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History and Theory Graduate Studio 1995-1997 Catalogue

Self-Portrait... a chest of drawers

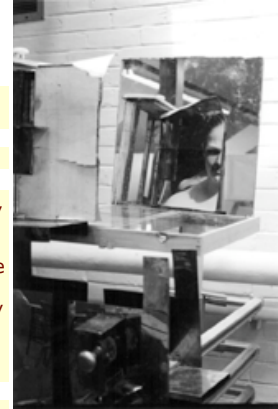
Jodi La Coe

... ubi de modo jungendi fictum cum vero.
 ... with the Manner of reconciling the
 fictitious to solid Architecture. ([note 1](#))

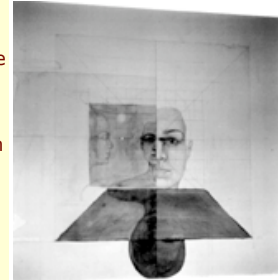
The self-portrait as a chest of drawers seeks to develop an illusion joined to reality. This narrative unfolds as the time of the body passes.

The Bottom Drawer

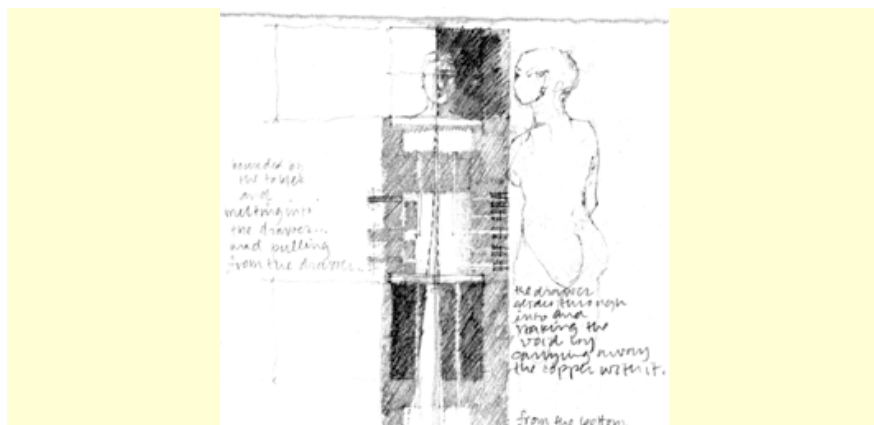
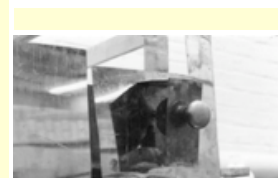
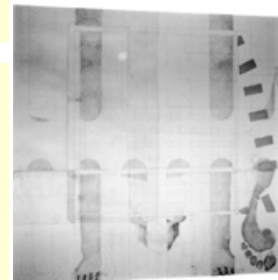
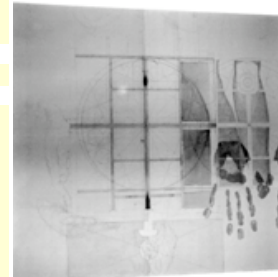
The bottom drawer contains a model of the Collegio Romano, the former Jesuit college in Rome, and the layers buried beneath it. The history of the site includes: an aedicule to Minerva, the goddess of Memory; the aqua vergine; the Collegio Romano; the first chapel of the Jesuit novices of the Collegio Romano, SS. Annunziata; the *trompe l'oeil* frescoes of Andrea Pozzo; the Church of S. Ignatius; the rooms containing some of the scientific instruments acquired for the college by Athanasius Kircher; and the astronomical walkway and observation towers visited by Galileo. ([note 2](#)) This physical layering of narratives is reflected in the drawer's construction and its relationship to the chest of drawers as a whole. The bottom drawer is the foundation of the chest of drawers, whose pieces stem from this immovable element buried in its feet.

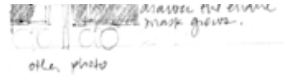
**The Middle Drawer**

The middle drawer is at once a sketchbook, a map of the city of Rome, and a memory system for the instruction of *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. In keeping with St. Ignatius' desire to teach catechumens in the Campo de' Fiori and the Piazza della Rotonda, this drawer allows *The Spiritual Exercises* to be performed through sixteen piazzas of Rome. ([note 3](#)) The order of the piazza creates a spiralling path beginning in the Piazza San Pietro and culminating in the Piazza Sant' Ignazio. As a sketchbook, the drawer was fashioned with a hinging wooden grid which opens to form a rigid drawing surface fitted with a compass. A symbol of the outline of *The Spiritual Exercises* corresponding to the cardinal and secondary points of a compass is drawn on each pair of pages. The drawer was taken on its first journey through Rome to sketch the elevations of the piazzas and to plot the position of the instructor within each piazza using the compass. As a map, the drawings are to be followed on a path through Rome and used to orient the instructor to begin the recollection of the exercise. As a memory system, the map illustrates the facades that delineate the sixteen piazzas of the journey. As in the rules for classical memory systems discussed by Frances A. Yates in *The Art of Memory*, this system is based on the placing of memorable images in rhythmically spaced architectural openings. ([note 4](#)) The instructor of *The Spiritual Exercises* would fill this sketchbook with personal images to construct each lesson.

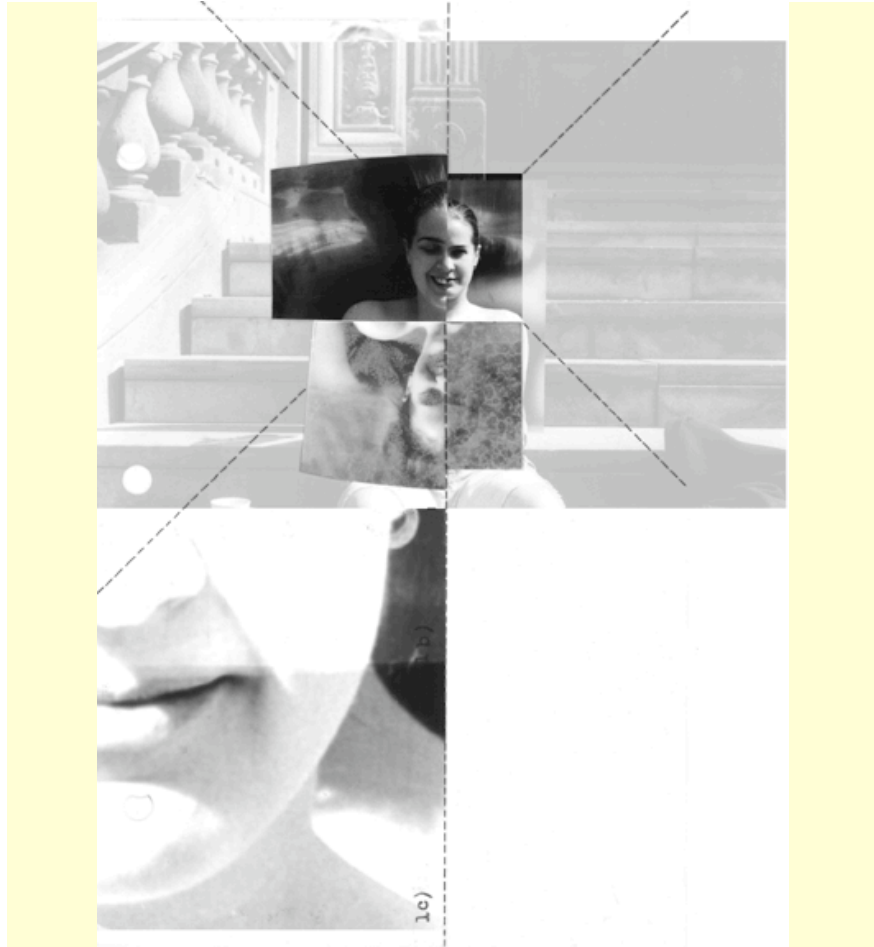
**The Top Drawer and its Copper Skins**

The top drawer has two positions. The first is closed, with a photograph that records half of my face in front of a copper sheet folded into the drawer case. A piece of the back of the drawer is fastened to two copper layers which form the front of the chest of drawers. The second position is attained once the drawer is pulled out of the chest of drawers and reunited with its fragment. The photograph and its copper frame swing out of the drawer case to face the mirror. In this open position, the copper of the drawer connects with the two layers of copper which form the front of the chest of drawers. The material of this facade is meant to age and decay as a companion to the decay of my body. From the moment of its making, the self-portrait and I decay together. Only in the photograph are we recorded standing as a marker of time. It is through an awareness of the slow decay of the body in time produced by the rejoining of the halves of my face in the mirror that the joining of truth and illusion is developed.



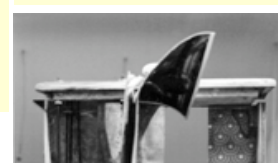
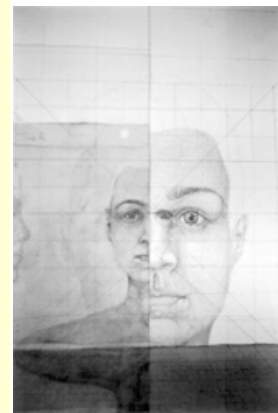
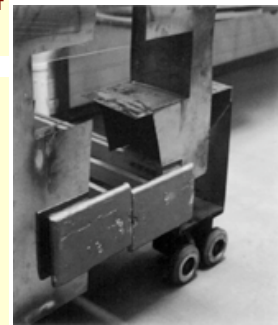


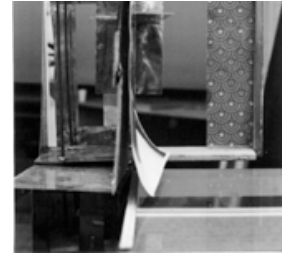
The skins of copper cover and support the front of the chest of drawers and house the middle drawer between the two layers of copper at navel level. The middle drawer locks the two halves of the skins together. Within the hinges of the middle drawer are four boxes of copper corresponding directly to four points of my body: my left breast, my navel, my womb, and my vagina. These boxes are the only parts which directly seek to represent pieces of the flesh of my body. When they are pulled out, the middle drawer is freed to drop along tracks until it is stopped by pieces of the bottom drawer. After it is tilted and removed from the chest of drawers, the skins can then be rolled apart on their wheels to open up the interior of the chest of drawers. Within, there is a desk on which to set the middle drawer to prepare the images for the instruction of *The Spiritual Exercises*.



The glowing reflection of light between the copper skins, the reflection of the person standing in front of the chest of drawers in the outer skin of copper, and the reflection in the mirror of the photographic mask and myself standing in front of the chest of drawers are three layers of reflection which change over time to connect the metaphors of aging and decay with the illusions of a frozen moment in time. It is the passage of time which completes the joining of truth and illusion. The present is reminded of its past and of the withering of the fleshy material of its body, and yet a thread of recognition of the former person in the present person remains.

The implications of this project for understanding the layers of historical artefacts buried in a site in Rome are connected to the issue of the joining of truth and illusion. Historical narratives develop over a span of time which is unfathomable to a bodily understanding. An understanding of time in fiction is the link to understanding time in history. Without being somehow joined to narrative time, an understanding of change in history is lost to an analysis of forms. As Paul Ricoeur stated, "*To put it another way, time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.*" (note 5)





Notes:

1. Andrea Pozzo, *Perspectiva pictorum et architectorum...* (London: J. Senex, R. Gosling, W. Innys, J. Osborn, and T. Longman 1707), found in the subtitle of Figura Trigesima. The text accompanying this figure presents a method of drawing the continuation of an Ionic cornice extending from a built structure into an illusion of depth painted on a flat surface. The discrepancy between the Latin text and the English translation occurs in other translations as well. It is in this gap between the meanings of words that the implications of Pozzo's method can be understood, as the joining of reality and fiction, as well as truth and falsehood.
2. Rodolfo Lanciani, *Forma Urbis Romae* (Roma: Edizioni Quasar di Severino Tognon 1990), plate XV.
3. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: St. Ignatius' Profound Precepts of Mystical Theology*, tr. Anthony Mottola, Ph.D. (New York: Image Books, Doubleday 1964).
4. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1966).
5. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1, tr. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1984), 52.