength of a painting, its force, when determined within the ambit of representation, is to be judged in relation to the essential, not just in relation to the object itself. Representation in this sense brings with it two referents. The first is the object *qua* object, and the second is the essential quality of the object. If interpretation remains within the field of representation then the interplay between object and essence must, in the strictest sense possible, comprise the locus and practice of

interpretation. The frame becomes therefore the site of that interplay.

How then does this interplay work within the frame presenting a self-portrait? Here the representation is of a unique self both as object and as essence. The self-portrait within representation is constrained to present the 'I' as it is. (This constraint operates equally within interpretation as well as providing the *intentional logic* of a particular self-portrait.) Appearance must give way to reality and yet of course the reality must appear. Prior to taking up the self-portrait – of portraying that which is unique to it – a detour needs to be made. What is at stake within both representations and interpretations enacted within representation is a specific semantic economy. Coming to terms with that economy is to come to terms with the possibility of its having been displaced. Its replacement figures as much in works of art as it does in interpretation.

The semantic economy at the heart of representation can in general terms be understood as involving a straightforward relationship between signifier and signified. The signifier can be viewed as representing the signified. Their unity is then the sign. The possibility of unity is based on the assumed essential homogeneity of the signified. The sign in its unity must represent the singularity of the signified. It is thus that authenticity is interpolated into the relationship between the elements of the sign. Even though the signifier and the signified can never be the same, there is, none the less, a boundary which when transgressed would render the relationship inauthentic. The relationship between signifier and signified would have become improper. It is precisely this conception of the sign that emerges within the aspirations of seventeenth-century philosophical thought and which comes to define, either in retrospect or actually, elements of both Classicism and Modernism.² Its breakdown, which can be traced in a number of different domains and which has a plurality of forms, provides the conditions of possibility for the move away from the semantics of Modernism. This movement is, in sum, that which follows in the wake of the growing impossibility of any straightforward relationship between signifier and signified; resulting within the present in the necessary irrecoverability of a unified and self-identical signified.³

The crisis of modernity therefore is the recognition of the irreconcilable split within the sign (a split, which, retrospectively it is possible to argue has always already been there). This irreconcilability has occasioned precisely that melancholia that marks the art, liter-

ature, philosophy, interpretation, etc., that remain trapped within the confines of modernity. The impossible possibility of the sign need not however give rise to interpretations and works of art that are organized around a past that has been lost, a present where the loss comes to be experienced, and a future in which loss may be overcome by its having been redeemed. Ironically it is possible to redeem the crisis itself while at the same time allowing loss to reappear. However it would no longer appear as that which determines the present but rather as something to be determined within the present. Modernism has not failed; it has, on the contrary, reached its limit. The presence of this limit is attested to by arguments for and against its having been reached. The nature of this limit and what it delimits must be briefly noted since at stake here are major claims both about the actuality of works of art as well as the practice of interpretation.

Fundamental to modernism is the presupposed unity or homogeneity of the object of interpretation. Such a conception of the object works within the assumption that the object is on an ontological level compatible with the self-image of the mode of interpretation or philosophical inquiry. Indeed this is the demand of the dominant tradition within the history of philosophy. Unity was given to the object of interpretation (here the work of art) by the unity (though only unity as self-image) deployed within both interpretation and philosophical inquiry. Excluded from both therefore was the very possibility of overdetermination or heterogeneity.⁴ The work of art could only frame the singularity of intent. There is however, an affirmative dimension of the crisis of modernism. In a sense it results from the nature of the crisis itself (even though it does, at the same time call into question the term 'crisis'). To use a different formulation, the crisis of modernism can be described as resulting from the impossibility of sustaining the homogeneous and therefore of excluding heterogeneity. The affirmative is situated within this gap. However its situation does not occasion nostalgia.

The affirmative has two important aspects. The first is that it allows for an interpretation of works enacted within the desire for unity (given the rider that the desire can no longer structure the method and direction of the interpretation of such works). The second is that it sanctions a distinction which can be drawn between works attempting what, to use Derrida's formulation, can be described as a 'nihilistic repetition' of unity, homogeneity and pure presence, and works which take place within the recognition of the futility and

impossibility of that attempt. These latter works are not avant-garde in the sense that they simply involve a rejection of tradition. In fact the language of acceptance and rejection is here, in this instance, inappropriate. A more accurate way of expressing the designation avant-garde concerns repetition. The refusal to repeat does not delimit the painting's concern. However the recognition of the refusal of the repetition of the same would comprise the opening move in any interpretation. These cursory comments and tentatively drawn distinctions can serve to provide a space in which to locate a number of Lucian Freud's self-portraits. These paintings can be divided such that they enact the division that marks the consequences of the crisis of modernism.

Perhaps as a way of starting it would be best to deal with the obvious objection. What makes it obvious is that it arises from the premises that identify the crisis itself. It can be argued that if the present is structured by the impossibility of establishing a fixed and unified relationship between the signifier and the signified, then, given that a self-portrait could only ever enact the desire for presence and hence of a stable and fixed relationship between signifier and signified, it would have to follow that the self-portrait had become an impossible state of affairs. It would be the supreme example of the repetition of the desire for unity. It is of course this desire that has been shown to be of necessity unfulfillable. The reply to this objection is contained in the divide that can be established between the two groups of self-portraits, and therefore in the possibility of an affirmative self-portrait. It needs to be specified in advance that a detailed interpretation of paintings whose intentional logic indicated the desire for presence and unity would show how such a logic failed to rid the canvas of heterogeneity.

FACING PAINTINGS

The eye attracts and is attracted. The interlocking eyes – gazing out, gazing in – introduce a visual simultaneity. Whose eyes gaze out? In Freud's painting *Man's Head (Self-Portrait)*, 1963, his own open eye captures and is captured. However there is nothing in the painting – in the frame – except for the title which is outside of the frame that marks it out as a self-portrait. It is similar in style and execution to a number of portraits. In spite of its power it leaves unquestioned the practice of painting self-portraits. Its intentional logic involves a pure

presentation which, while intended to represent the self who painted it, might as well be a simple portrait. The portrait as genre is here repeated as and within a self-portrait.

While this repetition becomes increasingly less stable it is none the less possible to include *Reflection (Self-Portrait)*, 1981/2, and *Reflection (Self-Portrait)*, 1983, within the parameters it constructs. The lack of stability arises not just from the always already heterogeneous nature of painting, but here, specifically, because of the type of application and use of paint – the techniques of scraping and building – works to undermine the intentional logic.

Freud's fascination with paint is clear from his own explanation of why he uses Cremnitz white as the 'basic pigment of flesh'. 'I wouldn't use Cremnitz on anything that was not alive. I use it for flesh, or even on the hairs of a dog, but never for instance, on a woman's dress. It is simply a code.'¹⁵ It would be worth pursuing the consequences of his techniques of scraping paint. It works to create a dense, thick surface that, amongst other things, draws attention to the surface as painting. The consequence of focusing attention on the painting (as the mark of an activity) is that it calls into question the assumed temporality of representation. This occurs in two specific ways. The givenness, or pure presence, inscribed within the intentional logic of the representational self-portrait (that is the self-portrait conceived as representation) is mediated and thus checked by the paint-work. The mediation introduces the first moment of temporal alterity and engenders the second since it is to the extent that representation is mediated that the frame starts to en-frame the heterogeneous. It therefore gives rise to and sanctions a reworking – similar to the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* – in which the original homogeneity is reworked in terms of an always already heterogeneous content. This reinvestment renders the original no longer the same as itself. It is the second way in which the temporality of representation is questioned. The absence of the need for such a reworking is another way of describing affirmation. It is in terms of three specific paintings that affirmation will be discussed. It should be added however that they would need to be complemented by *Two Irishmen in W.11*, 1984/5, and *Painter and Model*, 1986/7, since they both form an integral part of Freud's dwelling, within painting, on the activity of painting itself. In the case of his painting, *Portrait of the Two Irishmen*, the painting inscribes the activity of painting – the partly finished canvases – within the frame. Hence the painting becomes a painting

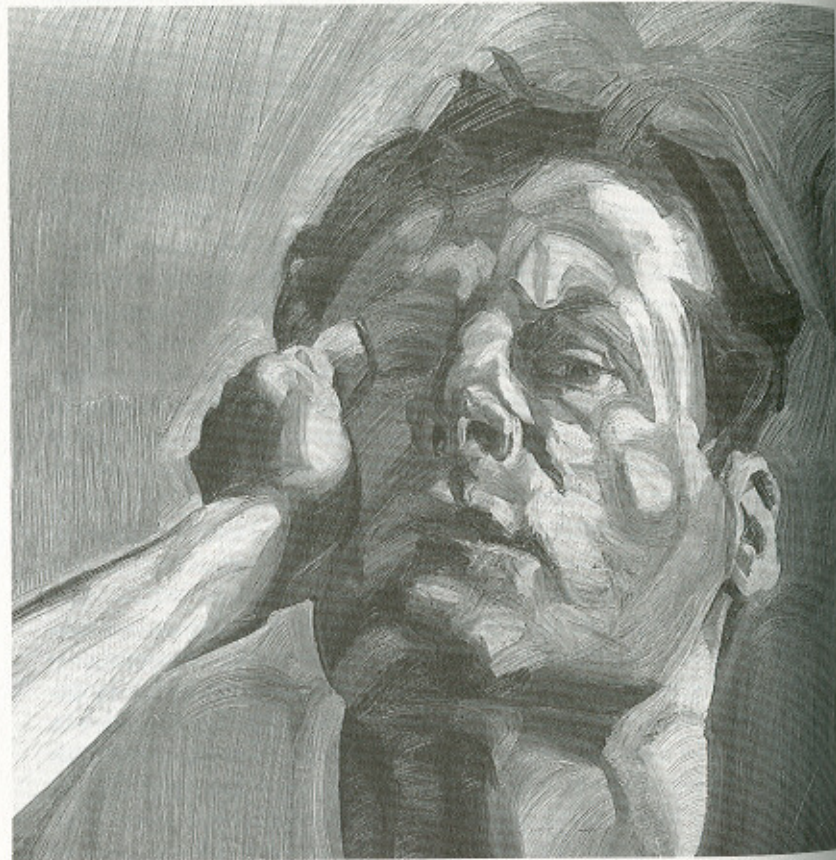


Plate 2 'Man's head (self portrait)', Lucian Freud, 1963, oil on canvas.

of portraiture, the process, rather than the simple presentation of a portrait, stasis. In the case of *Painter and Model* the paint used by the framed painter and the paint used to paint this event of painting become one and the same while remaining distinct. The distinction between subject and object is maintained and in being maintained comes to be denied. The distinction blurs.

The first of the 'self-portraits' which will be considered in slightly greater detail is from 1967–8, *Interior with Plant, Reflection Listening*. The second is a painting from 1967, *Interior with Hand Mirror*, and finally an earlier painting *Reflection with Two Children* of 1965. All of these paintings are catalogued as self-portraits. In each instance reflection either figures within the painting or forms part of its name. It is the way in which reflection is deployed within these paintings that serves to differentiate them from the other group. One of the aspects that marked the other paintings was the repetition of portraiture within and as self-portrait. It should not be thought however that the 'affirmative' group do not portray. It is rather that their portrayal takes over the portrait but refuses to let the representational conception of portrait, self-portrait, sign, etc., attempt to dominate the frame. The frame en-frames the event of questioning. These three paintings do not need to be reworked in order to trace their attempt to question what a self-portrait is. This questioning works to redefine in advance of any possible answer. The question shifts from who is being portrayed, to what is being betrayed within the portrayal.

Interior with Plant, Reflection Listening, (Self-Portrait) is of particular interest in this regard. It is tempting to focus on the dislocated body that seems to emerge incomplete from behind a plant which is thereby made preposterous. The body lacks centrality. It is there where it should not be. How is dislocation to be understood, however? Here this question is made more dramatic if it is joined to the more fundamental one, namely how is dislocation – the displaced – to be identified? The answer to this latter question is unproblematic. Identification is the consequence of sight, vision, of seeing the body there where it should not be; of viewing its lack of completion; of recognizing the impossible scale of man and plant. The eye reveals. Once the eye is focused on the 'self-portrait', on the face, then what is revealed is precisely that mode of cognition that displaces the centrality of the eye. The eye therefore is drawn to what cannot be seen. It moves ineluctably to the representation of that which is inherently unrepresentable, namely sound. The eye in focusing on



Plate 3 'Interior with plant, reflection listening (self portrait)', Lucian Freud, 1967–8, oil on canvas.

listening – on the cupped ear – confronts what it cannot confront. It is not just that the link between painting and vision, and hence between painting and representation, is thereby checked. There is far more here than a simple refusal. This painting sustains the possibility of the self-portrait but enacts it within an unending questioning of its own activity. In looking at this self-portrait, in looking at the ear, in hoping to 'hear' the painting, the question of the self-portrait itself is being asked. It is possible to take these preliminary deliberations a step further by concentrating on reflection within *Reflection with Two Children*.

Reflection involves the desire for a temporality of simultaneity. The desired look is reflected at the same time as the look takes place. The mirror is therefore thought to be the site of an absolute but momentary return. (The mirror in *Interior with Hand Mirror* plays, as will be argued further on, a fundamental role in ridding the frame of the domination of reflection.) In the painting under consideration reflection, while named by the title, seems to be impossible. The frame in containing two frames casts doubt on the viability of reflection by its affirmation of the impossibility of the temporality of simultaneity.

The entire frame – the one that bears the title – contains within it a secondary frame. It is this secondary frame that frames Freud and is thereby the self-portrait. The thick brown line does not simply break the frame in two, thus introducing two different perspectives; it also breaks the temporality of simultaneity by pluralizing time within the entire frame. What comes to be portrayed – portrayed within a self-portrait – is the plurality.

The two children, who form part of the self-portrait because they are named in its title, do not occupy the specific frame of the self-portrait. They are outside that frame. They do not, however, by themselves construct that outside. They are positioned there by the framing brown line. The line is important because it does not reduce the difference between Freud, as the subject of the self-portrait, and the children, as part of the self-portrait's subject, to an otherness defined in terms of a difference from the same. Difference therefore within this painting is not presented (represented) in terms of a simple self/other distinction. Within the frame – the entire frame – difference is differential because it involves plurality; a heterogeneous plurality that resists synthesis.⁶ This particular 'reflection' in breaking with reflection opens up a rethinking, within painting, of time, of self/



Plate 4 'Reflection with two children (self portrait)', Lucian Freud, 1965, oil on canvas.

other, of plurality and of difference. It is tempting to see this 'reflection' that resists reflection as ethical. In addition it is also clear in what way the painting is affirmative in its presentation of heterogeneity. Indeed it poses a problem for a reductive interpretation that, in its desire for simultaneity and representation, would have to preclude – if not occlude – the affirmative that is en-framed; here, en-framed by a doubling within a more general frame.

Reflection as an impossible possibility also figures within *Interior with Hand Mirror*. Reflection is absent from the title. None the less it figures within the painting. The mirror is the site of reflection. It is held in place by a window frame. Here the frame is not the transparent window; the window onto and hence framing the world. The window, while being a frame, does not, in any straightforward sense, frame. It is not transparent and thus involves neither an inside nor an outside. It neither gives onto a world nor encloses (en-frames) one. Within the general frame (the one bearing the title) and between the window frames there is another frame.

The mirror can only ever frame the transitory. What it holds and returns must be present. If the mirror were to frame, it would necessitate an eternal present in which the temporality of simultaneity could unfold without end. Within the mirror, reflected by it, is Freud's face. The mirror frames the self-portrait. The irony is that his eyes are shut. The unending backward and forward movement demanded by the temporality of simultaneity ends. The shut eyes mean that the reciprocity is broken. Reflection reflects into the closed and empty eyes. The logic within which the mirror is articulated not only works to break the power of reflection, but at the same time renders impossible any attempt to use either the categories of reflection or representation as means by which to interpret *Interior with Hand Mirror*. The mirror as frame cannot be viewed in isolation. Within the general frame the mirror no longer functions as a mirror. It is this functional refusal that links it to the window.

The window both by name and function involves framing. The window should present a world; frame it, divide it and thereby allow access to it. While the mirror sustains reflection, the window should picture the world. Here, in this painting, the mirror not reflecting and the window not picturing seem to be captured by its title. The window has not become the mark of an enclosure but of a foreclosure. The opposition between the inside and the outside has been foreclosed. It is now only displayed. The window has become a pure frame. It holds

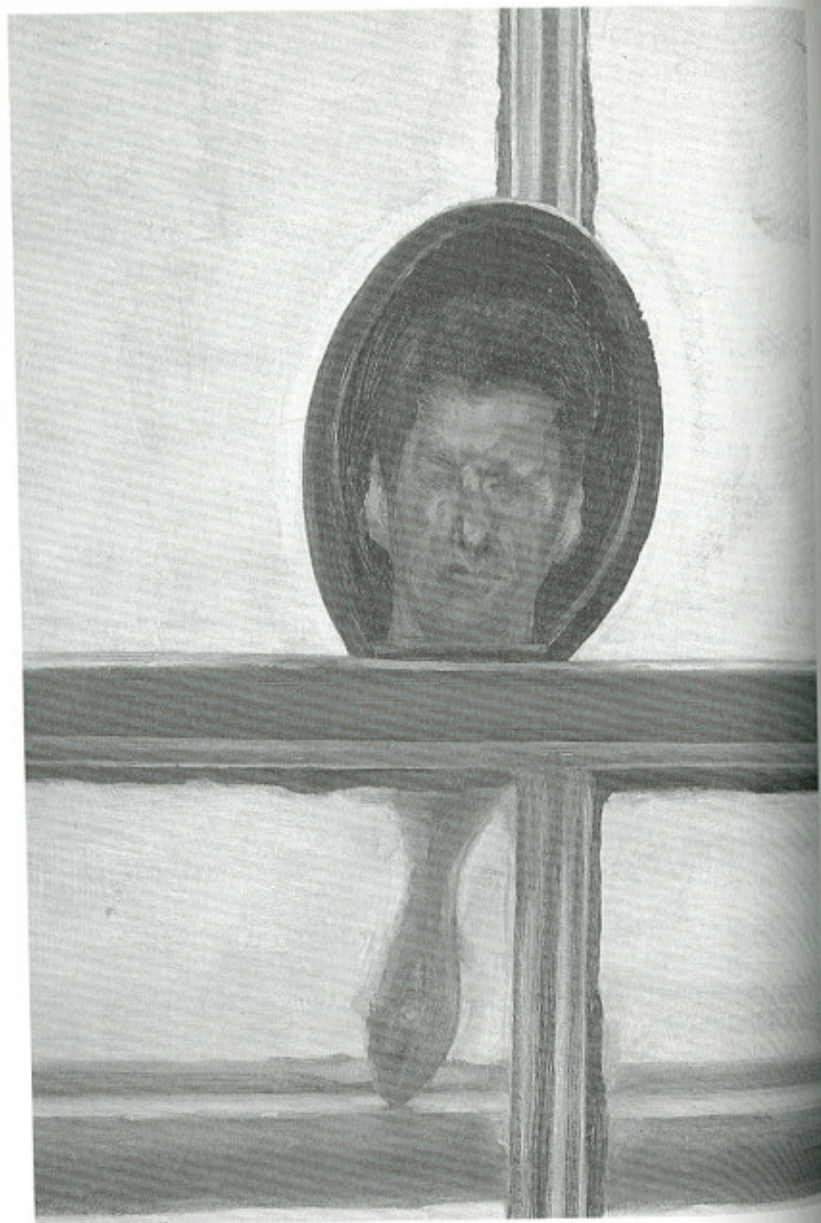


Plate 5 'Interior with hand mirror', Lucian Freud, 1967, oil on canvas.

the hand mirror. Between its own frames is the hand mirror as frame. The window therefore frames an interior with a hand mirror.

The overall result gives rise to a chaos of framing. The logic of each frame is called into question by what it en-frames. The overall frame cannot contain a self-portrait as representation. The window frames neither frame nor en-frame. They hold a frame that cannot hold what it frames – except if the mirror is stilled, so that in being presented as a mirror it cannot function as a mirror but rather as a frame which does hold. This excess within framing manifests a series of inter-dependent frames. The collapse of the functional and therefore of the reduction of frame to function is that which allows this particular moment of framing to take place.

At play therefore within different frames is the recognition of the possibility of the self-portrait that, in being possible, serves to undermine the possibility of a self-portrait framed by representation, that is, by presence. Once again, though, the additional point needs to be made that *Interior with Hand Mirror* is not reducible to a refusal of repetition. The refusal, as has been suggested, opens up the possibility of interpretation in so far as it frees the painting from any teleological determination. Teleology demands the exclusion of heterogeneity. Its inclusion as always already present inverts the demand and precludes the possibility of ever being able to reduce a work of art, either from the start or at the end, to a *telos*. The doubling and redoubling of a framing beyond function does in the moment of its presentation demand a response to its own portrayal. If, as was argued, the question to address is, 'What is betrayed in the portrayal?', the answer must be generated by the paradox within the *betrayal*; the word 'betrayal'. Here at the same time there is a showing and a denial; there is an honesty despite itself as well as treason. The word *betrayal* betrays plurality – semantic differential plurality – and therefore can never be reduced either to a simple oneness, or a unity, or a representation, or pure presence, or simultaneity, etc. This is of course precisely what is portrayed in betrayal and therefore what is betrayed in the portrayal.

The divide within Lucian Freud's self-portraits establishes the specificity of the proper name at the same time as taking its unifying power from it. These self-portraits, if taken as a whole, betray – show and deny – the self-portrait. This betrayal is not the ruin of evaluation. Indeed the distinction between a repetition bounded by the Same and a repetition involving difference and hence affirmation

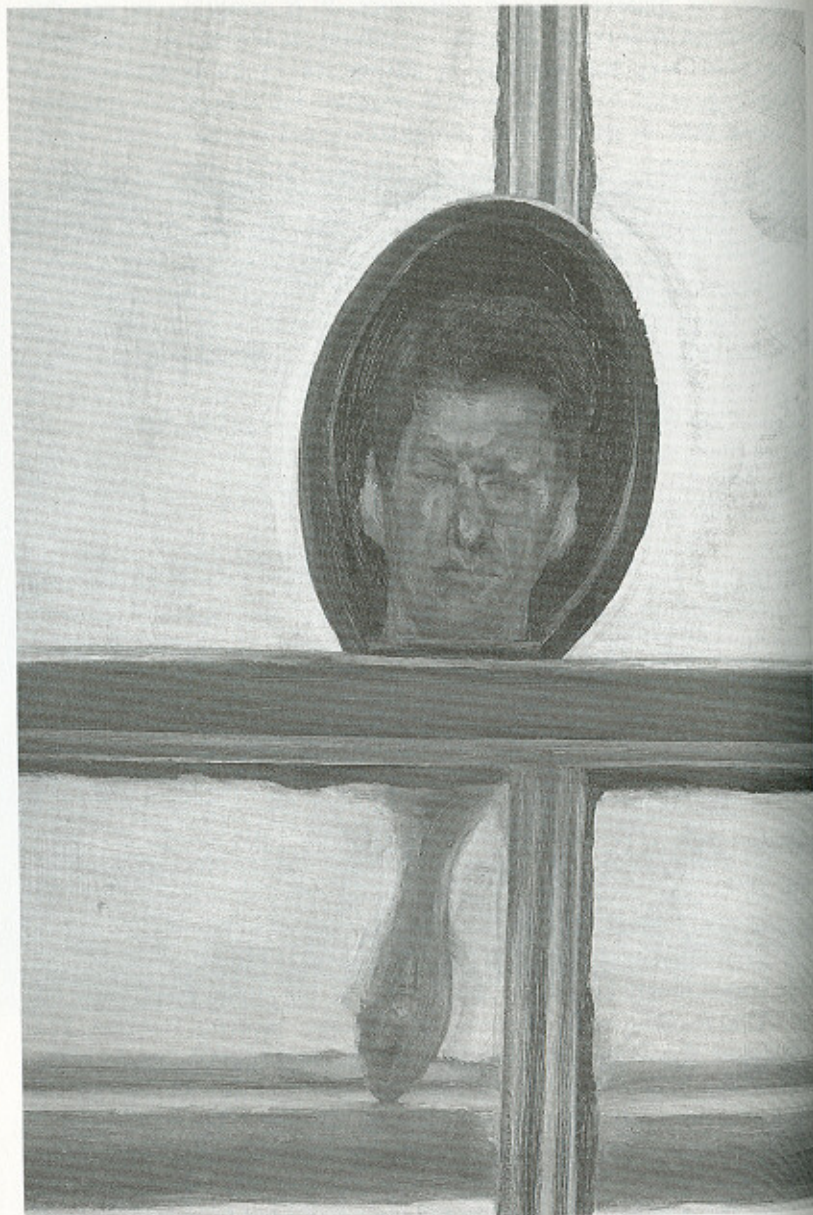


Plate 5 'Interior with hand mirror', Lucian Freud, 1967, oil on canvas.

the hand mirror. Between its own frames is the hand mirror as frame. The window therefore frames an interior with a hand mirror.

The overall result gives rise to a chaos of framing. The logic of each frame is called into question by what it en-frames. The overall frame cannot contain a self-portrait as representation. The window frames neither frame nor en-frame. They hold a frame that cannot hold what it frames – except if the mirror is stilled, so that in being presented as a mirror it cannot function as a mirror but rather as a frame which does hold. This excess within framing manifests a series of inter-dependent frames. The collapse of the functional and therefore of the reduction of frame to function is that which allows this particular moment of framing to take place.

At play therefore within different frames is the recognition of the possibility of the self-portrait that, in being possible, serves to undermine the possibility of a self-portrait framed by representation, that is, by presence. Once again, though, the additional point needs to be made that *Interior with Hand Mirror* is not reducible to a refusal of repetition. The refusal, as has been suggested, opens up the possibility of interpretation in so far as it frees the painting from any teleological determination. Teleology demands the exclusion of heterogeneity. Its inclusion as always already present inverts the demand and precludes the possibility of ever being able to reduce a work of art, either from the start or at the end, to a *telos*. The doubling and redoubling of a framing beyond function does in the moment of its presentation demand a response to its own portrayal. If, as was argued, the question to address is, 'What is betrayed in the portrayal?', the answer must be generated by the paradox within the *betrayal*; the word 'betrayal'. Here at the same time there is a showing and a denial; there is an honesty despite itself as well as treason. The word *betrayal* betrays plurality – semantic differential plurality – and therefore can never be reduced either to a simple oneness, or a unity, or a representation, or pure presence, or simultaneity, etc. This is of course precisely what is portrayed in betrayal and therefore what is betrayed in the portrayal.

The divide within Lucian Freud's self-portraits establishes the specificity of the proper name at the same time as taking its unifying power from it. These self-portraits, if taken as a whole, betray – show and deny – the self-portrait. This betrayal is not the ruin of evaluation. Indeed the distinction between a repetition bounded by the Same and a repetition involving difference and hence affirmation

opens the way for a revaluation of value and allows for the redemption of evaluation itself. Value and evaluation can be redeemed and hence linked to aesthetic judgement to the extent that there is an interconnected redemption of the avant-garde (both in relation to the 'object' as well as to experience).

NOTES

- 1 The critique of the camera as providing the model for representation is exemplified in Zola's writings in art. For Zola the camera could not capture what he described as 'la vie avec son mécanisme complet'. E. Zola, *Mon Salon, Manet, Ecrits sur L'Art* (Flammarion, Paris, 1970), p. 335.
- 2 The irreconcilable split between the signifier and the signified marks, for example, the advent of psychoanalysis. I have tried to trace this move in 'The overflow of words; from Breuer to Freud', in *New Formations*, no. 5, 1988.
- 3 Foucault has offered an important analysis of the development of this particular structure of signification within what he calls the 'Classical episteme'. See *Les Mots et Les Choses* (Gallimard, Paris, 1966), pp. 60-92.
- 4 While it cannot be pursued it is worthwhile noting that this exclusion has both an ontological and temporal dimension. In regards to time what cannot figure within the frame is a plurality of times.
- 5 Quoted in R. Hughes, 'On Lucian Freud', in *Lucian Freud Paintings* (British Council, London, 1987), p. 22.
- 6 I have discussed this conception of pluralism in Chapter 8, 'Pluralism, the cosmopolitan and the avant garde'.