

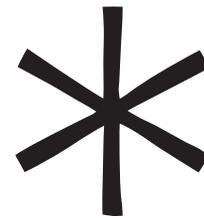
01 * Identity | Gijs Wahl

Contingency Institution Installation Image Curator Medium Direction Identity Things

Identity is what we understand things to be like. For instance, a thing is identified by its image, its name, its substance, and so on. But we do not have a final identification, the identification of the thing with what it is: truth. For example, what we understand ourselves to be is a combination of all the things one is identified with, but without any necessary red tape putting all those identifications together, except by the fact that they are all indeed identifications. So because identifications have been made, they do somehow exist together: as an installation of contingencies. This is the moment where the case becomes political, since curatorial decisions seem to have been made. This is not exactly so, but the case does offer the possibility to regard this political dimension in new ways: that is, not by designing institutions that are aiming to mirror some theoretical ideal, as a communication that has been fixed, thus becoming purely directional, but with the identifying gesture itself as directive principle: as a medium for a communication that is more than directional, for it is meant to arrive at a direction, instead of just pointing the right way. Likewise I will argue that any individual itself is exactly such a political installation. In the following essays, all agents are understood to be installations. This of course to prove that the existence together of different parts, languages and disciplines is not to be directed by a, yet to be discovered unifying structure, or by way of some romantic synthesis, but by politics. This essay is a first exploration of what these politics might be like.



Plato's Cave, illustration by Scott Mayhew



Identity

I would like to propose to you a new medium for interdisciplinary communications. Not a medium that is conveying any actual meaning, but a medium laying the groundwork for all possible meaning. That might sound rather universal and abstract, but in fact it is the most sensuous medium, as the following example might clarify:

If two people were to get shipwrecked on a desert island, miles apart from each other, what then could best be done in order for them to find one another? This problem cannot be solved without introducing something new into the scenario. This new thing will be an exemplar of the sensuous medium I am proposing to use.

If the shipwrecked want to find each other, it is not enough for them to rely on reason only. For instance, they might think it a good idea to write *wait for me here* in the sand. A fairly reasonable thought, it seems. However, because it is, the other person is most likely to make the same plan and device his own meeting sign. **Having two meeting signs is very unreasonable.** Their shared thoughts are of no use if not applied to some shared thing. So instead, they really ought to turn their attention to their environment. What will most likely catch their eye?

The thing that is most noticeable

The island might consist of: lots of sand, palms and **a mountain**. Of course then the mountain is the most noticeable thing. For instance in being the only one, the only one shaped like an eagle, or printed in bold. And as the mountain is so very noticeable, it is reasonable for one to assume it will manipulate the others senses likewise. Thus making the mountain the most perfect thing to which they can assign their shared thoughts; and make it their meeting place. This most noticeable thing now, exemplifies the sensuous medium I am proposing to use:

Things

Things are of such a kind that they open up possibilities for communication without actually saying anything. The only demand is that they are noticeable, so that they will be part of people's environment. In making them noticeable, tried methods can be used, like: authenticity, uselessness, or simply charm.

And because things are perfectly adaptable to any situation, and as such able to survive any specific meaning, I find that things indeed offer us the most suitable interdisciplinary glue.

State Identity

What is this notion of 'most noticeable thing', playing a role somewhere between the others, the environment and ourselves, when applied to the human being? We name it identity. To illustrate the relevance of this notion of identity to the political organisation of different groups, disciplines or individuals, it will be exemplary to regard its appropriation by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*.

If one would replace the mountain in the scenario of the shipwrecked by some sovereign, we are already a long way ahead in defining the relation between the different people and the noticeable thing they are subjugating themselves to in their shared need of direction. Why are they in need of such a shared direction? Before Hobbes's peoples organize themselves into a congregation, they lived in a state of chaos: The State of Nature. It is characterized in *Leviathan* as a war of all against all, and 'the life of men solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. This of course conveniently supplies Hobbes with an argument for organization. But the difficulty is that in order to arrive at such a congregation, men need to be able to trust one another, while trust is exactly what they lack; that is why they needed organization in the first place. As it was not enough for the shipwrecked to find one another by reason only, it is likewise not enough for Hobbes's peoples to bind themselves together by contract. For how could one tell whether the other is taking his signing seriously? The signing, as was already apparent in the story of the shipwrecked, is not meaningful by itself. In Hobbes's case, the other might so easily be doubted. And since the other knows that he can so easily be doubted, the doubting as such is perfectly reasonable.

So what is needed is something they can all subjugate themselves to. Just like the shipwrecked choose to let them-selves be led by the mountain. If one would know all the others subjugated to the same thing one is subjugated to him-self, he would know what would be on their minds, thus making them safely predictable.

This role of noticeable thing is in Hobbes's theory played by the Sovereign. All will hand over their rights to this Sovereign, by a contract between all that are to subjugate themselves likewise, stating that they will indeed do so if all the others do so as well. The Sovereign's being noticeable lays in the fact that his being is contingent and not bound by any contract: he is what the contract refers to. His doings might be completely arbitrary: he can do as he pleases. Yet it is precisely because of his being arbitrary, the whole group is able to function as one actual being, for they are all sharing the same identity: which is their master's as well as their master.

The Faceless State

Our liberal state, as envisaged by John Rawls, one of the mayor political theorists today, has not got some Sovereign's face, and so its identity is unclear. Thus he devised a method for the people of a state to look at themselves. Although Rawls's theory is a contract theory like Hobbes's, it make no use of some fiction of a natural state, so as to argue why contracts should come in handy. Instead he uses what he calls the Original Position: a purely hypothetical situation, designed to bring out the basic structure of our society, if it was to be as fair as it possibly could. The Original Position doesn't give much direction, as Hobbes's State of Nature surely would make one run. Instead it offers a means to self-reflect.

The hypothesis of the Original Position shows us what would be the fairest distribution of the elementary goods. The participants are to be imagined veiled, so as to make them

completely ignorant of all that would make them actual people inhabiting particular places in society, like their status, talents, and identity. Thus relieved of all contingent facts, like who will be who, and of who has got what, they are then to choose the elementary goods and its distribution. Rawls claims that in this way everything will be divided in the fairest way possible. Which does not necessarily mean that everything will be divided equal. Rawls does for instance make room for talented people, deserving more cash. But only if even the poorest souls would benefit from this arrangement, and end up better as when everything would have been left equal. Because every reasonable person can envisage this hypothesis of the Original Position and understand its outcome as fair, we can rediscover our rules as self-chosen, and consider ourselves voluntarily bound. Thus looking back on the state we devised, we can see that it is good.

However, one could still wonder on how to conceive of this state, a blindfolded, self-enclosed whole, in relation to its surroundings. How is the outside to be regarded? How are our actions abroad to be judged? In being faceless as a whole, the state is not offering any means for communication with the people not sharing this no-face. How could we then ever hope for them to join?

Reflecting without interruption on ones work has turned me into a suspicious creature. Ceel Mogami de Haas, in: *reflection on the honours-program.*

Shared Identity

By contrast, my Aristotelian conception is concerned with ends and with the overall shape and content of the human form of life. Martha C. Nussbaum, in: *Human Functioning and Social Justice.*

Martha C. Nussbaum, a mayor ethical theorist today, might just give the liberal state its face. Maybe it is a very vague face, but at least it is a face sharing some familiar features with faces across the border, making global communication much more likely. Nussbaum points out the fact that **WE do recognise others as beings of the same species.** That means we must at least share some features, even though they might have developed differently. We can best understand Nussbaum's features as family-resemblance: we share some features with some, some others we share with others. We are no singular group, with all of us forced into the same suit, but we are not identities in complete isolation from each other either.

However nice that sounds, there might still be a slight problem with the conception of Nussbaum's thick vague list, composed of all the features that make us understand ourselves as human, and the needs that come with that. The actual list Nussbaum presents us with would probably indeed be accepted by most, but the way she came up with it might be doubted. For how can she ever really know if in assigning importance to some features, and assuming her way of assigning to be shared by most, she is not just projecting her own conceptual schema? Again there seems to be the problem of direction, as was solved earlier on so harshly by Hobbes. The others and Nussbaum are not able to point to some shared external feature on which to differ.

That is why someone, most likely someone French, might object to Nussbaum, pointing out the likelihood of her only projecting. This possibly French then forwards his or her relativistic claim: because we don't know the truth of being ourselves, we should respect those who are radically other in being so. Nussbaum of course objects to this, claiming we surely share matters of life and death. But even those matters the possibly French regards as relative to the conceptual schema we happen to be bound to. He or she might claim (and quite often indeed does) that even in matters of life and death, we should not assist the radical others, for that might ruin their own special ways of doing.

Nussbaum needed not to have given her essentialist argument. The possibly French has already given him- or herself away in the claim that the radical others, possibly Polynesian, should be left alone. He or she might profess this otherness to be of the highest sublime beauty, but really,

something so neatly isolated must be regarded kitsch. What else are we to think such a radical otherness, being isolated not by necessity, or choice, but by the French?

Exactly like Nussbaum, the possibly French is also neglecting the function of identity as the noticeable medium I proposed before. If isolated, the radical other is denied existence in the space we share, whatever that space might be. He is denied forming his own identity in and against this space we might understand to share. And without this identity, a shared space cannot even be said to be there. In being denied an identity, a possibility of being noticed by anyone, any communication, understanding, or even misunderstanding, is rendered impossible.

There has to be a presentation

Identity is of such a kind that it opens up possibilities for communication, without even necessarily saying something, or of being understood for that matter. The only demand is that it is noticeable, so that it will be part of people's environment. In making it noticeable, one could use tried methods, like for instance authenticity, brutal force, or simply charm. And because identity is so very adaptable to any situation and as such able to survive any specific meaning, I find that identity indeed offers us the most suitable international glue.

Therefore it is most important to give everyone the right to attempt to make oneself noticeable. That does not imply we should go and open our eyes so as to see better. It means we should offer the others the same goods that are giving us the possibility of being noticed. For a start, we have to connect them to the internet. All that is presented on it, no matter how uncommunicative, in being a presentation, is understood as such. Instead of regarding it as some passive, natural thing we stumble upon, we recognise a presentation as something actually seeming to communicate some meaning we need not necessarily understand. But there it is.

The new 100\$ computer, with camera and wireless connection will do just fine. If 4.5 billion people would need one for free, there are still individuals to be found in our liberal state who would be able to finance it all by themselves. Imagine! With so cheap a price, it is a great injustice to deny beings their own face, leaving them nothing but the fleshy one, of which the expression travels ever so little in comparison. This is far worse than not sending any bread.

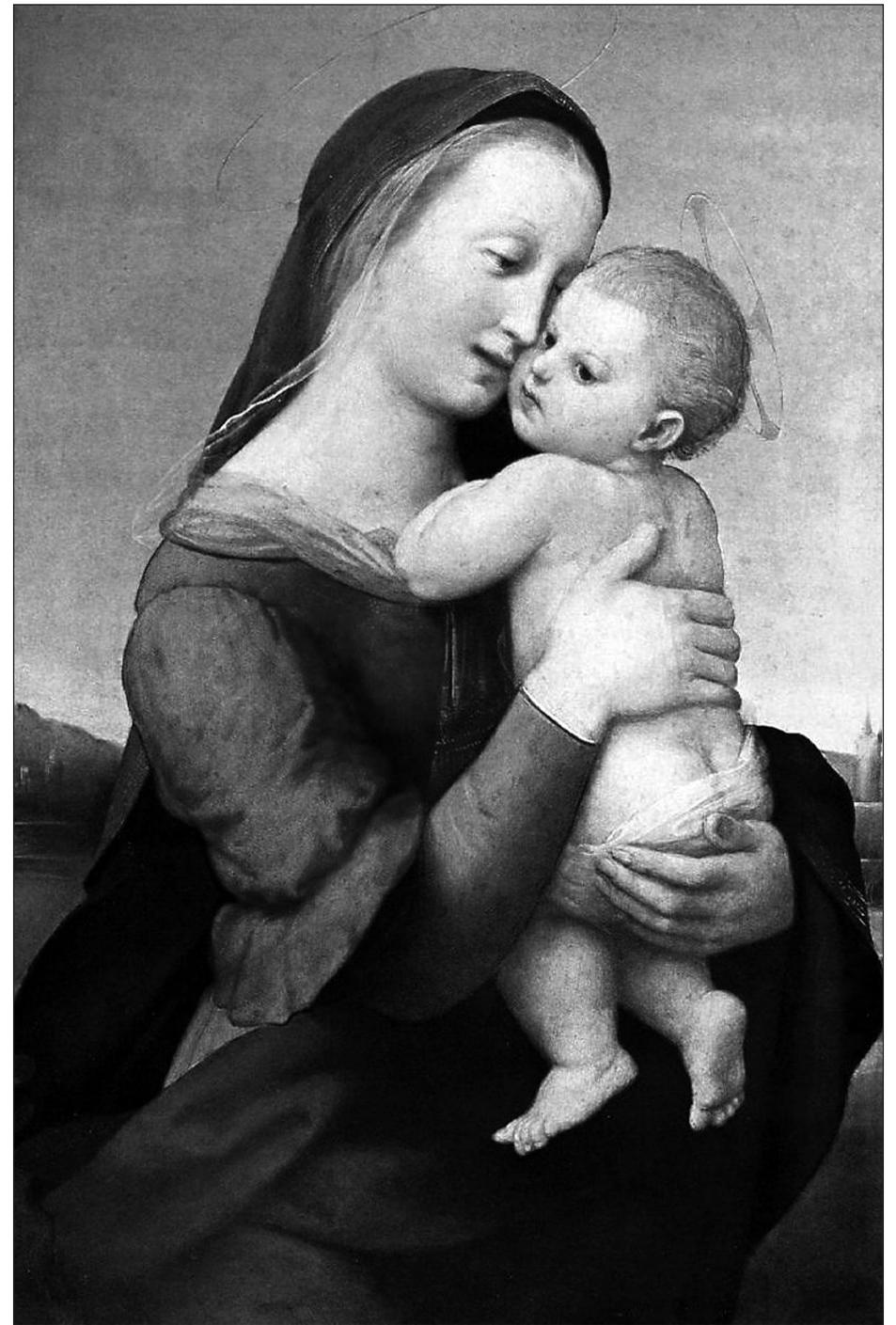
MmeBovary2.0

She wanted to die, and she wanted to live in Paris, Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, part 3.

And so image and image-maker ought to be the same. Now following I would like to show in what way they are indeed the same. This is not an ontological claim, making the above 'ought' superfluous, but a functional one: identity is our operating system. The example:

In 2007, a technique was developed that made it possible to experience feeling in an artificial limb (Nature, 29-1-2007). 'Feeling' is not to be understood as some passive experience, as if a simulation. It works both ways: the artificial limb is in all its movements directed by thought, while the mind responds to what it senses. Rather conventionally, the artificial limb was still installed in its proper place.

However, the conventionality of such a 'proper place' came soon to be questioned by artists, philosophers, and the sexually confused. For one can think of a great many ways to install an arm, in no way less functional than on the right side of the chest. It could just as well have an interesting role to play at the other side of the room, and probably even more so, in someone else's. So now, in 2017, I can feel it, when you touch your mouse. But we must admit, it has been far from easy to accept our distant-body-parts as our own. Embarrassingly, it still seemed more natural to accept the experience of distant-touch as some religious experience, rather than as something we could control. So in the beginning, we could only undergo the stimulations passively.



Raphael, *Tempi Madonna*, 1507-1508

That is, if we found someone to touch our distant-body-parts at all. Because that was the second problem: in order to get touched, we had to make ourselves desirable. So we had two problems to solve:

1. How to understand ourselves as a unity.
2. How to make others want us.

Looking back, we see that the 2007 bionic girl learned to operate her arm very quickly. How was she able to do that? It was not so difficult for her exactly because her arm was placed where an arm conventionally would be found. **How does one remember the proper place of a dismembered arm?** What is this understanding of where what should be? In other words: what operating system made it possible for her to understand the new arm as her own? It was her sense-of-self.

This sense-of-self was given to her by the others around her: they gave her the words, images and expectations. By looking right back at her, they offered her a mirror.



Bold Britney, 2007

And so we discovered what was needed in order to unite our distant-body-parts, and do so in such a way that it would be a presentable unity for others to desire. This operating system is known as: identity. Identity is the software that can do for the distant-body-parts-technique what Microsoft/Apple did for the computer in the 1980's, that is: to give the hardware a language.

However, this time we did not need to write a new language, for we had unknowingly been creating it all along. We had been developing it ever since we called ourselves human. Only, we thought we were doing something else. **What we now see as the construction of an operating system, we had misunderstood as a philosophical or spiritual search for the self*.** We had confused the necessity to see ourselves as a whole, and the necessity for others to perceive us so, with presuming the actual identities we happened to think ourselves whole with, as being necessarily those.

While looking all around, we have found nothing necessarily so. But in doing just that, we have developed numerous forms of life. So while we might not have found ourselves some true source, we have created a rich system of contingent forms instead. A rich system of contingent forms is known as: language. By searching a sense of self, we have developed a sense of language. Instead of only ourselves, we are the language we create.

YOU



After breakfast I made my morning walk as usual. A silver balloon was hovering over my head for some time.

Of course I could have waved at it. In the beginning we used to do that all the time. But I didn't.

Now we know it isn't fitting for us to act so straightforward. We have found that how faster we try to move out of our positions of isolation, the more stuck we get. So we don't bother. From now on, we will be as slow and careful as possible.

But I have to admit that I did wonder about the one who had sent me this balloon. Is he close? Maybe he is actually a she. But hey, does it really matter, if love is only this slow and gentle construction? We will always have time to make adjustments after recovering from the initial disappointment of finding the love not conform the reality. There is so little reality here, it is worth a lot of disappointment.

And so we construct our love before we have ever even met. But although I can't prove it straightforwardly, I am sure the others are constructing their love just like me. I can read it in the design of **your** cities and in **your** ways of speaking. I can read it in all **your** inclinations and dispositions. So I'm sure they are doing it, even if they are not waving anymore at the balloons I send

them. What would be the point of that anyway? We can film each other as much as we want, the resulting image will always be impossible to distinguish from YOU.

Imagine my loving the invisible more than caring for YOU and YOUR kind. YOU think we send the balloons to YOUR place all the time just to get an idea of what direction YOU want from us next. YOU think it is the knowledge of YOUR desire we aim to translate into new projects and products. As if made especially for YOU.

YOU probably think we are wholly there for YOU. That we exist wholly as our image only, right? But YOUR world is likewise a picture to us. Every morning I read it to see what changes the others like me have made for YOU. And then I offer YOU my proposals in return, but only as an answer to them. We are building your world, but not for YOU. Not really. Every change someone like me has made over there, I can only understand to be a sign for me. And likewise, I construct my signs for them.

YOU don't want to communicate with all of YOU, so YOU need direction. We don't want any direction. We long for communication. Our communication is YOUR direction.

Remember back in 2007? We were still sending bread and cake to the poor, when we finally realized we were denying them something far more important than being taken care of. That is, the right to exist in shared medium. Only when this right is established first, could any creature ever hope of being something else than a mere slave of whatever. If we kept denying the unfortunate access to the medium to posit them-selves, they could not even ever hope to be misunderstood. And so we added the right to try to make oneself noticeable to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, obliging us thus to give every human being a 100\$ computer. So the quest for global existence began.

YOU know who became YOUR biggest stars. But solely because we turned out to be most useful to YOU. And so here we are, offering YOU identity, where there is no other way to redirect ourselves into a whole. But besides this whole, have YOU ever wondered about the rest of me? Of course not. It isn't there. It is in love with someone else.

But it is only to YOU we can write, YOU being the only unknown we know, meanwhile hoping for someone specifically unknown to notice the signs we hid in our offerings. We will always end up having to go back to this only medium we have, which is YOU. How could I then imagine YOU would believe me for one single second when I state I do not care for YOU?

*Note on the homemade connection:

Sometimes, philosophers think truth to be accompanied by a certain state of mind. And sometimes this state of mind is then regarded as the actual goal of the search for truth. For example, a state of * is reached when one would be in possession of the right judgements. This is what the first Sceptic also must have been thinking. Longing for *, he's off to search for truth, just like any other philosopher would. However, different from the dogmatic philosopher, he sees himself obliged to suspend his judgement, when he doesn't find any truth. Then, as if by accident, he reaches the desired state of * anyway. As if by accident, because he expected this desired state as an effect of being in possession of the right judgements, and not as an effect of suspending them.

This is how in this essay the discovery of ourselves, as construing, is to be understood: not as the discovery of our power of creation, or our freedom of choice, but simply as the discovery that we must have been constructing. As the observation of a specific connection between contingent parts we had apparently been making.

The story of Apelles illustrates this. Apelles the painter was looking for a technique that would create a realistic effect of the foam on a horse's mouth. When he doesn't succeed in finding it, he gives up, and angrily throws his sponge at his canvas. Then, by

accident, he reaches the desired effect of * after all. The effect is found by not searching instead of made up. Apelles discovers accidentally a connection between the bumping of a sponge at a painting, and a realistic effect of foam. Is Apelles from now on aimlessly handed over to Destiny? No, of course not, now he can develop a sponging-technique. In retrospect, the sun doesn't seem to rise every morning again by pure accident.

