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## D is for the most cherished sense (whence it comes and wither it goes)

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D is for the most cherished sense (whence it comes and whither it goes)

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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are to be given all around

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Abstract

D IS FOR THE MOST CHERISHED SENSE (WHENCE IT COMES AND WHITHER IT GOES)

By Hallie McNeill, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017

Major Director: Corin Hewitt, Associate Professor, Sculpture and Extended Media

A transcript of the audio that constitutes the work by the same  
title, along with an introduction and relevant bibliography.

## Introduction

I.

Several years ago, I visited Faulkner's estate with my mother. It's about an hour south of Memphis, where I'm from, in Oxford, Mississippi. Rowan Oak is a funny place: regal enough to be a house with a title, but really just a modest two story house with a little barn out back where Faulkner kept his horse.

I can't say that much about the house stuck with me, or, for that matter, struck me, save one detail - his study. All along the walls of the room, which was medium-sized and on the ground floor, hardly tucked away, just off the kitchen, are the days of the week, written in red grease marker. Underneath each day of the week is a to-do list, written in black, thoroughly outlining the author's day-by-day plan for Faulkner's last novel *The Reivers*.



Picture of Faulkner's study at Rowan Oak courtesy Image Google Search.

It's funny to see someone's brains on a wall. And it's a weird way to think of it, I know, but trying to write this sentence has me realizing how odd it is to discuss the process of entering into, or being inside, another's head. Most art forms (if I can be forgiven for the sloppy blanket term) are inherently tied to the idea of presenting a point of view, which is, in turn, inevitably tied to the idea of a singular vantage, and thus to the individual. How it's done - that is, how the daisy chain works in the opposite direction (individual > singular vantage > POV as a kind of backbone for a work) - is the process the artist/writer/maker deals with, a kind of creating and encoding of whatever kind. Seeing these notes on the wall of Faulkner's study relieved me; though he's known for his dense and difficult stream-of-conscious prose, the clarity with which he spoke to himself on the walls of this room alluded to a different story than the ones he spent his time composing - that of a man trying to figure out the inside of his head, taking the inner and making it outer.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "It may at times have occurred to you, dear reader, to doubt somewhat the accuracy of that familiar philosophical thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer. Perhaps you yourself have concealed a secret that in its joy or in its pain you felt was too intimate to share with others. Perhaps your life has put you in touch with people about whom you suspected that something of this nature was the case, although neither by force nor by inveiglement were you able to bring out into the open that which was hidden. Perhaps neither case



“Is it solipsistic in here, or is it just me?”

My abandoning of God as a teenager coincided with, or perhaps prompted, my interest in art shifting from that of after school activity to a sincere and somber interest. I’m not fully convinced that one truly replaced the other, as I think the two fulfill very different needs and desires. Instead, I think it’s more apt to say that the move changed my path, inserting me into a different community of people with different conversations, different foci of attention and dedication, which in turn invoked a new set of needs and desires than from what religion asked of me. Maybe art sets forth a different kind of faith: one rooted inasmuch in the material world as in the conceptual and intellectual engagements the world offers to us.

Though I must confess that even in writing this I wonder: are the two that different?<sup>2</sup>

Religion, obviously, is a weird thing. I grew up in what I’d describe as kind of lukewarm Christianity. I don’t really know what the point of it was, other than give people a few things to do throughout the course of the week. The kids I hung out with were nice, and inasmuch as the idea of organized religion irks me, the reality was that it made for a pretty decent childhood in a small town. It was that or drugs. And considering that most of the people whom I know (or knew) who did not grow up with church are now dead, you could say it worked out.

As most people are aware, church teaches you to pray. Taking this at its most superficial: church teaches you talk to yourself while pretending that you are not. My problem with this is not that talking aloud (or inside your head) to a person or entity who may or may not be there is good or bad, but that we find this mode of communication acceptable, while talking to oneself stills has an air of ridiculousness to it. If you get caught doing it, you’re socially obligated to brush it off by way of a self-deprecating “Oh, I was just talking to myself!” and more or less pause your thoughts until you’re catcher moves out of earshot.

---

applies to you and your life, and yet you are not unacquainted with that doubt; like a fleeting shape, it has drifted through your mind now and then. A doubt such as this comes and goes, and no one knows whence it comes or whither it goes. I myself have always been rather heretically minded on this philosophical point and therefore early in my life developed the habit of making observations and investigations as well as possible [...] Gradually, then, hearing became my most cherished sense, for just as the voice is the disclosure of inwardness in commensurable with the exterior, so the ear is the instrument that apprehends this inwards, hearing the sense by which it is appropriated.” Kierkegaard, *Either / or*, vi.

<sup>2</sup> I find myself wondering if the dividing line might be that art concerns itself with both the material world and the immaterial world (painting is as much about paint itself as it is about the conversation and history of painting), whereas religion is largely about the immaterial (wine is not wine but a symbol of Christ’s blood, i.e., the material thing is not the material thing that it is, nor is it the material ‘thing’ it symbolizes, it *is* the metaphor, or, as Foucault often mentions in his writings, investment in the self and this world is not really an investment in *this* world, but the next).

Discussing one's ideas is reserved for specific formats: giving a talk, writing a book, participating in a conversation with another. But the reality is that we debate with ourselves, whether opposing versions of ourselves, or internalized others within oneself. Inasmuch as thought is thought, talking presents an entirely different mode of thinking: a concretization of thought, even if it's still just for yourself. Perhaps there's a theatricality to the simple act of enunciating, of making the inner outer, that befits the realm of spectacle, and anything in the realm of spectacle is, according to the sort of stodgy Protestant work ethic outlined by Weber, just too much for the individual. Or, of course, there's the more obvious and worn out story of talking to oneself as crazy, so you don't.

Unless you're crazy.

After I decided God was dumb, I still prayed accidentally. Mostly because I was 16 and driving and there were far too many incidents in which someone did something dumb and my knee-jerk reaction was to start begging this big nothing over my head to make it okay. The second I could ease off the brake or the other person eased off their horn, I'd snap back and resent myself for what I saw as an act of regression.

With the passing of time, the inadvertent praying ceased. Instead it's just an on-going dialogue with myself, a smattering of voices and vices that play back and forth, equal parts navel-gazing and dialogic debate. I don't think I'm any kind of an exception here, though I would argue that growing up an only child and then getting stuck in various crews of stepkids with whom I did not bond enabled me to live in my head. As such, I can entertain myself pretty well, reliving stories, sometimes to myself and sometimes to others whom I internalize for myself to create another layer of entertainment in the little broadcast in my head. Other times it's just practicalities: to-do lists that I can't write on walls, all kinds of anxieties, doubts, ideas, questions.

I've often wondered if my lack of faith in a traditional Judeo-Christian sense makes me a better or worse person. Does this sort of inward folding, a kind of internal seeking and self-discovery - not unlike what Adam Curtis describes in his documentary *The Century of the Self* - inevitably lead one to merely collapse in upon oneself, like a black hole of selfishness? In Eastern philosophy, which so much of contemporary Western lifestyle 'philosophies' have attempted to borrow from, the underlying principle is that an individual, a self, is inseparable from the world and the earth around them. Hence the rhetoric around an inward turning, self-improvement, as a way to reach back out.

What happens when retreating from the world is doomed *and* being part of it is so damned disheartening? What kind of faith, or lack thereof, could provide a way to break this loop between the inner and outer?

This is one of the loops in my head. And I hoped that maybe if I said some of these things out loud, I could let them out, and let them go. Not exactly a prayer, but perhaps not totally unlike one, either.

3.

The Russian linguist and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin believed that a voice is singular, and thus reflective of a particular set of emotions, values and ideas. According to his understanding, dialogue, then, is the way in which varied perspectives collide. In the century that has passed since Bakhtin wrote and published his ideas, we've begun to understand that the ideas of singularity of voice or perspective, ideas at the center of individuality, aren't as straightforward, nor are the other binary assignments that attend them. We exist along spectrums, in context, which produce not so much a singular, steadfast entity which is an individual, but a sort of motley bunch of things - germs, cells, ideas, experiences - that we congeal under the umbrella of an individual, most often in accordance with Cartesian thought, to make it easier to operate.

In the process of making this work, I began to think of the voice as the liaison between the inner and the outer. That the vibration of one's vocal cords, like a small and very personal corporeal symphony, enables all of the craziness inside one's brain to find form, moreover, a form that at once constitutes and explicates the self as an individual (i.e., a person has a voice, you know me by knowing my voice, the better you know me the better you know its variations and moods, etc.) to another, is nothing short of miraculous.

4.

As an only child, I've always thought of myself as a kind one-off. There's no taller older brother with my Dad's nose or blue eyes, nor a younger sister who got my mom's sorority girl enthusiasm or horse-riding addiction. Most people who have met both of them tend to agree that I'm almost a perfect 50/50, which is pretty lucky, all things considered. I know the ways in which I am exactly like my mother, in spite of all my efforts to thwart this from EVER happening. Conversely, I know exactly when I'm acting like my father, also in spite of myself.

Like one's dealings with oneself, one's dealings with understanding what it means to be a self, as well as being oneself, the underlying rationale is, most crudely: you are what you get. And you are what, as well as who, you are. It's quite simple, really. And it's the same for family.

My maternal grandmother, Dolores, died of a heart attack in her bed at home while my mother was in the room with her. She was in her 40s, and my mom was, I believe, 14. Dolores was a mysterious woman. Based on my mom's stories, she refused to speak of her own history, and she was prone to violent tantrums, knocking over furniture and throwing things when angered. Decades later, when I was 12, and my mom freshly divorced and trying to renegotiate her new single adult life in a small town, her father died. In the sequence of days that followed, little of which I remember because I was so upset at the loss of this grandfather, a kind man who introduced me to *Fractured Fairy Tales*, the ridiculousness of old men who drive sports cars, and the value of a good homemade hamburger, that I hid out at my dad's in my secret spot behind my bed where no one ever looked. The loss floored my mother, who, coming out of her dissolved marriage, had looked to her own dad to help her transition into the world in a way that she had skipped by marrying my dad straight out of college.

In writing this, it seems heavy-handed to articulate how much these others make me and vice versa. But that is exactly the point.

I don't really remember when my mother said this, at least not specifically, but sometime during this whole ordeal, as we were delving into or pulling ourselves out of being balls of tears together, she told me, verbatim:

“You know, sometimes, I just feel like you are the only thing tethering me to this earth”

As I have gotten older, I have begun to that the feeling is mutual, and that - to put it quite viscerally - the person from inside whom I came is the reason for which I am, literally, out in this world.

Inner, outer.

5.

The origins of the audio are simple. I wanted to write a loose, essayistic narrative that would flow between the supposedly universal and the supposedly particular/individual, abstract ideas and lived experience, all while negotiating the ridiculous inescapability of the self. I had originally intended the narrative to be a voice-over for a video but as the writing began, I found myself losing interest in any possible imagery that might accompany it or illustrate the script. It seemed worth trying to make something that could rely on language alone, specifically spoken language.

The piece was meant to pick up on Bakhtin's idea of the voice as a singular perspective, and to acknowledge the shortcomings of that, while simultaneously thinking about the ways in which we internalize other voices in our own minds. I tell myself these tales with the voice of my mother, the voice of my friend, the voice of the stranger in the bar, in their voice that is my version of their voice. It's another kind of tethering, like a crazy kind of internal psycho-tethering that networks us together while respecting the inner / outer boundaries, however thin or porous they may be.

Over the years, I've often asked myself if it was possible to make a room an essay, or a text of some kind. This is, at least thus far, the most direct attempt to do just that.

6.

During the past year, the craziness of how American politics have shifted revealed to me, and most of my peers, a kind of unfortunate failing of our understanding of ourselves and our political landscape. The disappointment of this stung, just as much from what it implied about where our country would go as what it said about how naïve we are and had been about things we thought we were wizened about. The striking realization of how we stood from where we thought we stood put us in very different places literally and metaphorically. I found myself feeling pointless and confused, at a loss. Making things seemed dumb.

I seemed dumb to myself.

I've always felt that the consistent thread throughout my work is a negotiation of desire: how wanting shapes us into the people we are, which in turns shapes the world, the cultural landscape, around us, and that, coming full circle, molds us further. We want concrete things and abstract things; to be certain people and to be like certain people, to have things that make us certain people, to talk and act in ways that allude to certain ideals and echelons of social standing, so forth and so on. From a biological standpoint, desire is a good thing: you desire food, so you eat, so you survive. You desire a nice life, so you work and do well. As someone who has and continues to go in and out of depression, I've learned that overwhelming desire can induce misery, the darkest moments are actually when I am at a point of total apathy. When you want nothing, you stop swimming and you drown.

Listening to the conversations that were going on around me and around the world, I began to wonder about the idea of the personal as political. Is it even possible to share a public or civic sphere when the particulars of each person, moreover, each person's desires, is so varied? I don't know how to extract the personal from the political, my experience from me, and yet I know someone like Hannah Arendt, for example, believe deeply that the two had to be kept apart.

So I began this piece with these ideas in mind. I wanted to attempt to reconcile the desire for optimism with tendencies toward cynicism while simultaneously thinking through the manifold meanings of the words revolution and revelation in relation to the world at larger and to the self, and, moreover, the naïve and often misguided relationships we have to both. I also wanted to show how, despite our best intentions, we can be our own worst enemies, and how even so, we can still laugh at ourselves for it. I hoped that I could make something that could be dumb in the most honest way possible, and in doing so, would maybe have an intelligence rooted not necessarily in skill or sophistication, not in technical facility or wow, but in its straightforwardness, its embrace of being exactly what it is. And, lastly, I wanted to air out some of my bad tendencies, the ways in which I let myself get stuck inside my head, in hopes that by doing so I might pull myself out. Not exactly putting my brains on the wall, but close.



transcript

This is a kind of show

Or a play

Or a play

A monologue

No,

no

a conversation

An exercise in dialogic thinking

You mean navel-gazing

Maybe. Does it matter?

It doesn't matter

It doesn't matter.

Besides,

It does matter

describe a happy time in history

in your life

In the beginning

Whose beginning?

Huh?

Yours, mine, or ours? Sole property or shared? Collective memory or individual?

I mean, I can only speak from personal experience so...

Individual!



I got a facial once. Afterwards, I was so disappointed. I saw myself and I looked exactly the same. Nothing changed.

What did you expect? A new face?

I did; I wanted a new face. I've been disappointed ever since. This was not the face I began with - why should it be the face I end with?

You get the face that you deserve.

Do you need a new face to be you?

Iiiiiii don't think it has anything to do with merit; it has to do with realizing you can be your own worst enemy. It's about starting over. If I want to start over and I need to start over, why is it my fault if I can't distinguish between the two?

If I want to start over and I need to start over, why is it my fault if I can't distinguish between the two?

We would all like to start over if we could-

Speak for yourself

I do!

Sometimes it can't be helped. God helps those who help themselves

God

God

Yes but you see-

retreating from the world is doomed. But being part of it is just so damned disheartening

(damned disheartening)  
 (damned disheartening)

But I'm only interested in the here now

(it's a nice way to be)

who wants a history that requires more memory? The goal is to start over and  
 to do it better - that's the whole point of a revolution

revelation

that's the point of evolution

Out with the old, in with the new, the new you: the better you

A new you. Like the time you moved to ----- ready to *be* the new you. Well-crafted, curated and thoughtful like  
 a newly decorated apartment

Until the new you became the you you. Until the new you became the old you. The inevitable you. The you  
 who was always you, through and through

the inevitable you

Until the new you was just you

Until the new you was just you, through and through

Some things never change. But just because the personal is political doesn't mean you're a martyr-

No, but I am a singular voice so let me tell my story:

You better hope was you did as a kid

(id)

Was good because you

will always go back to it

You will always go back to it

You will always go back to it

I will always go back to it  
 Back to myself to look into myself to better understand myself to know myself

to escape yourself

To collapse in upon yourself

To lose the self

Maybe. Sometimes I close my eyes to create a space in which I can project fantasy lives for myself

(my selves)

potential futures that will one day constitute all my pasts

(me)

A kind of romantic futurism

romantic pastivism

It's an exercise not unlike writing your own obituary

Except that it makes me realize

paralyzed

I need at least a thousand lives in order to figure out which of the possible mes I really want to be

I need at least a thousand lives in order to figure out which of the possible mes I really want to be

Charlotte Posenenske

Charlotte Posenenske

née Meyer

German artist born October 28, 1930, died October 3, 1985.

German artist born October 28, 1930, died October 3, 1985.

The day I was born

The day I was born

The day you were born

The day I was born

I'm not a mystic

(She's not a mystic)

and I know it's impossible

(possible)

But I like to think

(cynic)

that I might be a start for you, or a continuation of you, a  
cosmological lineage of some kind made up by me

made up by me a me desperately looking for ways into and out of myself

a me desperately looking for ways into and out myself, into  
and out of the world, into and out of the world

It's a relationship like a letter. A monologue, essentially.

Formulated between a posthumous you and a living me.

A reaching outwards towards another who may or may not be there in order to reach back into yourself

myself

In 1968 you published your manifesto. You told everyone you were leaving art behind, starting anew

(revelation)

a personal revolution

How did it feel to walk away from it all?

How did it feel to reject it all?

To start anew?

To do it all better?

To do it all better

Rejecting it all? Me, who takes more than my share of free mints when I leave a restaurant? I don't think so

Now you're just being grandiose. Just because the personal is political doesn't mean you're a martyr

No, but I am a singular voice, so let me tell my story.

The point is to do it slowly. To take the time to do it better. I don't want the empty rhetoric of revolution, (self actualization) personalized revelation, (internalized revolution), custom-built, designed by you, bought online

You don't get a new face that fast. You don't get a new you that fast.

Yes but you see, retreating from the world is doomed

Yes you see, retreating from the world is doomed but being part of it can just be so damned disheartening

damned disheartening

damned disheartening

So you have to do both

So you do you

No, no you've got to say it faster like on a sitcom or it isn't funny

Well I-

I wanted to enjoy myself

take my time

Time? Too slow.

But what about personal gratification?

Too slow.

Which is why it's important to understand that we aren't explicitly political; we're comfortable

It's a good life

It's a nice way to be

But we are political if we need to be

It's a nice way to be

But we are political if we need to be. We aren't hypocritical, we're flexible: it's what the world demands!

I'm just another so-called rational actor navigating in the web of so many so-called rational markets

relaxing in so many so-called rational markets

And so the problem goes: how can I be entrusted with any kind of communalism? Any kind of utopian schemings?

Is it about an inward uncovering, or an outward discovery? A utopia within the self

myself

yourself

Or outside of it in which the self can reside?

Too slow

Is utopia the version of myself that I'm looking for? A version of myself to call home?

Or is it another place?

Another time?

Another self entirely?

Another self entirely?

Ugh. No one wants to talk about that, not even you.

But maybe

But maybe

if you teach me who to be - like a kid who, like the kid who has be taught to like his or her vegetables

if you teach me who to be - like a kid who, like the kid who has be taught to like his or her vegetables

- I'll want to be who you want me to be too

I'll find happiness in your version of me

I'll find happiness in your version of me

In my version of me, in my version of me, in my version of me

This is the paradox of desire: when the wave hits again and I am drowning again the worst feeling is not what I will miss or won't miss

Or might miss

But that the emptiness feels right

But don't you want more?

What for? Time moves too fast to want more; I can't enjoy what I have.

My mother told me once: you are my only tether to this earth

You are my only tether to this earth

I am your only tether to this earth

I am your only tether to this earth

It took centuries to know that we move around the sun and even longer to believe it

What she said wasn't a complaint

it was an assertion of gratitude

it was an assertion of gratitude. Sometimes when I am lost in the loop of my own ego,

(stuck inside your own head)

I forget the meaning of these small things. And in these loops

inside your head

inside my own head - in the rotations, these revolutions, these revelations

we wonder:

I wonder:

We move at once too quickly and too slowly for our own reinvention

I move too quickly

too quickly and too slowly for our own comprehension

We move across oceans and continents, through systems and networks, carried by things of our own design and forces beyond our control

Too quickly for our own comprehension, but too slowly for our own impatience

We ride on winds and desires that sometimes bring good and sometimes bring bad things to pass

But we are always who we are.

And so I wonder:

And so you wonder:

And so I wonder:

If we destroyed ourselves to begin again, would we be a better version of we?

You of me?

Or would I be another me? The same interior with a different exterior?

When does a need become a want become a luxury, which then redefines need? What does that even mean?

You wrote it



You should know

And yet I've said it so many times that I don't know anymore. Do I need a new face to be me? Or do I want a new face to be a new me? Is that a luxury?

Do you need either?

What would a new you do that you can't already do?

Why are you always wanting more?

But without wanting what are you?

At best we use esoteric words like telos to insert ourselves into a discourse that's gone on for thousands of years. I think it's because partaking in a conversation with the living and the dead helps with the loneliness of the individual self, the uneasiness of asking a question to which there may be no answer. At worst it's a way to disguise a simple question, to try to adorn with superficial value something whose true value we may never know.

That's why I wear my heart on my sleeve

You mean printed on your tote bag!

If you don't say it on a tote it's like you don't say it at all!

If you don't advertise yourself to the world how will I know you're here?

eternalize yourself

You were ever here

Summer in a halfway house, watching another destroy himself. The conversations were a loop. me: you don't have to do this he: you don't understand me: don't do this he: I can't help it me: no you don't have to he: yes I do, you don't understand

He was right. I didn't

I still don't.

I still don't

We would do this for hours: pleading, yelling, crying, resolving, forgiving. A full circle, a full revolution.

The difference between words and actions can be so wide. The difference between ideals and experience is a chasm. You can be your own worst enemy.

You can be your own worst enemy.

How do you define the good life? Through working and saving? The slow accumulation of material goods to show your glory to God and others?

The accumulation of knowledge?

The accumulation of power?

God

How will you know you were ever here?

This is a kind of exorcism. A delving into the self, into other selves

That you do and do not want to be

That I do and do not want to be

Sometimes the difference between ideals and experience is a wide chasm, but sometimes it's closer than that

Sometimes the difference between ideals and experience is a wide chasm, but sometimes it's a direct correlation

A one to one

A direct correlation

Thought out, planned beforehand

Like a game of chess. Calculated and strategic.

The personal is political

Stop-



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