

## Helen Chadwick's "Composite Images"

### **Abstract**

This article will trace the considerations of British artist Helen Chadwick (1953-1996) regarding 'composite images' and the potential liberation they opened up in the gap between image and form, surface and spectator. These will be discussed as the article follows two apparently contrasting trajectories of her thought; while her considerations of the image, and her own image-making, tend increasingly towards 'pure surface,' her ambitions for spectatorial positioning and agency increase. In parallel, while the epistemological underpinnings of her thinking become increasingly complex and dynamic, the role of (self)portraiture in her work moves away from the portrayal of her own, and later the recognisably human, body.

These trajectories can be mapped (roughly) onto particular projects, beginning with *Ego Geometria Sum* [1982-4], developing through *Of Mutability* [1984-6] where she first used the photocopier to produce 'automatic images' and into her light-based installations, such as *Blood Hyphen* [1988].

### **Keywords:**

Helen Chadwick; Composite Image; Self-portrait; Automatic Image; Multiple Images

## Helen Chadwick's "Composite Images"

### 1 *Composite Images: or, 'FICTIONS' against the Mechanical view of the Universe*

Through a wide range of projects and media, the British artist Helen Chadwick (1953–1996) is perhaps best known for addressing questions of space, gender and power relations. Through the overt institutional critique of early projects such as *Train of Thought* and *Model Institution*, these issues were clearly manifest. However, in 1982 her work appears to turn sharply away from this approach. While the motives behind this are complex, Chadwick referred to the potential 'liberation' she sought in terms of 'composite images', where traditional relationships between image, form and material—and their broader epistemological underpinnings—could be challenged. Writing in a notebook in the early 1980s, she articulates this as follows:

Veiling of image over form as in EGS [*Ego Geometria Sum*] freed from 'terrestrial' prison—liberates as a series of composite images (not even a single instance as in a moment at which photograph is fixed...) → Newtonian/Platonic view of reality as matter/mechanical model opened into quantum mechanics — open dynamic, inter-related fixing of occurrences as an 'image'

i.e. FICTIONS (Chadwick, HMI 2003.19/E/6:147)

*Ego Geometria Sum* comprised a series of ten quasi-Platonic objects applied with photographic images relating to the early years of Chadwick's life (incubator, font, pram, bed, piano, desk, gym horse and so on), supplemented in its installed versions by a series of photographs (*The Labours*) hung around a controlled spatial enclosure defined by curtains.<sup>1</sup> The project played on the conflict between personal and institutional politics and identity.

In preparatory notes written in 1982 she observed that 'buildings are stronger than people—more enduring, more real than lives led.' (HMI 2003.19/E/5:1) Pursing these concerns, she developed an interest in the difference between idealised forms, including representations such as architectural drawings,<sup>2</sup> and photographs which portray that which remains. Early proposals for this project played out this contrast more explicitly:

In gallery look at architectural drawings plotted from photos of some of more relevant buildings i.e. bungalow + 124 CV Rd

Contrast of formal drawings of buildings —idealised— with actual photos. (Chadwick, HMI 2003.19/E/5:9)<sup>3</sup>

In the realised version of *Ego Geometria Sum*, each object presented a conformity of body to geometry, the geometric form and physical size of each particular object seeming to force Chadwick's body into a certain accommodating pose. But the surface portraits were, in Chadwick's words, 'absurd images',<sup>4</sup> and contest the 'I am Geometry' of the title by providing a range of geometries.

Attempts at ‘liberation’ came in part from this absurdity: individually and collectively, when read across –indeed, experienced spatially within—the composite series of images, objects and the perimeter photographs of *The Labours*, the relationship between Chadwick’s posed body and their supporting, or controlling, forms demonstrates a more ambiguous submission to and mastery of the objects. The ‘inter-related fixing’ that she wrote of charged *Ego Geometria Sum* with exceeding the ‘single instance’ of the photograph, but also suggests that both form-image and matter remain present in the composite image, and that these could continue to play against each other, remain relational, non-totalising, and even antagonistic. This is born out in the realised work.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the individual images that provide the composites of these composite images are all easily recognisable. The ‘veiling of image over form’ that Chadwick noted is more explicit in her development maquettes for *Ego Geometria Sum*, called *The Juggler’s Table* [1982]. Here, as well as applying photographic portraits directly to the surfaces of the objects, she laid specific photographs related to the particular time of her life that was referenced on the object.

Composite images were to raise questions regarding the relationship of image and form, or of visuality and materiality, with all the attendant implications this carries regarding the hierarchies of Western thought that valorise mind over matter. In *Ego Geometria Sum*, the awkward distinction frequently conflated in the term form (*eidōs*) is teased apart, presented in a tension that Chadwick hoped to instigate between the objects and the images, or between what we can refer to for convenience as form-shape and form-idea. Although for every object in the project, form-shape and form-idea relate to a specific moment in Chadwick’s life, these two aspects are not necessarily easily legible, and require some effort on the part of the viewer to combine them into a clear story that traces Chadwick’s autobiography. Moreover, there are several images pasted onto each shape, requiring viewers to take these in from different directions. Even in the most straightforward examples such as the *Font*, applied photographs composed more or less as plans and elevations interfere with each other because of shape of the material substrate interferes with the presumed flatness of the image.

In other words, the composite images were offered, and operated, in different modes simultaneously, as Chadwick worked to challenge the separation of visuality and materiality in conventional terms. She found a useful stimulus for this challenge in Gaston Bachelard’s notion of the poetic image.

## **2 Poetic Image**

Chadwick was reading Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* while developing *Ego Geometria Sum*; the book discusses memory, space, the domestic, and worked against prevalent psychological and psychoanalytic takes on these issues. The appeal for Chadwick of working through Bachelard is clear: as Etienne Gilson writes in the *Foreword*, ‘Bachelard was resolutely turning from the universe of reason and science to that of imagination and poetry [+ memory, adds Chadwick]’. (Gilson, [1958] 1964: viii)<sup>6</sup>

Although Chadwick remained ambivalent about Bachelard’s work generally, she was particularly drawn to the radical novelty he assigned to the

poetic image. In her copy of the book, she underlined this sentence: 'how can an image, at times very unusual, appear to be a concentration of the entire psyche?' (Gilson, [1958] 1964: xiv) Above 'image' she added the word 'object.' To develop her consideration of the poetic image/object, she paid close attention to Bachelard's borrowings from Minkowski, whose work on 'reverberation' (*retentir*) had proved influential. A lengthy footnote to *The Poetics of Space* cites Minkowski's *Vers une Cosmologie*. There, he argues that the world comes alive by filling up with reverberations:

It is not a material object which fills another by espousing the form that the other imposes. No, it is the dynamism of the sonorous life itself which by engulfing and appropriating everything it finds in its path, fills the slice of space, or better, the slice of the world that it assigns itself by its movement, making it reverberate, breathing into it its own life. The word "slice" here must not be taken in its geometrical sense. It is not a matter of decomposing the world virtually or actually into sonorous balls...(Gilson, [1958] 1964: xx)<sup>7</sup>

Chadwick made a direct claim on this notion of poetic image for the objects of *Ego Geometria Sum*, charging them with the role as 'triggers', such that their 'sense [was] not to be disentangled but felt + allowed to resonate.' (Chadwick's annotations to Gilson, [1958] 1964:xx)<sup>8</sup> If we can accept the composite image as an attempt to reconsider the stuff of our experience, our world-view, and thus our identities in radically different terms to the prevailing epistemologies of Western thought, then the direct encounter with the artwork (here, *The Juggler's Table* or *Ego Geometria Sum*) would position the artist and the spectator in a different position vis-à-vis that reality. Speculating on and opening up the separation-veiling of image over form, this notion of poetic image or object signals Chadwick's ambition rather than a realisation, setting an agenda where poetic images would reverberate as a non-ocular, non-geometric mode of experiencing.

That said, while the composite images operating in *Ego Geometria Sum* were charged explicitly with challenging the Newtonian universe, they were deployed within a space that did little to upset Newtonian rules. Frustrated by her work's inability to shake off this connection, Chadwick challenged herself to turn away more convincingly from Newtonian or Platonic 'truth' by developing more 'open dynamic, inter-related fixing of occurrences as an "image" i.e. FICTIONS'. She began to work away from notions of truth based on paradigms of vision towards a more contingent kind of image that became at once more spatial and bodily *and* less physical. To pursue this trajectory in her thought and her realised work, there are several clues that can be plucked from her own research around this time, particularly that involving the work of eighteenth century theorists William Hogarth and Etienne-Louis Boullée.

### **3 Expanded Images: eggs and onions**

The ambition of her initial (her only) mention of composite images was not realised to her satisfaction in *Ego Geometria Sum*. Nevertheless, she continued to consider the potential they offered, in ways that would engage the observer more directly in the experience and reverberation of these

images. Supporting this investigation, she drew on the writings of Boullée and Hogarth, paying particular attention to their meditations upon the contingent experience of pure forms (Boullée) and pure surfaces (Hogarth).

While both Boullée and Hogarth were responsive to the C18th development of neo-classical architecture, their works inscribe a certain tension. Both authors explicitly address the positive paradox available to spectators in certain situations where vision doesn't provide immediate comprehension.<sup>9</sup> Chadwick was particularly interested in Hogarth's notion of the 'Line of Beauty', which was set within a quasi-rational, classical situation in his book and plates. But as his modern editor Ronald Paulson notes, 'One paradox of the *Analysis*... is that Hogarth invokes both contingency and an absolute; he both humanizes and abstracts.' (1997: xxxiv) A related paradox can also be identified in Boullée, particularly around the tension between his writing (on variety), his disavowal of the Rococo, and his own drawn projects. In their various ways, Boullée and Hogarth's advocacy of a both/and situation appealed very much to Chadwick.

Boullée linked the notion of *image étendues* (expanded images) explicitly to what he called the Poetry of Architecture, where variety is provided by the contingencies of experience, presumably even as 'we' stroll around and appreciate the ever-changing image of the dome or that most perfect of Platonic solids, the sphere.

In several notebooks and papers, Chadwick made direct reference to Boullée's *Architecture; Essay on Art* in the context of *Ego Geometria Sum*, emphasising how the latter worked with the kinds of pairings that Boullée championed (symmetry and variety, square and circle, as well as some that he would discourage: Classical and Rococo) albeit in a different guise. Indeed, we might push the point and suggest that—despite other qualifications—Boullée's notion of *image étendues* provided a model for her own developing suggestions regarding *Composite Images*. Boullée set out his theory of *image étendues* in architectural composition and experience as follows:

As in nature, the art of giving an impression of grandeur in architecture lies in the disposition of the volumes that form the whole in such a way that there is a great deal of play among them... It is just such expanded images [*image étendues*] that I have tried to produce in several of my projects...

It follows from these remarks that if we are to produce gay, smiling images, it is necessary to be familiar with the art of diversification; for this one must depend on flashes of inspiration for they make objects new, different and more stimulating, and diversify design. They utilize picturesque forms so as to disguise and individualise them... By ingenious combination and unexpected progressions they create unexpected vistas that proffer the stimulating attraction of novelty. (1976: 89–90)

Despite his claims for this Poetry, the disparity between Boullée's stated interest in diversification and the crushing monumentality of his unrealised architectural projects must be acknowledged.<sup>10</sup> This contradiction around Boullée's work anticipates the awkwardness and ultimately the dissatisfaction that Chadwick voiced regarding *Ego Geometria Sum*: 'Unable to wrench it forward, my work left behind in geometry: static model of pre-Newtonian Universe. No depiction of dynamic changes: concept of momentum/ impetus

denied.’ (HMI 2003.19/E/5:105) The balance between regularity and variety that Chadwick took from Boullée’s writing needs to be considered more carefully in terms of how and where these occur and play out. For Boullée, the work (the ‘Poetry’) of *image étendues* was experienced over time by an itinerant, kinetic spectator who would balance between an ideal and a contingent reading: Chadwick had similar ambitions for the work of veiling of image over form, although the manifestation of this in both the *Juggler’s Table* and *Ego Geometria Sum* remained within the Platonic-Newtonian view that she criticised.

Chadwick identified a possible way out of this impasse via the work of Hogarth: while he shared Boullée’s interest in the balance between regularity and variety, immediate differences are announced as Hogarth champions *The Egg*, in contrast to Boullée’s advocacy of the more perfect Platonic sphere. (see Hogarth, ([1753] 1997: 31) Ch. IV, *Of Simplicity, or Distinctness*) Behind this rather banal observation, Hogarth offers a different approach, one that steers between the real and imaginary rather than Boullée’s real and ideal. Hogarth comes out much more explicitly against mathematical sources or rules of beauty,<sup>11</sup> and in contrast to contemporaries such as Hutcheson, he rejects the notion that beauty is experienced where unity can be perceived across variety, be sublimated in some way (indeed, this anticipates Boullée’s position). Instead, Hogarth argues for an on-going exploration and discovery, an active process of aesthetic experience; the pleasure of beauty is the pleasure of discovering variety (‘infinite variety’).

As well as advocating a kinetic experience of regularity and variety, Hogarth entreats his readers to imagine forms reduced to an absolute surface. This conception of form-as-shell allows Hogarth and his readers to imagine being both inside and outside any form so conceived, as he explains in his *Introduction: The use and advantage of considering solid objects as only thin shells composed of lines, like the outer-coat of an onion*.

The very word, shell, makes us seem to see both surfaces alike... [W]e shall facilitate and strengthen our conception of any particular part of the surface of an object we are viewing, by acquiring thereby a more perfect knowledge of the whole, to which it belongs: because the imagination will naturally enter into the vacant space within this shell, and there at once, as from a center, view the whole from within, and mark the opposite corresponding parts so strongly, as to retain the idea of the whole, and make us masters of the meaning of every view of the object, as we walk around it, and view it from without. ([1753] 1997: 21)

The prospect of getting below the surface, or freeing the surface, was taken up by Chadwick as her work developed. Rather than Boullée’s *image étendues* gathered over time, Chadwick pursued the promise of Hogarth’s *consideration*, anticipating how information that is different in kind could be gathered from within and without and brought together by the imagination. Nevertheless, there remained something of Hogarth that was just as totalising as Boullée. At the same time as she was reading their works, she found something of a compliment in the stories of Italo Calvino such as ‘The Spiral’, published as part of *Cosmi-Comics*. ([1965] 1982: 150-151) While this shared Hogarth’s interest in the shell as the surface of an object that could be

traversed in some way, Calvino's premise moved from that of total form to the formless.

In her copy, she underlined almost all of 'The Spiral', which is about the formlessness of the characters (molluscs), their relationship to their shells and their possibilities for grasping a visual self-image. We might think of this as a process of self-portraiture. As Calvino, or the mollusc-author of the story, puts it, this process involved a non-optical seeing that co-produces the seer *and* a way of seeing, that particularly resonated with Chadwick. It is worth quoting the relevant section of 'The Spiral' at length:

The shell... was able to create visual images of the shells, which are things very similar—as far as we know— to the shell itself, except that the shell is here, whereas the images of it are formed elsewhere, possibly on a retina. An image therefore presupposes a retina, which in turn presupposes a complex system stemming from an encephalon. So, in producing the shell, I also produced its image... For myself, I had none of this equipment [optic nerve, and so on] so I was the least authorised to speak of it; however, I had conceived an idea of my own, namely that the important thing was to form some visual images, and the eyes would come later in consequence. So I concentrated on making the part of me that was outside (and even the interior part of me that conditioned the exterior) give rise to an image, or rather to what would later be called a lovely image. ([1965] 1982: 151)

While holding on to aspects of Hogarth's account of the shell, Chadwick found that Calvino's mollusc set out a more radical reversal or extension of the seat of agency and (self-)consciousness, with attendant implications for the whole conceptual schema within which the self-portrait—and indeed any image— would be set out: 'In short,' continues Calvino's mollusc, 'I conceived of the eye-encephalon link as a kind of tunnel dug from the outside by the force of what was ready to become image, rather than from within by the intention of picking up any old image.' ([1965] 1982: 151) The resonance of this trajectory was significant for Chadwick's work on and across the production and viewing of images—in this challenged, or expanded sense—and arguably provided a model that she tucked into her own developing practice.

Whereas for Hogarth the viewer imagines themselves inside another object, Calvino's mollusc imagines its selfhood through the very constitution of an observer (itself or another), and thus reverses the usual logic of seeing that presupposes a seeing agent.<sup>12</sup> The implications of this can be felt across the surface. The pure surface form challenged, though accepted, by *Ego Geometria Sum* becomes more complex, and rather than offering a kind of screen around which the composite images coalesce through the resonances set up between image and form, the broader epistemological reach is sketched out by Chadwick thus:

\*figures both object + subject.

exist as feeling itself+ remainder of feeling (?)

seen both from within and without

felt from inside, not image of object of gaze

but self looking + feeling at self feeling, towards dissolution of self, not capturing of other in another's gaze

\*dissolving boundaries not subjecting the person to another's consumption

(HMI 2003.19/E/6:124)<sup>13</sup>

Chadwick's interest in linking self-image, identity, observer and surface (boundary) were pursued in a number of interesting directions. Here in particular, it is useful to follow the ways in which her earlier concerns were developed by emphasising the separation, even the autonomy, of the surface within this broader process of self-emergence. As her work moved on from *Ego Geometria Sum* to *Of Mutability*, it lost the direct engagement with Platonic solids and 'veiled' images, as well as with any direct reference to her auto-biography. Although *Of Mutability* was a large and complex installation work, I want to explore just one element in the main room of this installation called the *Oval Court*, where Chadwick developed a different artistic and spectatorial relationship with the surface, which was reduced to—and expressed as—a single raised-floor surface known as the *Reflecting Pool*.<sup>14</sup> Rather than setting up a dialogue between image and form, this element sought to articulate and operate around what she referred to as pure surface, where another kind of composite image was set out. The raw material for this work had moved away from the photographs of *Ego Geometria Sum* to use photocopies instead, replacing 'light-writing' with 'light-copying': for Chadwick, this hands-off aspect was particularly appealing, and she discussed its importance in terms of the 'automatic image'.

#### **4 Automatic image**

Machine

Naturalism— crude truth to life of machine-made image to propose illusory nature love

Automatic image

Photocopy: pure surface- totally 'superficial' no depth, surface illusion

World of pure surface of things – imaginary depth, infinite space feeling + pleasure

(HMI 2003.19/E/7:55)

To put this interest in the automatic image and photocopying into context, the *Reflecting Pool* surface was collaged from thousands of tiny pieces of photocopy arranged into a mosaic of 12 figures. As Chadwick described it,

The *Oval Court* was made with a Canon copier and a computer. The installation shows that basic image-making machines can produce eloquent and engaging work. It includes a cycle of flora, fauna and figure studies made on a Canon photocopier and toned in blue, self-portraits based on photo-images... Each of the 12 figures is made from the artist's body and other objects placed directly on the photocopier. Each image uses several hundred blue-toned photocopies, cut and assembled into a mosaic... (Press Release: V&A Helen Chadwick File 1)<sup>15</sup>

Chadwick claimed to like the photocopier because there was no conscious framing of the image when the button was pressed: "The photocopy is an extraordinarily direct and efficient medium. You work on your own with no need for assistants; you just press a button and the image appears. You



make a photocopy direct from life.’ (‘Helen Chadwick quotes on *The Oval Court*’ Unreferenced. One sheet A4. V&A Helen Chadwick File 1) While this automatic image did produce a direct impression from life, it possessed significant differences from the photographic images Chadwick had used previously. Distinct from the monocular view of the photograph, even from the extra-terrestrial Archimedean view, and for all its recognisability, the photocopy provides a view from nowhere, in the sense that it is not lens-based image but an index, an image without a physical viewing position or single focal point.<sup>16</sup> For Chadwick at the copier, the moment of image making was done ‘blind’, in both these senses.

Indeed, Marina Warner has referred to this equipment in acoustic rather than optical terms, likening the photocopier—in Chadwick’s hands—to an echo chamber. (2008) Warner develops this link more explicitly in terms of the role the echoed image takes up as self-portraiture: ‘In the case of an artist posing for herself as model, the emotions represented in the image issue from the speaker or the maker since they are one and the same: the short circuit of the self-portrait makes the original voice and its echo indivisible.’ (1989: 56)

It is interesting at this juncture to refer to Jacques Derrida’s long meditation on self-portraiture and blindness, *Memoirs of the Blind*. Derrida too is interested in the multi-vocality of (self-)portraiture, and discussing portraits of the blind he examines how the trait escapes from the field of vision, referring to the gestural dynamics of some of these portraits as offering a ‘mirror without image’. (1993: 12)<sup>17</sup> A strand through Derrida’s discussion develops around these dynamics, which he refers to as abocular (from *ab oculis*, ‘without the eyes’). In this, he identifies three types of powerlessness of the eye, the first of which is pertinent to our present discussion, and which he terms the aperspective of the graphic art. He writes ‘the trait must proceed in the night. It escapes the field of vision. Not only because it is not yet visible, but because it does not belong to the realm of the spectacle, of spectacular objectivity’. (1993: 45)<sup>18</sup> Derrida develops this meditation on spectacle around the notion of aspectus, coming from both sides, ‘on the one side, the spectator, and on the other, the aspect, in other words, the spectacle’, (1993: 44) which recalls the burrowing of Calvino’s mollusc (from within and without, co-productive of image and self), and Hogarth’s shell. The aperspective that Derrida describes follows the pattern of Chadwick at the photocopier, where in the first instance, ‘the inscription of the inscribable is not seen... It escapes the field of vision.’ (1993: 44)<sup>19</sup>

While Derrida’s riff is more on the *trait* of the self-portrait, Chadwick’s work offers more consideration of the *auto* of the *autoritrato*. To pursue this connection also goes some way, if indirectly, to addressing Michael Newman’s criticisms of Derrida for the latter’s lack of engagement with ‘the specificity of the mark in drawing... He [Derrida] does not once... describe a drawing according to its mode of appearing.’ (1994: 222)<sup>20</sup> Albeit with a different modality of marking and appearing based on a moving mirror, light, heat and (blue) toner, Chadwick’s automatic images pass from the abocular to the visual register. For her, this was only a stage in a longer process, where larger or smaller pieces of each automatic image were cut and arranged within a larger (re)composition in an effort to retain the mode of appearing and pass this on to the spectator. Chadwick discussed this use of fragments and her determination to maintain what we might call their abocular legibility,

echoing the initial stage of the process in her struggle to pull non-visual 'images' into the domain of the visible:

I am using the fragments of photocopy to build something up: I don't know how to make abstract concepts visible, but that is what interests me. I am pursuing a desire for the unity of the self in an art which is baroque in its search for totality through dramatic illusion.

(Helen Chadwick quotes on *The Oval Court* Unreferenced. One sheet A4. V&A Helen Chadwick File 1)

The illusion of totality was set out across the raised floor of the *Reflecting Pool*. The immediate material fragility of this surface recalls Hogarth's shell, a material and conceptual surface that emerged from *both within and without*. Chadwick sought to maintain this tension across the surface, making reference to another of Hogarth's concepts in connection with this use of multiple images.

## 5 *multiple images*

Writing in a notebook, Chadwick is clear about the role of multiple images in these representations (while coincidentally making reference to another egg).

Representation Body (Sue Arrowsmith – Egg of Night)

Multiple images, refuse to hide traces or decide upon definitive line. Acknowledges own uncertainties (HMI 2003.19/E/7:53)

In her build up of photocopy fragments, Chadwick's refusal of the 'definitive line' reiterates her interest in Hogarth's 'Line of Beauty'. There, the serpentine line was advocated because it could occur anywhere in a composition, rather than being at the service of some overall regulating geometry. It operated without definitive framework, and consequently could escape overarching forces of composition and, by extension, epistemology.

In line with Hogarth's 'Line of Beauty', the mosaics of *Of Mutability* resist assimilation into the overall organisational logic of the composition, though by different means, refusing to hide traces of their making in two senses. It is clear that these are collaged, as the cut-out pieces of photocopied paper are legible, while at a larger (compositional) scale, there remains a tension between the small and the images. In terms used earlier, the abocular legibility of the fragmented, automatic images is organised within collaged figures that are demonstrably aperspectival. What at first glance appears to be a human or animal figure—Chadwick's body, as swan, a sheep, and so on—is on closer inspection an impossible form (for example, in one figure, both sides of Chadwick's face appear from the same body). The multiple images that Chadwick notes seem to refer to the hundreds of fragments of photocopy that make up every figure, although they could equally refer to the multiple possible readings of each figure so composed. In these ways, the collages offer a more or less uncanny nag that refuses synthesis into final form or definitive experience. Although they operate in a different way to the pieces in *Ego Geometria Sum* or *The Juggler's Table*, the collages of the *Reflecting Pool* do

set up a pull, a veiling, between image and form, a series of composite images that similarly sought ‘liberation ... from the Newtonian/Platonic view of reality as matter/mechanical model [and] opened [instead] into quantum mechanics – open dynamic, inter-related fixing of occurrences as an “image”.’ (HMI–2003.19/E/6:147)<sup>21</sup>

Chadwick observed a relationship between this ‘Fiction’ and the work of Sue Arrowsmith. *Egg of Night* was an exhibition of Arrowsmith’s work that took place in 1986. Patricia Bickers’ essay from the exhibition catalogue, *Into the Light*, positions Arrowsmith’s work between controlled accident and deliberate mark, between painting and photography. ‘In her progress towards self-definition, the artist feels her way forward into the light, corroborating information provided by the eye and by memory, through touch.’ (1986: 5)<sup>22</sup> Although this progress towards self-definition reverberates with the image making of Calvino’s mollusc, the overtones of Bickers’ title counter the more ambivalent balance that Arrowsmith and Chadwick sought. Rather than reinforcing traditional metaphors where light provides a proxy for knowledge, *enlightenment*, and so on, Chadwick was resistant to this easy notion of ‘progress’ by attempting to maintain a balance and play between different modalities of information provided by eye, memory, touch and even blindness: composite images that were at once abocular, aperspectival and visual.

*Into the Light* can provide an invitation in a different, more prosaic sense: not a Platonic move towards light (out of cave, with all the baggage this metaphor brings), but a more literal move that shifts the medium of images into light, away from the physical surface. In a subsequent work called *Blood Hyphen*, Chadwick explored the possibility of moving the operative aspect of viewing multiple images away from the physical surface and into the light, in what might be considered a third stage or iteration of her interest in *composite images*. Writing notes in her *Filofax*, Chadwick set this out in terms of ‘surface exchange:’

Defy the surface –exchange between actual + surface of simulation

In flight from here+now of encounter—displacement from the real (HMI 2003.19)<sup>23</sup>

*Blood Hyphen* set up an alternate arrangement between these ingredients, one that sought to defy or dematerialise the surface through its more deliberate, active spatiality.

overlay image onto another surface

Image as light –frail/unsubstantial–alters authority of material substance

light as particle + a wave. (HMI 2003.19)<sup>24</sup>

## 6 *Pure surface*

*Blood Hyphen* was installed in the Clerkenwell and Islington Medical Mission, London, in 1988. It occupied the whole building (originally the Calvinist Woodbridge Chapel, dating from 1832–3), and involved viewers ascending to look above a suspended ceiling that must have been added at the level of the gallery some time during the 1970s. Chadwick had removed two polystyrene

tiles to allow access to the space above this ceiling, and replaced one of the tiles adjacent to this new hole with a screen showing a cellular image made from a smear from her own body, onto which was projected light and a laser beam.<sup>25</sup>

Side-stepping the overall symbolic complexity of *Blood Hyphen*, the pertinent aspect of this work in the present context concerns Chadwick's attempt to develop a more direct mediation between the image and the spectator. Although the piece employs something of a conceit (there's still an image applied on the surface of the new ceiling tile, rather than the image as light mediated directly to the viewer), it does place emphasis on the active process of spectatorship, an interest Chadwick set out in notes kept around this time.

Viewer as spectator, engaged in poetic space of identification.

Between proj[ection]/screen move in to scrutinise surface ~~material~~+ image, move back to construe the ~~image~~-object: between these 2 processes we are held in place, witnessing event where light meets matter. (HMI 2003.19)<sup>26</sup>

Moving backwards and forwards—or more precisely, above and below the suspended ceiling—demands a spatialised, physically active mode of viewing and involved another kind of composite image. *Ego Geometria Sum* operated by adjacency, image being 'veiled over' form: in *Blood Hyphen*, the suspended ceiling offers a prosaic version of the veil, something that can be moved through, an insubstantial, more or less transparent screen through which two spaces are divided and connected, and the two processes of identification are held in place. The composition of images here had to be undertaken by the movement of the observer, in ways that recall Boullée's notion of *image étendues*. Unlike Boullée's formulation though, where images were to be gathered over time, Chadwick here attempted to set up a composite image that responded more to her interest in the continua reported by modern science,<sup>27</sup> and based on something of an oscillation or simultaneity that recalled her early aspirations for *Ego Geometria Sum*: an 'open dynamic, inter-related fixing of occurrences as an "image".'

This particular temporality was central to the project's conception, and is written into its title: replayed around the location where the Woodbridge Chapel altar would have stood, *Blood Hyphen* makes direct reference to an art-historical motif that combines two moments from the beginning and the end of Christ's life. As James Elkins explains: 'The medievals often placed the two events in relation to one another in their altarpieces; subtler ways enforced the connection. Art historians speak of the "blood hyphen" in mediaeval images of the crucifixion in which the blood from Christ's side streams down His side into His loin-cloth, reminding us of His Abrahamic roots, and of His own small passion as a baby, barely a week old.' (2004: 90)<sup>28</sup> In its ambition at least, Chadwick's work similarly holds together two separate moments of viewing in this one piece, the image seen from below and from above.

Aping traditional representations of divine authority by using technological devices from modern science (the laser, microscopic cellular photography) in a space still characterised by its recognisable religious

architecture, *Blood Hyphen* draws upon two different, powerful ways of seeing. These are mediated across the most banal and soul-destroying element of late 20th century architecture, the cheap, retro-fitted suspended ceiling.<sup>29</sup> Between the authorities of religion and science, the standardised anonymity of the spec office building wins out.

Literally and metaphorically, *Blood Hyphen* attempted to move identity formation to a location where the mundane world and transcendent, ideal accounts could be supplemented by a quantum understanding that challenges—displaces, to stick with Chadwick's term—what is frequently accepted as 'real': (self)identification is conceived as an event, rather than the static conception that could be circumscribed by geometry. As with previous works discussed above, Chadwick attempted to prise open some relief in these dominant, overbearing systems, offering spectators some encouragement to counter the received wisdom they impose. Here, she literally (re)opened a hole in the ceiling, inviting viewers to take a peep where they were not usually able to look.

Seen from both sides of the ceiling though, the cellular image is only recognisable as such; it would take a spectator with a high level of specialism to be able to identify the kind of cells these were, or from which living thing they came. While this was not an obstacle to the effectiveness of *Blood Hyphen* as an installation on its own terms, it is significant when considered within the broader trajectory of Chadwick's meditations on the role and relationship of image and form, because it de-personalised the image beyond a threshold of recognisability. In contrast to the specific auto-biographical content of *Ego Geometria Sum*, and the more universalised mythological references of *Of Mutability*, *Blood Hyphen* refused to offer the spectator a hook onto which the on-going work involving the unsynthesisable re-composition of the composite images could be hung. *Blood Hyphen* operates with a blindness that is different in kind to abocular automatic image of the photocopy, and that is instead due to the powerlessness of the naked eye to recognise this detail in our own bodies and the world around us. As Marina Warner has observed regarding her work at this time, 'Helen Chadwick had travelled to the very limits of the visible'. (1996: np)

## **conclusion**

Chadwick only directly addressed the composite image once, although it persists as a cipher for her broader, enduring enquiry into the dominance of form (and through this, the many other issues that 'form' bears). She charged the composite image not only with the teasing apart of image and form, but through this separation and articulation of surface, image and object, with the questioning of accepted ways of seeing and knowing, in order to mount a challenge to various dominant epistemologies.

Her notebook writings remain enigmatic. They had no audience beyond herself. The realisation of the composite image in particular pieces was subordinate to other ambitions, and ultimately remained unresolved both in her writing and realised works. While we can trace some kind of 'development' from *The Jugglers Table* to *Ego Geometria Sum*, *Of Mutability*, and *Blood Hyphen*, this is to force a lineage through projects that had other targets.

Nevertheless, to consider the trajectory of the composite image through and alongside these projects is interesting because of the breadth of ambition and exploration they support. If this trajectory is mapped as a play on self-portraiture—or perhaps more strongly the disintegration of the self-portrait—it runs from the personal, to the universal, to the fragmented, modern subject, and the construction of identity more broadly. It is important to emphasise that for Chadwick, this wasn't a lament. She believed that the insights of modern science promised an alternative to the dominance imposed by the canons of the Western Tradition. The revisions she sought in epistemology were not simply motivated by a wish to acknowledge matter, base *stuff*, but an invitation to reconsider much more broadly the distinction between the visual and material, image and form. She asked (she had no answer) how could the insights of modern science, which challenged the everyday understanding of the boundary and form of the body, and thus our identity, be taken up. Could there be an image of 'us' that challenges the whole-body understanding that is taken for granted, seems to be common sense?

The composite image can best be considered as an approach that combines different kinds of (in)sight. Acknowledging Hogarth's *consideration*, it encourages the reduction of the object to a shell through the combination of real and imagined points of view, inside and outside. In this moment of reduction, opportunities arise for a fuller perception and understanding. The composite image mobilises and enjoys these different views, different modes of viewing, but it also accepts the failures of vision, announcing as they do different ways of seeing (the *abocular* and *aperspectival*). The composite image anticipates the on-going event of composing and recomposing differing modalities of information about our selves and our world.

'image' changed —series of actions/traces.

Self as event not matter

[...] Dissolution of boundaries of self.

(HMI 2003.19/E/7)

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Chadwick, H, Press Release: One sheet A4 with a variety of background/quotes etc. V&A Helen Chadwick File 1 (*The Oval Court*),  
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### **Figures/Captions**

All works by Helen Chadwick.

All images © Leeds Museums & Galleries (Henry Moore Institute Archive) and The Helen Chadwick Estate

### ***Ego Geometria Sum / The Labours / Juggler's Table / Detail of Font maquette, 1983–1984***

Developed as one of three parts of *Ego Geometria Sum* and containing all the ingredients of that work, *The Juggler's Table* comprised ten cardboard maquettes for the *Ego Geometria Sum* sculptures, placed on top of photographs of the buildings that relate to each of the ten stages of her life referenced in the main piece (such as the hospital where she was born, childhood home, schools and so on). Coincidentally, Derrida talks of the drawing/painting 'leaning against the base of the statue, lower than it, as if abandoned on the ground.' (1993: 44)

Installation shot of Chadwick standing in *Ego Geometria Sum* from the Riverside Studios, London, February 1985. On the floor are five of the ten geometric sculptures that make up the full piece, although in this show only six were included. (In the photograph, the *Incubator* representing birth is in the foreground, then the *Font*—three months, the *Pram*—ten months, the *Boat*—two years and the *Wigwam*—five years.)

On the wall in the background can be seen two of ten photographs in the series *The Labours* that she made in collaboration with Mark Pilkington showing her holding each of the ten objects. *The Labours: Birth* is shown in detail here.



In addition to discussing Juggler's Table, need more reference to *Ego Geometria Sum* (including its architectural Fibonacci layout and spatial experience, the curtains, the Labours.) *The Labours* repeat the motif of image over form, with the objects reversing the earlier relation between form and flat image, as the objects carried become veils for her own body.

### **Of Mutability (Oval Court) 1986**

Installation for the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, where it occupied the Upper Galleries. Here, the reflecting pool at the centre of *The Oval Court* with *Carcass* just visible through the door into the adjacent gallery. Computer-drawn Solomonic columns line the room, topped with swags of foliage and images of Chadwick weeping.

Detail of 'Leda and the Swan', one of twelve different scenes comprising *The Garden of Delights* at the centre of *The Oval Court*, made from complex collages of blue photocopies.

### **Blood Hyphen 1988**

*Blood Hyphen* was installed in the Clerkenwell and Islington Medical Mission, London, in 1988. It occupied the whole building (originally the Calvinist Woodbridge Chapel, dating from 1832–3), and involved viewers ascending to look above a suspended ceiling that must have been added at the level of the gallery some time during the 1970s. Chadwick had removed two polystyrene tiles to allow access to the space above this ceiling, and replaced one of the tiles adjacent to this new hole with a screen showing a cellular image, onto which was projected light and a laser beam.

### **Notes**

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- 1 For a thorough account of *Ego Geometria Sum*, see O'Dwyer (2012).
  - 2 Here, we can include architectural photography that follows the same formal logic of the orthographic drawing, smoothing the transition from form-as-idea to form-as-(architectural)matter.
  - 3 'CV Rd' refers to the family home in Croydon.
  - 4 Chadwick was interested both in her direct autobiography and the possible effect of these objects on others. In the programme 'Imaginary Women,' made for television by Gina Newson and Marina Warner and screened in the UK on *Channel 4* during 1985, Chadwick discussed *Ego Geometria Sum* as a way of examining the past (her past) and giving it order. She described the project as her 'personal history in ten boxes', as 'flesh converted into geometric truth.' —Chadwick, H in Newson, G and Warner, M (1985). In terms of the role given to images and their relationship to the objects, she talked of a 'nude, human echo placed onto thing'. In Chadwick's words, they're 'absurd images'. Her concern that buildings were stronger than people can be recalled here: the conversion of flesh into geometric truth marks the superior strength of not only buildings but of a kind of scientific over poetic knowledge (and a Newtonian over an emerging modern quantum version). What the Composite Image sought was a technique to resist this. Chadwick elaborated on this on a Flier for *Ego Geometria Sum* (printed on one side with the pram and the cube, with the accompanying text reproduced here):  
'EGO GEOMETRIA SUM  
Suppose one's body—isolated in solitude—could be traced back through a succession of geometric solids, as rare and pure as crystalline structures, taking form from the pressure of recalled external forces...  
... the incubator, laundry-box, font, pram, boat, shoe, wigwam, bed, piano, desk, horse, temple, door...  
...and if geometry is an expression of eternal and exact truths, inherent in the natural law of matter and thus manifestations of an absolute beauty, pre-destined, of divine origin...

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...then let this classical model of mathematical harmony be infused with a poetry of feeling and memory to sublimate the discord of past passion and desire in a recomposed neutrality of being.’  
(HMI 2004.19/2)

5 While the article traces a trajectory of self-portraiture around issues of the composite image, there were other factors that contributed to the changes in Chadwick’s work, perhaps most notably the critical (hostile) reception *Of Mutability* received from sections within feminist art practice. That’s a bigger story, and one that I can’t take on here.

6 At the same time, Chadwick was reading a number of works on the philosophies of science by authors such as Arthur Koestler, Stephen Jay Gould, Fritjof Capra, J. E. Lovelock, Erwin Schrödinger and so on.  
7 Chadwick underlines these lines, and writes in the margin ‘here, yes it is!’, and then below, ‘installation as memory.’

8 In the margins to the pages of the Foreword in her copy of *The Poetics of Space*, Chadwick dwells on the resonance and reverberation of the object per se, adding ‘The objects [of *Ego Geometria Sum*] as poetical studies/triggers’ and ‘object’s sense not to be disentangled but felt + allowed to resonate.’ The text at this point is criticising the approaches of both psychology and psychoanalysis, because they try either to ‘describe’ or ‘understand’ the images.

9 Boullée explicitly against the rococo but equally interested in variety, Hogarth pursues a more complex engagement with both the product and consequences of Georgian architecture and town planning present in London. Indeed, his *Analysis* can be considered as a treatise on the contemporary city.

10 This is a separate discussion, one that his modern editor takes up. Boullée’s resolute criticism of the rococo is also somewhat paradoxical given that as an architectural style and experience it would have come much closer to meeting the prescriptions of *image étendues* than his own designs.

11 See Hogarth ([1753] 1997: 65, Ch.XI. *On Proportion*): ‘so whatever may have been pretended by some authors, no exact mathematical measurement by lines, can be given the true proportion of a human body.’

12 There is a tradition of visual theory that picks up on this complexity, reaching back to classical Greek theories of extramission and so on.

13 Consider also a similar formulation set out in another notebook:

‘Space as geometry

‘time as continuity of number

‘Pushed from within by DNA atoms + without by destiny

‘Continuous determinism from within + without...

‘DETERMINISM OF SHAPE

‘within + without

‘catalepsy of body pose’ (HMI 2003.19/E/5:110). Catalepsy is a disturbance of consciousness occurring esp. in schizophrenia, characterised by prolonged maintenance of rigid postures.

14 There is all sorts of baggage here concerning Chadwick’s explicit references to and play on the Myth of Narcissus, Tears, Mirrors, and so on that I can’t pursue here.

15 *Of Mutability* was a literal attempt to play out the superficiality and fragility of a surface; a different take on the *Ego Geometria Sum* veil of image over form (although Chadwick does make a very similar assertion regarding *Of Mutability*—“These things are here, but in what respect? They are like veils of images in space.” (Press Release: V&A Helen Chadwick File 1)

16 Recall Rosalind Krauss’ discussion of the C. S. Peirce’s ‘theorizing the difference among the sign-types—symbol, icon, and index—[he] distinguishes photographs from icons even though icons (signs which establish meaning through the effect of resemblance) form a class to which we could suppose the photograph to belong.’ It is also relevant to note that Peirce places extra emphasis on ‘instantaneous photographs... because they are in certain aspects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature.’ (1985: 215) citing Peirce (1955: 106).

17 Derrida’s recurring interest in mirrors, monocular vision (and the Cyclops), tears, veils, skiagraphy, photography, shadow or light writing, and so on could all be pursued in more detail in the context of *Of Mutability*. On multi-vocality and reverberation, consider: ‘Like Memoirs, the Self-Portrait always appears in the reverberation of several voices.’ (1993: 64), and Minkowski cited earlier in Bachelard ([1958] 1964).

18 Derrida’s second attribute of the powerlessness of the eye concerns ‘the *withdrawal [retrait] or the ellipse, the differential inappearance of the trait.*’ (1993: 53 original emphasis). He talks of a tracing that cannot (or can no longer) be seen, ‘insofar as ... it tends to wear itself out so as to mark the single edge of a contour: between the inside and the outside of a figure.’ (1993: 53). His third attribute concerns the rhetoric of the trait.

19 Derrida develops the temporal aspects of this discussion in terms that ring of Minkowski’s *retentir*, reverberating or operating beyond time and space: ““before” and “from-since”: these draw in time or space an order that does not belong to them.’ (1993:55)

20 Newman goes on in various ways to pursue this lack, through to accusations (echoing similar elsewhere) of Derrida’s own prioritisation of the word (language and poetry) over the visual arts. Compare Chadwick’s own response in an essay in the *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts*: ‘Given this

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scenario of the object, the sign and the commodity, the suggestion is that we are full-square in the realm of language. If so, I cannot help but ask myself where am I to locate subjectivity? What is my relation to all of this?' (1992: 68)

21 The intention of revealing traces —*traits*— is to counter the Platonic role of and direction through images in traditional conceptions of understanding; to encounter the image-as-idea (rather than image-as-mundane-form) was to get through to truth. Here, though, this kind of absolute, Platonic truth is not located.

22 Many of the 'self-portraits', or works that include an element of self-portraiture, have much in common with Chadwick's work from this time: attempts to balance ideal and subjective views of the body, use of grids juxtaposed with her body, using her own body directly on photographic paper, or on paper, etc. (*one, two, three, nine*, 1985, or *Nine Accidents* 1984).

Chadwick similarly embraced chance occurrence in the context of her automatic images: 'Photocopies as electrons! Take chance as in photocopies, 'arrested moment' of automatic / mechanical image.' (HMI 2003.19/E/7)

23 Written some time after 4.12.87.

24 This *Filofax* page entitled 'Lecture/talk Camerawork', and dated 5<sup>th</sup> March 1988.

25 In the context of Chadwick's explicit pursuit of 'a desire for the unity of the self in an art which is baroque in its search for totality', it is interesting to observe the close similarity between this physical and operative arrangement of *Blood Hyphen* and the well-known diagram of the *Allegory of the Baroque House* given by Deleuze in his discussion of 'The Pleats of Matter' and the folds in the soul, and originally published in the same year as *Blood Hyphen*. The English translation is Giles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1993). For the diagram see (1993: 5).

26 This entry between February and December 1987.

27 For a detailed account of Chadwick's interest in modern science (especially quantum mechanics and developments in cellular biology, see Walker (2010).

28 In *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, James Elkins (2004) discusses *Blood Hyphen*, arguing that 'the laser is reminiscent of the straight line painted in Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation: the Holy Spirit travels down the line from God to the Virgin. The blood is reminiscent of Christ's blood, and the brilliant upper floor contrasted against the spectral lower as the light of heaven to the unilluminated Earth. Even the title, *Blood Hyphen*, echoes the line, called a hyphen, between Christ's first and last wounds—between the circumcision and the wound in his side.' (2004: 90) He does go on, coincidentally to talk about a veil between the work and the Eucharist.

In contrast, Guillian Bruno discuss the blood hyphen in the female body, again positioned between first and last wounds, but now these are the 'primary lack marking a woman's body—a body seen as castrated, wounded. And the mutilated piece is, in a way, fetishized, displaced into a chain of diverse object signifiers (the breast, a book, a lamp etc) standing for what is now a missing part.' Bruno, 1998: 294)

Chadwick cites different sources in her text/commentary on *Blood Hyphen*: Leo Steinberg, (1983), 'The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion,' and a response to Steinberg's text by Caroline Walker Bynum, (1986) 'The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg,' (to the effect that blood refers primarily to suffering, and that this is what we can all share). See Chadwick (1989:88).

29 There is a parallel here with the proprietary raised-access computer flooring system that formed the plinth for the *Reflecting Pool* in *Of Mutability*.