RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne
Canadian Art Review

RACAR
Revue d'art canadienne | Canadian Art Review

"She entered a room like a self-portrait": Duration and Unfinish in Pegi Nicol MacLeod's Self-Portraits

Devon Smither

Volume 46, Number 1, 2021

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078067ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1078067ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)
1918-4778 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Smither, D. (2021). "She entered a room like a self-portrait": Duration and Unfinish in Pegi Nicol MacLeod's Self-Portraits. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, *46*(1), 59–74. https://doi.org/10.7202/1078067ar

Article abstract

Entre 1925 et 1939, l'artiste canadienne Pegi Nicol MacLeod a réalisé un certain nombre d'autoportraits modernistes, intimes et introspectifs. Les critiques et les collègues de MacLeod ont souvent décrit ses peintures comme inachevées, précipitées, bâclées et manquant d'organisation, ce qui vaut pour l'ensemble de son oeuvre. Cet essai est une tentative pour lever le silence dans lequel MacLeod est plongée depuis sa mort, et ce, malgré la grande considération dont jouissait son art de son vivant. Je soutiens que la qualité ouverte, expressionniste et expérimentale des peintures de MacLeod va à l'encontre de la conception masculine du chef-d'oeuvre comme création entièrement aboutie. De plus, la lecture de ses oeuvres comme inachevées témoigne des préjugés liés aux genres dans la réception de son travail. En m'éloignant d'une interprétation psycho-biographique de ses peintures, je soutiens que les autoportraits de MacLeod sont profondément ambigus et incitent à une observation prolongée.

"She entered a room like a self-portrait"[1]: Duration and Unfinish in Pegi Nicol MacLeod's Self-Portraits

Devon Smither

Entre 1925 et 1939, l'artiste canadienne Pegi Nicol MacLeod a réalisé un certain nombre d'autoportraits modernistes, intimes et introspectifs. Les critiques et les collègues de MacLeod ont souvent décrit ses peintures comme inachevées, précipitées, bâclées et manquant d'organisation, ce qui vaut pour l'ensemble de son œuvre. Cet essai est une tentative pour lever le silence dans lequel MacLeod est plongée depuis sa mort, et ce, malgré la grande considération dont jouissait son art de son vivant. Je soutiens que la qualité ouverte, expressionniste et expérimentale des peintures de MacLeod va à l'encontre de la conception masculine du chef-d'œuvre comme création entièrement aboutie. De plus, la lecture de ses œuvres comme inachevées témoigne des préjugés liés aux genres dans la réception de son travail. En m'éloignant d'une interprétation psycho-biographique de ses peintures, je soutiens que les autoportraits de MacLeod sont profondément ambigus et incitent à une observation prolongée.

Devon Smither is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge.
—devon.smither@uleth.ca

"A work of art is complete if in it the master's intentions have been realized."
— Rembrandt[2]

"I had a few Canadians like Riopelle, and the only Canadian whom I still have and would never sell of the things that I had, are the three or four Pegi Nicol MacLeods that I bought in the middle Sixties. I thought she was one of Canada's best."
— Jack Greenwald[3]

Within an enduring system of visual oppression, women's self-representation is deeply political and challenges the ontology of a visual regime predicated on women as objects for a presumed male gaze. The intimate, self-reflexive, and modernist self-portraits executed by Canadian artist Pegi Nicol MacLeod (1904–1949) between 1925 and 1939 participate in this challenge. Critics and colleagues often described MacLeod's paintings as unfinished, rushed, "dashed off," "lacking organization," and "too animated to see all at once."[4] In this essay I examine the phenomenon of unfinish in MacLeod's self-portraits to ask what role gender has played in the critical reaction to her work. I then examine how the unfinish in her paintings engages the spectator and destabilizes artistic convention. I argue that MacLeod's self-portraits obscure the viewer's ability to read resemblance as a projection of interiority, instead challenging the conventions of the genre and the ontological coherence of the self. In other words, her paintings manifest the dismantling of the face and faciality, in Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the term.

Born in Listowel, Ontario in 1904, MacLeod was educated in Ottawa by Franklin Brownell before moving to Montreal to study at the École des Beaux-Arts. In the late 1920s, with the support of Marius Barbeau, MacLeod eventually ventured beyond the eastern region she had grown up in, travelling to Alberta and then on to the Skeena River in British Columbia, painting along the way. In the 1930s, while living in Toronto, she began contributing to *Canadian Forum* where she worked briefly as the art editor. She also painted theatre sets at Hart House at the University of Toronto and window displays for Eaton's department store. She settled in Ottawa around 1932, producing some remarkable scenes of urban life, including notable paintings of children in the school gardens across from her parent's house in the Glebe. Shortly after her marriage to Norman MacLeod in 1937, the couple moved to New York where she continued to paint the world and people around

her, including the bustling street life outside of their apartment window, and producing numerous paintings of her daughter, Jane. In 1940, Macleod helped found an art centre with fellow artist Lucy Jarvis at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton and returned annually to the city throughout the 1940s to teach art at its Summer School. She was commissioned by the National Gallery of Canada to paint the activities of the Canadian Women's Army Corps during the Second World War and completed over one hundred paintings of wartime activity. MacLeod passed away in 1949 at the age of 45. She was a well-established and nationally recognized artist at the time of her death, whose achievements warranted a solo memorial exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada in the same year, a rare achievement for many artists. MacLeod was championed by Eric Brown, Director at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), as well as numerous other art collectors and patrons, from Jack Greenwald and Donald Buchanan to Vincent and Alice Massey.

In her short lifetime, MacLeod showed her paintings extensively across the country. She had her first solo show at Eaton's in 1932 and she went on to participate in a number of major exhibitions in Canada and abroad, including *Artists of the British Empire Overseas* (1937), Royal Institute Galleries, London, England (1937), *Canadian Water Colours*, Gloucester, England (1939); *Pintura Canadense Contemporanea*, Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo (1944); *Canadian War Art* (1945), among many others. She won numerous awards, including five medals for her exceptional work while at the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal and the prestigious Willingdon Arts Competition for *The Log Run* in 1931. In the foreword to the catalogue for her 1949 NGC exhibition, Vincent Massey wrote:

> We Canadians would do well to recognize and appreciate genius more quickly when it appears among our own people. It is inevitable that final appraisal must always await the process of time, but failure to encourage in some measure an artist during his lifetime means a loss to us all…To this splendid company belongs Pegi Nicol MacLeod. She was an artist of unique and vivid individuality who has left an indelible record in the history of Canadian art.[5]

Despite her critical success and the attention she received in newspapers and periodicals from the 1920s onward, MacLeod largely receded from view after her death until Joan Murray's 1983 exhibition on the artist and Murray's edited collection of her letters, which appeared a year later.[6] Laura Brandon also drew renewed attention to MacLeod in her 1998 touring exhibition and accompanying catalogue, *Paragraphs in Paint: The Second World War Art of Pegi Nicol MacLeod*.[7] Brandon's extensively researched biography, published in 2005, was part of a momentary increase in interest in MacLeod. That same year a touring exhibition of MacLeod's work (also curated by Brandon) took place, and the National Film Board released Michael Ostroff's documentary *Pegi Nicol: Something Dancing About Her*. Since 2005, however, there has been no subsequent scholarly work on the artist.[8] The aforementioned exhibitions toured regionally, not nationally, helping to cement her reputation in Ontario and the Maritimes, but she remains, arguably, a marginal figure in Canadian art history.[9] As Brandon writes, "While Pegi moved in the highest of art circles in Canada, that did not assure her a long-lasting national reputation."[10]

1. F.R. Scott, "For Pegi Nicol," in *Events and Signals* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1954).
2. Jonathan Bikker and Anna Krekeler, *Rembrandt: The Late Works* (London: National Gallery, 2014), 134, 137.
3. Montreal art collector and patron Jack Greenwald interviewed by Joan Murray, 1983. The Robert McLaughlin Archives.
4. Joan Murray, ed., *Daffodils in Winter: The Life and Letters Pegi Nicol MacLeod, 1904–1949* (Moonbean, ON: Penumbra Press, 1984), 14.
5. Vincent Massey, foreword to *Pegi Nicol MacLeod, 1904–1949: Memorial Exhibition* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1949).
6. The touring exhibition *Pegi Nicol MacLeod: 1904–1949* organized by the Robert McLaughlin Gallery did not include an accompanying publication per se, although some information is included in Joan Murray, ed., *Daffodils in Winter: The Life and Letters Pegi Nicol MacLeod, 1904–1949* (Moonbean, ON: Penumbra Press, 1984).
7. Laura Brandon, *Paragraphs in Paint: The Second World War Art of Pegi Nicol MacLeod* (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, 1998.)
8. Laura Brandon, *Pegi By Herself: The Life of Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Canadian Artist* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); *Pegi Nicol: Something Dancing About Her, directed by Michael Ostroff* (Montréal: National Film Board of Canada, 2005).
9. From William Colgate to Russell J. Harper and Dennis Reid's histories of Canadian art, women artists have been virtually written out of Canadian art history. Contrary to what post-World War II Canadian art history would suggest, those women artists were not ignored, but discussed critically by the art writers of their day. Newton MacTavish, for example, devoted a chapter to women artists in his 1925 text. MacLeod does register a very brief mention in the 1988 second edition of Reid's survey. See Newton MacTavish, *The Fine Arts in Canada* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, at St. Martin's House, 1925); William Colgate, *Canadian Art: Its Origin and Development* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1943); Russell J. Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966); Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973).
10. Laura Brandon, *Pegi By Herself: The Life of Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Canadian Artist*, 4.

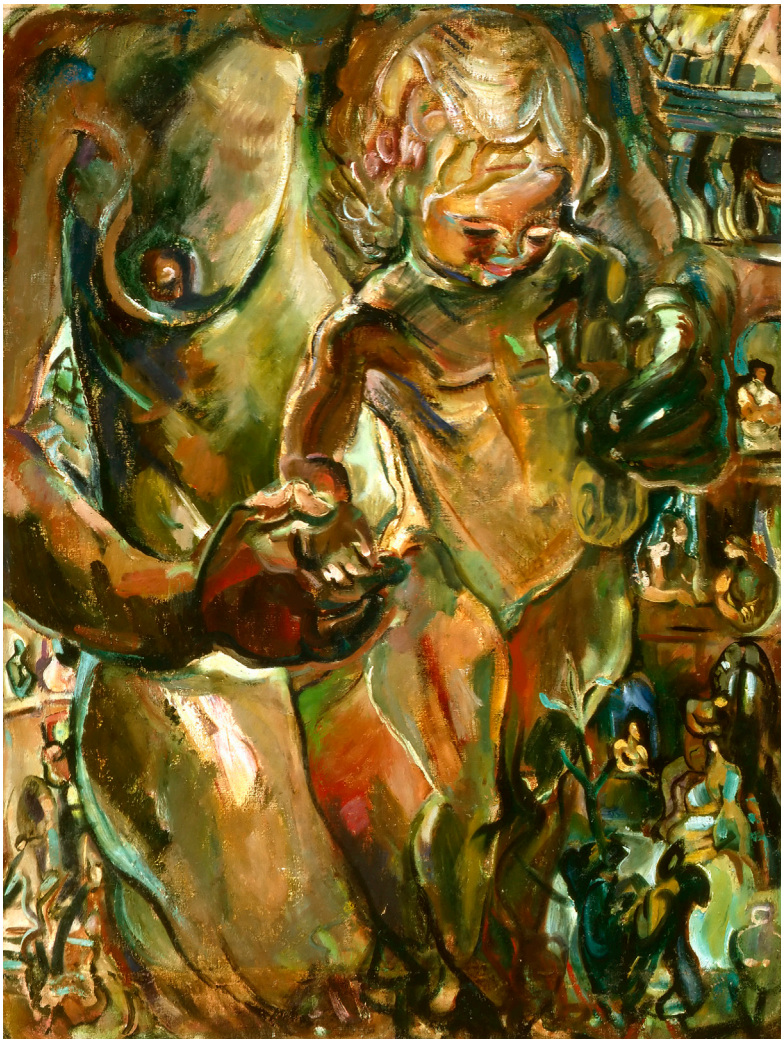

Figure 1. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *Self-Portrait with Jane*, ca. 1939. Oil on canvas, 84.8 × 69.5 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, G-86-136. Photograph: Ernest Mayer, courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

MacLeod executed more than a dozen self-portraits including | **fig. 1** | *Self-Portrait with Jane* (ca. 1939), | **fig. 2** | *Self-Portrait* (1928), | **fig. 3** | *Costume for a Cold Studio (Self-Portrait)* (ca. 1930), | **fig. 4** | *A Descent of Lilies* (1935), | **fig. 5** | and *Torso and Plants* (ca. 1935). These artworks, with their expressionist and open-ended experimental quality, are typical of MacLeod's oeuvre in emphasizing process and becoming. Where Brandon's analysis of her self-portraits relied on a psycho-biographical approach, I aim to focus on the implications of the often-disparaging descriptions of the appearance of her paintings as unfinished, as possessing a kind of "lo-fi" aesthetic.[11] This essay examines the critical attention MacLeod received during her lifetime and in the decades that followed to argue that gender played a role in the reception of her work and contributed to her marginal position in Canadian art history. The reception of her artwork was often complex—many critics simultaneously praised her vivacity and the freshness of her approach, while the majority of them also described MacLeod's paintings as unfinished. I argue that the unfinish, or *non finito*, in MacLeod's paintings counters the masculine formulation of the masterpiece as fully resolved, borne out in the varied criticism her works received. I read the unfinish in her paintings (and self-portraits in particular) as a challenge to modernism's focus on masculine genius, progress, and mastery. I posit that this challenge, and the gendered criticism she received, are causes of what Vera Frenkel has deemed MacLeod's "prolonged disappearance."[12]

A reviewer in the *Montreal Star* wrote in 1932 of MacLeod's paintings: "They are pictures which require a little time and distance for the appreciation of their merits. They are broadly, sometimes roughly, painted studies of the anatomy of landscapes and portrait heads, and seem at the first glance to be shapeless and dull in colour…"[13] Robert Ayre, the art critic for the *Montreal Star*, wrote that MacLeod didn't always take time to compose, and that she was careless about her drawing as she attempted to get down all the life she saw around her before she lost it. "Whether in water colour or oils," he wrote, "her works are like cartoons, painted with a large and generous gesture. She seemed to be always in a hurry. She had to catch life alive and get it down, alive, before it changed. Cutting great swathes out of the walls of life, she shows it to us in teeming disorder."[14]

In his 1939 book, *A Short History of Canadian Art*, art critic Graham McInnes wrote: "Pegi Nicol MacLeod's…bubbling enthusiasm, expressing itself in an unregulated and at times undisciplined flow, covered her canvases with a brilliant and cascading profusion of figures: children at play, sailors in a park, or nuns on a quiet, tree-lined street."[15] In his article "Artist of the Wayward Brush," published the year she died, McInnes would add:

> An Ottawa artist whose delightfully wayward and brilliantly acute water colors achieved fame throughout Canada and beyond its border, Pegi Nicol's work in many ways, still remains that of the sensitive girl who, with the appalling clarity of childhood's vision, looks at the world about her and sees it in sharper focus…For her things had a constant and surprising immediacy … And if the picture was, on occasion, confused, it was because her inspiration sometimes outran her technical skills. But rarely has any Canadian painter achieved so early and held so fast to

11. This essay is indebted to the work of Matthew Sims on Cézanne's unfinish in conjunction with the feminist idea of failure as productive. The impetus for my thinking on MacLeod's work was a 2012 radio interview with the pioneering punk icon Kathleen Hanna. Hanna was asked why her band Bikini Kill—who were then celebrating the twentieth anniversary of their first album—had chosen not to remaster the original, very rough, and unpolished recording from 1992. Hanna explained that leaving the mistakes on her records was intended to allow young women to think that they too, could play an instrument and form a band. Bikini Kill, like many early 1990s riot grrrl bands, celebrated a raw, unfinished, and lo-fi aesthetic in order to give young women the confidence to make mistakes and try again—to counter the perfection of (masculine) professionalism and to assert, "amateurism not as something lesser than, but as something to aspire to so that there was space for the viewer to…insert themselves and so that they could do what we were doing." By refusing to revisit and "polish" her earlier work, Hanna is pointing to the productive potential of failure, a potential that also has resonances for (feminist) art history, in particular the ways in which women artists have challenged conceptions of mastery and artistic convention. Kathleen Hanna interview by Jian Ghomeshi, Q, CBC Radio, December 19, 2012.

12. "To make MacLeod's work and life present to our collective imagination requires analysis of the causes of her prolonged disappearance." Vera Frenkel, review of *Pegi By Herself: The Life of Pegi Nicol MacLeod*, *Canadian Artist* by Laura Brandon, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 562–564.

13. "Pegi Nicol's Landscapes and Portraits," *Montreal Star*, February 17, 1932.

14. Robert Ayre quoted in J. Russell Harper, "Pegi Nicol MacLeod: A Maritime Artist," *The Dalhousie Review* 43, no. 1 (1963): 49.

15. Graham McInnes, *A Short History of Canadian Art* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1939), 88.

> an absolutely individual style…It has been said that her paintings were sometimes formless. She was well aware of her lack of discipline, and it was something against which she struggled all her life. Pegi Nicol's personality was like her painting: ebullient, elfin and wayward, with a curiously "fey" quality that was unmistakable.[16]

McInnes was a great admirer of MacLeod, but it is difficult not to balk at his somewhat patronizing assessment of her approach as "childlike," and while McInnes acknowledges her strong artistic abilities, he undercuts such praise by challenging her technical skills and by describing the artist as "ebullient," "elfin" and "fey"—all terms marked by gender bias.

The tenor of the criticism already outlined above is echoed in a number of the obituaries printed just after MacLeod's untimely death from cancer in 1949. Writer and art historian Donald Buchanan asserted in an essay that was reprinted in the catalogue to her memorial exhibition:

> The medium most natural for the exercise of [MacLeod's] talents was water colour, and in this she worked with great speed and concentration. …But often she was less at home when working in oils, for this medium permits, even if it does not dictate, more forethought in planning and execution than she was usually accustomed to allow herself. She did not stop much to contemplate and construct. She rather rushed in with all her energy to do what her vision instinctively prompted.[17]

Art critic and curator Paul Duval perhaps best summarizes the criticism wielded at MacLeod's swift and sinuous brush: "Her art has its limitations … shortcomings which arose from her need to put all she felt down at once, in a single rush."[18] Fellow artist Caven Atkins equally recalls:

> Because it just flowed out of her like water out of a tap you know. That's actually the way she painted…but because of a certain lack of organization, some of the stuff didn't come off. … The good ones are really interesting to look at, I think. …Yes [her approach was] very slap dash…she just picked up a brush and there were colours in front of her and she just swished it around and put it on the canvas. Sometimes it came off and sometimes it didn't.[19]

In viewing MacLeod's method as quick, lacking forethought and planning, some writers like Duval, Atkins, and Buchanan regarded her paintings as unfinished.

Ruth Comfort Jackson, daughter of artist Charles Comfort, stated, "[MacLeod's] paintings are vivid, with sure brushstrokes, kaleidoscopic colours, streaked with dripping paint, frequently left unfinished giving them a live, immediate quality, with many showing a degree of exotic fantasy characteristic of their fey creator."[20] In a 1982 interview with curator Joan Murray, Canadian diplomat and magazine editor King Gordon noted that "some of Pegi's … best work was unfinished. In fact, she was a great unfinisher. She would carry her painting to a particular point and then said really all she wanted to say in that and she'd pass on to something else."[21] Gordon's wife declared that MacLeod "never felt anything was finished. I often wonder if she had lived longer whether she ever would have felt any work was finished. I doubt it."[22] I want to stress that it is clear from the writing about MacLeod's work that her watercolours and oil paintings were not seen as utter failures. The situation is much more complex given that many critics (Buchanan,

16. Graham McIness, "Artist of the Wayward Brush" *The Citizen*, February 14, 1949.

17. Donald Buchanan, "Pegi Nicol MacLeod 1904–1949," *Canadian Art* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1949): 158–162. Reprinted in *Pegi Nicol MacLeod: Memorial Exhibition* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1949).

18. Paul Duval, *Four Decades: The Canadian Group of Painters and Their Contemporaries, 1930–1970* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1972), 44.

19. Caven Atkins interviewed by Joan Murrary, 1982. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

20. Typescript of notes on Pegi Nicol MacLeod, Ruth Comfort Jackson, Box 6, File 19, Laura Brandon fonds, National Gallery of Canada, Library and Archives, Ottawa.

21. King Gordon and Mrs. Gordon interviewed by Joan Murray, 1982. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

22. King Gordon and Mrs. Gordon interviewed by Joan Murray, 1982. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

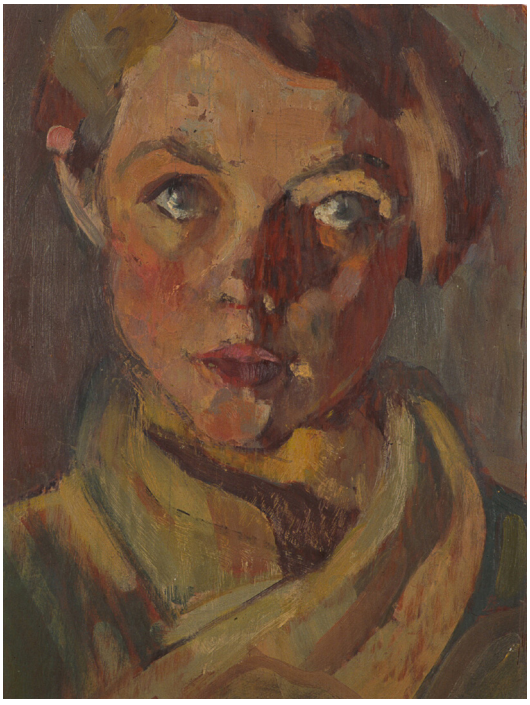

Figure 2. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *Self-Portrait*, 1928. Oil on plywood. Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston. Gift of the Estate of Richard Finnie, 1995 (38-013.02).

Figure 3. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *Costume for a Cold Studio (Self-Portrait)*, ca. 1930. Oil on canvas, 43.1 × 38.1 cm. Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

for instance) lauded her work. The common descriptions of her work as "rushed" and "unfinished," reveal a gendered inflection, one that can be read as thinly veiled criticism.

What were these male critics responding to in MacLeod's paintings? *Self-Portrait with Jane* shows the artist, nude, on her knees, her head cut off at the picture plane as she holds her young daughter up as if trying to teach her to take her first few steps. All around the two central figures are twisting flowing lines and arced brushstrokes, which evoke the apartment windows and figures seen in other paintings from MacLeod's time living in New York. There are sections of *Self-Portrait with Jane* in which the white of the picture plane shows through. The edges of MacLeod's painted arm, hand, and leg appear rough and sketch-like, and the figures outside her New York apartment window are so abstracted that it becomes difficult to discern them from the flowers and plants on the windowsill in the picture's foreground. With this painting the spectator is made aware of the artist's embodied subjectivity through its expressionistic brushwork and flowing lines, which give the work a kinetic quality. This energy activates the spectator's own sense of embodiment, which is prompted in part by an awareness of the artist's maternal role. In addition, the painted surface hints at the temporality of its own making: there is no attempt to efface how the work was produced. The blank areas of canvas, curvilinear brushwork, and fluid forms are suggestive of the speed with which she worked—what McInnes and Buchanan see as "undisciplined flow" and "speed." MacLeod's rapid working method signals the unfolding, durational experience of the artist's practice. Meanwhile, the areas that read as unfinished—whether the blank areas of the painted surface or rough edges of her brushwork—suggest an artist not bent on producing a fully "complete" picture in the traditional academic sense.

While her paintings have an unfinished quality and her critics commented on this aspect of her work, MacLeod nevertheless viewed her paintings as finished. She used *Self-Portrait with Jane* for a Christmas card in 1944.[23] *The Slough* (1928) was a wedding gift to her friends Marian and F.R. Scott, and other paintings, including *Descent of Lilies*, were sent for exhibition upon completion. MacLeod was happy to put these paintings out into the world, although this of course did not stop critics from suggesting that MacLeod's painterly technique was too loose and, in their eyes, unresolved. MacLeod herself commented that she wasn't interested in clean, tight paintings. Writing about two annual society shows in Toronto in the 1930s, she stated: "everything is becoming neater and neater—so neat that it makes your hair curl."[24] MacLeod was not wholly focused on that precise moment when a work of art reaches completion, rather her paintings open themselves up to the spectator; she pushed them as far as she could before leaving them to the beholder, she was, "a great unfinisher."

Self-Portrait | **fig. 2** | was a gift to MacLeod's friend, Robert Finnie. Painted around 1928, it shows the artist head-on in a three-quarter length bust portrait sporting the short, bobbed haircut of the 1920s flapper with a winter scarf wrapped around her neck. Finnie explains that it portrays the artist

23. Brandon, 109.
24. Joan Murray, ed., *Daffodils in Winter*, 110.

"precisely as I remember her when she was watching or hearing something of interest."[25] Her piercing eyes stare straight out of the painting directly at the beholder; the whites around her pupils, the brightest part of the painting, are rendered in mostly neutral and dulled tones of pink, yellow, orange, green, and brown. The brushwork is patchy: areas of MacLeod's hair on the left are rendered in hues of dark yellow and streaks of beige highlight her locks on the right. Her face is composed of thick brushstrokes in deep orange, beige, and muddy purple. A long and careful study of the painting begins to reveal areas of unfinish that seem to show the plywood support below the painting's surface. It appears as if MacLeod has treated the wooden surface with a painted wash of dark red colour before building up the layers of paint, however without an x-ray analysis of the work it is difficult to say for certain. The large patch of unfinished surface between the bridge of her nose and her left eye reads almost like naked untreated wood showing through. Other areas of unfinish emerge above her left eyebrow, cheeks and spots on her forehead. The areas of blank surface, as in many of her other paintings, impel an ongoing responsiveness from the observer. The swirling lines of her scarf are also delineated by these patches of the red and brown original surface upon which she has worked up her self-portrait in her signature loose, modernist style. The rough edges, spots of white, loose, almost abstract areas of her paintings register life in a state of becoming, not fully formed or finished.

Matthew Simms could just as easily be writing of MacLeod's approach when he states, "[i]ncompletion is therefore a mark of value in Cézanne's art, because it reflects the interior experience of the painter and the temporal unfolding and transformation of his life."[26] MacLeod was a great admirer of Cézanne, and the two share a sketch-like quality which critics responded to in similar ways, albeit in very different artistic contexts.[27] From the 1880s onward, critics singled out the unfinished character of much of Cézanne's mature and later work "as one of the most, if not *the* most, distinctive components of his modernity."[28] Simms argues that the unfinish in Cézanne's paintings constitute "one of the most startling and challenging aspects of his art."[29] Where critics of Cézanne viewed his unfinish or challenge to the "conventional quality of finish" as incompetence, Gustave Geffroy defended Cézanne and suggested that the incomplete quality of Cézanne's artworks registers the unfolding, temporal (or durational) experience of life. As Geffroy wrote in Cézanne's defense: "Who can say at what precise moment a canvas is finished? Art … always contains an element of unfinish (*inachèvement*) for the life that it reproduces is in constant transformation."[30] For example, the blank patches of canvas in Cézanne's famous 1899 *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard*, especially on the sitter's hand, can be understood as traces of uncertainty, as spots "in which indecision and doubt concerning the exact tone—*le ton juste*—could ultimately not be resolved."[31] The blank spots in Cézanne's works, according to Simms are indications of indecision.[32]

25. Brandon, 30.
26. Simms, 238.
27. Many of MacLeod's friends remember her admiration of Rouault, Dufy, and Cézanne. In 1940, she wrote to Harry McCurry at the National Gallery to request prints by Cézanne and Van Gogh for her teaching at the Observatory at the University of New Brunswick. See Joan Murray, ed., *Daffodils in Winter*, 148.
28. Matthew Simms, "Cézanne's Unfinish," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 36 (Autumn 1999): 227.
29. Simms, 226.
30. Gustave Geffroy, "Salon de 1901," in *La Vie artistique, huitième série* (Paris: Dentu, 1903), 376, quoted in Simms, "Cézanne's Unfinish," 238.
31. Simms, 229.
32. Simms, 232

The visual affinities between MacLeod's and Cézanne's paintings demonstrate a concentration on form and an impressionist concern[33] with capturing a scene from life. Richard Shiff writes about the unfinished quality of Cézanne's paintings: "He was generally regarded as an 'incomplete' artist and often as a 'primitive,' one whose art was in some way simple or rudimentary, devoid of the refinements and complexities of his materialistic, industrialized … society."[34] I invoke Cézanne here because the criticism he received and his challenge to traditional ideas of perception and painting resonate closely with the criticism of MacLeod's artworks. Cézanne's working method was of course quite different from MacLeod's, he laboured for hours over a single painting in an effort to get ever closer to a resolution he referred to as "realisation."[35] MacLeod, by contrast, worked hastily, but not without forethought, to achieve something of her own idea of "realisation." Like the areas of doubt and uncertainty in Cézanne's paintings, MacLeod's self-portraits also engage the spectator's imagination by granting it the openness to fill in the gaps and complete the loose, unfinished brushwork. I would argue that her works also offer a topography of becoming that is rife with aesthetic pleasure for the viewer.[36]

MacLeod was certainly not the only artist to receive mixed reviews during and after her lifetime. In fact, the criticism about her work could perhaps be read as indicative of the difficult reception many modern artists had in the early decades of the twentieth century in Canada. In response to early exhibitions of their work, artists like John Lyman, Maurice Cullen, The Group of Seven, and Bertram Brooker all received mixed, or negative reviews. However, many of these (male) artists are now canonical, their works eventually gaining acceptance before mid-century or shortly thereafter, and their positions have been cemented by successive art history survey texts from J. Russell Harper onward. I contend that the (gendered) criticism that MacLeod's artworks received reverberated after her death and perpetuated her marginalization in Canadian art history.

The unfinish, the *non finito*, in MacLeod's paintings, as well as the artist's handling of paint, situates her artworks firmly under the *aegis* of modernism. Many of her contemporaries, including the Group of Seven with their invocation of Post-Impressionism, appear retrograde today when viewed against the larger context of 1920s international modernism. Of her fellow Canadian Group of Painters contemporaries, Bertram Brooker's experiments in abstraction reflected a deep and abiding interest in movement and Bergsonian vitalism, but Brooker's paintings are clean, geometric, and taut in comparison to MacLeod's. Paraskeva Clark and Charles Comfort shared MacLeod's interest in the figure and human subjects but they stress form and colour in a more realist approach; Macleod's paintings, by contrast, are typified by their expressive flowing brushwork verging toward abstraction. There were few artists working in Canada alongside MacLeod who captured the vivacity, movement, and dynamism of people and life as she did. As Brandon writes, "Pegi responded to developments in contemporary painting and evolved a unique technique and approach that has no Canadian

33. Richard Shiff argues that the impressionist view of Cézanne's art more closely corresponds to his intentions than a symbolist reading of his work. Richard Shiff, "Seeing Cézanne," *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1978): 769–808.

34. Shiff, "Seeing Cézanne," 771.

35. In a letter to Bernard, Cézanne writes of the obstinacy with which he pursues "the *realisation* of that part of nature that coming before our eyes, gives us the picture." Paul Cézanne, *Correspondance*, ed. John Rewald (Paris: Bernard Grassert, 1937), 276.

36. Simms, 231.

equivalent in the period."[37] Linda Jansma similarly maintains that "Pegi Nicol MacLeod left a legacy of distinctive work unlike many of her peers." Echoing Vincent Massey's words in the foreword to the catalogue of the 1949 National Gallery of Canada memorial exhibition of her work, Jansma claims: "[MacLeod] was an artist of unique and vivid individuality…recognized as an artist of unusual ability."[38] A review of the exhibition in the *Windsor Daily Star* stated that Pegi's artwork "is possibly more refreshing, more expressive of our times, than that of any other woman painter."[39] Nevertheless, the expressive modernist quality of her painting was challenging to critics, one of whom remarked that she had a need to paint "or bust."[40]

In *Torso and Plants* (ca. 1935) | **fig. 5** | MacLeod uses short angular brushstrokes of greens, yellows, blues, and pinks to represent her own torso, her head cut off at the neck by the top of the painting's frame. She is seated with a large assemblage of biomorphic flowers and plants, including daffodils and rhubarb on her cloth-draped lap that appear alive. One leafy tendril of the rhubarb plant touches the artist's right breast reaching toward her nipple, an erotically charged gesture; on the right a daffodil leaf almost touches her left nipple, activating the beholder's engagement with the painting. The artist places herself, nude, in what could be any generic still life composition of a flowering plant or vase of flowers. As Anna Hudson writes, "[s]he presents herself as a studio nude and, in so doing, includes the artist among the still life objects arranged for aesthetic contemplation."[41] However, the body is no mere object among others—rather, the dynamic quality of her sinuous brushwork resists our reading of the artist as object. She combines the genres of still life, portraiture, and the nude in one painting, challenging the parameters of all three genres. The intrusion of the artist onto the representational field calls attention to the artifice of production, while the absence of her head and face challenge the viewer's understanding of the work as a self-portrait. The result is an ambiguous and complex work of art. By defying artistic tradition MacLeod defied many Canadian critics' ability to make sense of her work.

I want to turn to another of her self-portraits and read it against the criticism of her paintings as "uneven" or "roughly painted," and her method as "undisciplined," to assess the predominantly male critics' responses to MacLeod's works. What does it mean to read MacLeod's unfinish as a kind of failure in a different way—that is, what if we consider that "failure" as a resistance to (masculine) mastery? Jack Halberstam views failure as a potential form of resistance, "a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique." Failure, for Halberstam, "recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities."[42] MacLeod's so-called "unfinished" paintings defy the dominant logic of (masculinist) artistic discourse in Canada; they question perceived norms and conventions of what constituted a fully formed artistic "masterpiece." Given that the idea of the masterpiece has historically been masculine, MacLeod's artworks perhaps

37. Brandon, 4.
38. Alicia Boutilier et. al., *A Vital Force: The Canadian Group of Painters* (Kingston, ON: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 2013), 71.
39. David Mawr, "Pegi Nicol MacLeod," *Windsor Daily Star* June 18, 1949.
40. Robert Ayre, "Art Notes… Appeal, Charm of Pegi MacLeod Revived at Fine Arts Museum," *The Montreal Daily Star* March 4, 1950.
41. Anna Hudson, "Art and Social Progress: The Toronto Community of Painters, 1933–1950," PhD diss. (University of Toronto, 1997), 99.
42. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.

Figure 4. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *A Descent of Lilies*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 122 × 91.6 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1993. Photo: NGC.

Figure 5. Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *Torso and Plants*, ca. 1935. Oil on canvas, 90.9 × 68.7 cm. Robert McLaughlin Gallery.

had no hope of every achieving this status and, moreover, her artistic approach foreclosed the possibility.

MacLeod's experimentation with genre combined with the blank areas of canvas, wood, and paper in her artworks led critics, as I have outlined, to take issue with her quick handling of paint. Margaret MacKenzie, a friend of MacLeod's in New Brunswick, recalls:

> That was the only criticism that people made of her that her paintings spilled off the sides of the canvas. I remember one artist or critic or somebody from Ottawa saying to me, "The only thing about Pegi, is if she had a little control and kept her paintings on the canvas, she'd do better." That was the only criticism I heard. … No it wasn't Kay Pepper. I can't remember who it was but it was a man.[43]

Some two decades after this event took place, MacKenzie still felt compelled to stress the fact that the criticism of MacLeod was from a man, an observation that bears the mark of gender bias. It should be noted that women, including King Gordon's wife, reinscribed this criticism of MacLeod. In other words, the gendered criticism of MacLeod's work is part of a naturalized patriarchal discourse, in which men and women could be complicit. One aim of this essay is to tease out the very subtle ways in which the writing about MacLeod's artwork reproduced gendered conceptions of art making which reinscribed the unfinish in her works as somehow feminine and a sign of a lack of artistic mastery. While Cézanne's unfinish was part of the reason his works were rejected by the official Salon and for the skepticism that met his first one-man exhibition (organized by Ambroise Vollard in 1895), Cézanne's reputation as an integral figure in the development of modern art was well established by MacLeod's time. The gendered inflection of the criticism of MacLeod's unfinish—the ways that critics praised her work while concomitantly offering backhanded or condescending comments about her artistic approach—was not only sexist, but also hypocritical if we consider how the unfinish was a marker of canonicity in male modernist painters (Cézanne among them). The overt denigration of women artists is rare in early twentieth-century Canadian art writing,[44] but essentialist notions of women's roles percolated below the surface of many reviews.

The view that women's main purpose in life was biological—to marry, have children and keep a household—was commonplace. Margaret Lawrence's *The School of Femininity*, first published in Canada in 1936, addresses women with artistic leanings and suggests not only that the aesthetic temperament is foreign to women, but also that it is almost impossible for a woman to be a first-rate artist due to her biology: "When a young woman takes to writing…or advertising copy, sculpture, engineering, or designing… it is because something has hurt her biologically, and she tries to escape the fate of womanhood."[45] While Lawrence reinforced traditional gender norms, others felt quite differently about women's place in a changing society. In "Women, Are They Human?" a critical review of Lawrence's book, Governor General award-winning author Gwethalyn Graham wrote that Lawrence failed to recognize the socially constructed ways in which women and girls are conditioned to want nothing more than marriage in life. "It is

43. Margaret MacKenzie interviewed by Joan Murray, 1983. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery Archives.

44. Women were treated differently in the press, albeit in subtle ways. For example, MacLeod was often compared to Emily Carr, seemingly for no other reason than Carr was a known female artist working at the same as MacLeod. There are also examples of critics being much more forthright with their sexist views, for example in a review of an exhibition of work by MacLeod and Ernst Neumann, Richard Hersey writes, "Very few women painters have anything to offer but MacLeod in her demand for agitation and ability to render these fast rhythms without resorting to sterile design proved herself in these times." Examples like this are harder to find, however. Richard Hersey, "Pegi Nicol McLeod [sic], Ernst Neumann Widely Contrasting" *Montreal Standard* March 4, 1950.

45. Quoted in Gwethalyn Graham, "Women, Are They Human?" *Canadian Forum*, December 1936, 22.

a pity," she maintains, "that the first book on women to appear in Canada for some time should be devoted to the expression of a point of view which is too time-worn, too familiar and too retrogressive to be any kind of genuine contribution to the literary and intellectual life of Canada."[46] Lawrence's text is a reminder that, while there were many women working as professional artists in the early decades of the twentieth century, they did not have equal footing in the art world, nor in the world at large. The mostly male critics' assessment of MacLeod's work should thus be understood as bound up in a Canadian culture in which, despite views to the contrary (voiced in newspapers and popular magazines), biological essentialism and traditional ideas about women's abilities were deeply embedded.

MacLeod's nude self-portraits, like her scenes of rivers, children playing, or still lifes, are characterized by a plasticity of form and vibrant colour. *A Descent of Lilies* is a fantastical scene of flowers, horses, and a central nude representation of the artist herself. Macleod's face has individuated features; her body is draped in vibrant pink cloth from the waist down and her body is represented from behind as she turns her head to look back toward the spectator. Her torso is repeated twice amidst a series of large falling lilies, whose white blossoms seem to float and open up in various stages of bloom. A large hand with painted red nails is rendered with the same soft curves in ochre and pale pink hues as the flowers around it; the hand and flowers are difficult to distinguish at first glance. In the bottom left-hand corner are two figures on horseback. Their faces are represented as blocks of colour and flecks of paint, while the horses they ride blend seamlessly into their surroundings. MacLeod's use of colour works to make all the elements on the canvas almost indistinguishable from one another, giving them a dream-like quality.[47] Clouds, flowers, figures, horses, hands, and cloth seem to emerge out of, and into, each other. But this is no ordinary nude. The viewer's eye is continually drawn back down to the presence of the hand in the bottom right of the painting, with which the artist calls attention to the hand that produced the painting before us. The hand is grasping a paintbrush-flower hybrid, which reminds the viewer of the labour involved in the artwork's creation, while the curvilinear brushstrokes of paint on the canvas are indexical of the movement of the artist's paintbrush across the canvas. MacLeod's painting foregrounds the representational act of the artist having sat in front of a mirror to produce the painted image. Her reinterpretation of the genre of the nude is self-reflexive and prompts durational identification. The viewer is not given a fixed vantage point from which to identify with the image. Instead, the evocations of temporality and process challenge the fixed binary of subject and object: the artist celebrates the moment and conditions of the work's making.[48] *Descent* connects the hand and the artist in such a way as to evoke the tension at work between the artist's labour and the embodied subjectivity of both the spectator and the artist herself.

MacLeod disrupts the codes of the nude genre—that most originary portrait of the female body which transformed subject into object. The observer is made aware of the fiction of the artist's pose as she offers up a modernist,

46. Graham, 23.
47. Brandon, 85.
48. Joseph Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 5.

de-idealized female nude body. Not unlike the early twentieth-century nudes by Suzanne Valadon, *Descent* distorts the figure-ground relationship, playing with the depth of field. As Rosemary Betterton has noted of Valadon's nudes, "the spectator is offered no ideal viewing position from which to look at the nude figure of the woman."[49] Valadon's series of nude paintings from the 1920s and 30s also blur the nude and portrait genres, and many male critics responded to Valadon's nudes with disgust and incredulity. One even accused Valadon herself of misogyny for taking revenge on women by refusing to idealize them.[50] Like Valadon, MacLeod refused to align the nude with sexual desirability and classical idealization. *Descent of Lilies* is both surrealist fantasy, nude self-portrait and, one might add, still life. The painting, like *Torso and Plants*, destabilizes the conventions of self-portraiture and the nude, and further challenged contemporary critics with its areas of sketchiness and unfinish.

MacLeod participates in a very modern break with the idea of the self-portrait as an assertion of the artist's social status or "genius." Like Expressionists Oscar Kokoschka, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Gabriele Münter, MacLeod was inventing a radical new modern form of self-portraiture. Kirk Varnedoe sees the strategies of Expressionist portraiture as "borrowing guises and inventing symbolic fictions." He argues that what is most "modern about these works is not the directness of their communication, but its obliqueness; not the sense of revelation, but the sense of performance."[51] MacLeod's experiments with unfinish, however, are decidedly not a form of performing the self (an approach more in line with Renaissance self-portraiture), but instead reveal its fragmentation and incoherence.

MacLeod painted *Costume for a Cold Studio* (ca. 1930) | **fig. 3** | after returning to Ottawa where she lived with her parents in the middle-class neighbourhood of the Glebe. She transformed the attic of her parents' house into her art studio. In this self-portrait, the artist stands posed with self-assurance, in front of a mirror, a direct and intense expression on her face. She wears loose culottes and a distinctive painter's smock. Resting her sketchpad on her stomach, she bends one knee to support her body as she paints herself. Perspective and space are distorted and subtly hint at the abstracted aesthetic that would become more common in her later works. Her face, simplified in form, is defined only by details of her thickly outlined nose, lips and eyes, which look askance toward the bottom right of the canvas, where the mirror MacLeod used to capture the scene was likely located. Thick brushwork accentuates the bulbous folds in her smock, which are echoed in the curves and forms in her brown bobbed hair, the decoration on the wall behind her, and the curvilinear lines of the purple chair on the left. *Costume for a Cold Studio*, *Self-Portrait*, and her double-sided self-portrait, *The Slough*, demonstrate the shifts in MacLeod's appearance; each reads like a portrait of a different person. Such a comparison troubles our understanding of the notion of a self-portrait as a window into the artist's individuality.

The sheer aesthetic variety in MacLeod's self-portraits, alongside her evocation of temporality and duration, deterritorializes the face and

49. Rosemary Betterton, "How Do Women Look? The Female Nude in the Work of Suzanne Valadon," *Feminist Review*, no. 19 (Spring 1985): 17.

50. Betterton, 21.

51. Kirk Varnedoe, *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture, and Design* (New York: MoMA, 1986), 171–74.

demonstrates the ways its fixity can come undone. MacLeod does not fix the face as significance; her self-portraits do not turn subject into object; she is, like Francis Bacon, a painter of "heads not faces."[52] As subject of her own paintings she keeps herself in a constant state of differentiated and self-reflective becoming. Her self-portraits make manifest the dismantling of the face and faciality.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the abstract machine of faciality, a system comprised of the "*white wall/black hole* system," is one in which the white wall is the ground of signification where meaning is projected, and the black hole is subjectivation where meaning is expressed.[53] Faciality is a machine of organization or systematization which affects being and makes the face readable as a structure. Faciality is the social production of faces which overcode the subject, overriding, swallowing individuality.[54] Meaning is organized on the face in a white wall/black hole system in which the white wall is the surface upon which meaning is projected and read; and the black holes are the sites where meaning comes into being. As Maria Loh eloquently puts it, "without the organizing force of social codes, the face would be thought of as no more meaningful than the flab of skin that hangs at the end of the elbow."[55] To dismantle the face is to move away from repressive signifying systems that reify binary processes and thinking. For Deleuze and Guattari:

> Concrete faces cannot be assumed to come ready-made. They are engendered by an *abstract machine of faciality* (*visagéité*), which produces them at the same time as it gives the signifier its white wall and subjectivity its black hole. Thus the black hole/white wall system is, to begin with, not a face but the abstract machine that produces faces according to the changeable combinations of its cogwheels.[56]

We think of our faces as being "us," as defining who we are. We "read" faces like language to gain knowledge about the identity of the person behind the face; the face is a source of the self and a tool of communication.[57] In other words, the face brings forth a model of representation, but is not, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, an external manifestation of interior emotions or causes.

How then can a subject escape the face and faciality? Rather than capture a realistic representation of a sitter's physical appearance, modernism pushed portraiture in new aesthetic directions. MacLeod's self-portraits are experiments in naturalism and distortion and they dismantle the tradition of transforming embodied subjectivity into static data. Her self-portraits are neither projections of personality nor personal narratives, for they do not preserve the idea of the portrait as truth of a knowable self. With their blank areas of canvas, they signal, rather, the impossibility of ever translating the truth of a "knowable subject" into representation. Her critics' responses to her paintings as unfinished evidence the difficulty in reading her work in traditional ways. MacLeod explored the performative body as both machine and representation, and her series of self-portraits offer depictions of a woman, an individual, we cannot completely know. ¶

52. Deleuze writes of Bacon's portraits: "As a portraitist, Bacon is a painter of heads, not faces, and there is a great difference between the two. For the face is a structured, spatial organization that conceals the head, whereas the head is dependent on the body, even if it is the point of the body, its culmination…Bacon thus pursues a very peculiar project as a portrait painter: to dismantle the face, to rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the face." Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 19.

53. "The face constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of; it constitutes the wall of the signifier, the frame or screen. The face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through; it constitutes the black hole of subjectivity as consciousness or passion, the camera, the third eye." Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 167–168.

54. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 170.

55. Mariah Loh, "Renaissance Faciality," *Oxford Art Journal* 32, no. 3 (2009): 345.

56. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 168.

57. Paul Elliot, *Guattari Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 76.