

**‘I don’t find it at all
violent myself’:
Bacon’s material practice
and the human body**

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Violence, horror, destruction, mutilation, brutality – these are only a few of the terms commonly used to address the work of Francis Bacon. From very early on commentators have been struck by Bacon's 'imagery of contemporary nightmare' and the 'violence of his content'.¹ His work has been interpreted as a manifestation of 'our fear of solitude, failure, humiliation, old age, death and of nameless threatened catastrophe'.² His paintings have been characterised as 'spectacles of physical humiliation, torture, and manslaughter'.³ The figures in Bacon's pictures have been labelled 'children of violence'.⁴ The representations of the human body have been read as an expression of the 'cold but paroxysmal violence of neurosis' and their pictorial deformations have been called the 'logical result of the violent process of perception'.⁵ The artist's way of painting has been referred to as a 'brutal gesture'.⁶ His 'struggle against figuration and his creative process' have been regarded as 'a record of wilful (auto)vandalism'.⁷ Moreover, affinities have been claimed between his 'practices of picture making and the technique of dissection, which turns [Bacon's] art into an exercise of brutality'.⁸ And even when it comes to Bacon's use of visual resources the artist's approach towards pictures is sometimes considered to be 'destructive handling', 'aggression against photography', or an attack in 'a pictorial battle'.⁹

In my opinion, readings of Bacon's art tend to overemphasise aspects of violence and destruction. I do not want to argue that issues such as injury, mutilation or brutality are absent from his work and that they are not worth discussing.¹⁰ I shall rather try to show that interpretations which are primarily led by these preconceptions are at risk of missing some very important facets of Bacon's work. The reiterated references to iconoclastic or aggressive tendencies within his art veil the remarkable sensibility which is discernible in Bacon's working practice; they distract our attention from the complex interrelation between pictures and the human body depicted. I shall, therefore, follow a different approach which aims at pointing out Bacon's acute appreciation of the pictures' as well as the bodies' corporeality. To this end, I shall initially discuss a passage from an interview with the artist and then examine a few items from his studio. The study of Bacon's visual archive will not only reveal the painter's productive receptiveness to material change. More importantly, I shall argue that it will also provide evidence that the working documents served as a kind of testing ground on which Bacon thought about the human body and how it is bound up in representation.

The inhibited painter, or: On models and photographs

At the end of his life, Bacon took an unequivocal stand on the issue of violence in his oeuvre. Asked by Michel Archimbaud if the violence felt by the viewers of his paintings might be a reflection of the brutality that characterised the 20th century, Bacon expressed a general discomfort with such interpretations: 'I'm always very surprised when people speak of violence in my work. I don't find it at all violent myself. ... I really cannot even begin to believe that my work is violent.'¹¹

The decisiveness with which Bacon rejects even the possibility of violent traits in his oeuvre is, of course, sustained by neither his own imagery nor his own statements. It is beyond question that he produced paintings which easily open up associations of brutalised bodies and that he occasionally conceived images which explicitly display violent subject matter. Moreover, in the interviews with David Sylvester, Bacon himself suggested that his work might have been affected by 'the violence which [he had] lived amongst.'¹² It is also undeniable that the term *violence* denominates a key concept in Bacon's own theory of pictorial representation. The artist commonly referred to it when he tried to explain how a successful painting should convey the full appearance and emanation of the object depicted. In his own words, the painting should 'bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently ...'¹³ Bacon's attitude towards these issues, thus, was fairly ambivalent – he welcomed *and* rejected notions of violence. Therefore, interpretations of his work should not rely on single statements, but should rather analyse in which way the artist made use of these terms in more complex contexts.

In my opinion, some of the most interesting utterances can be found in a passage from the second interview between Sylvester and Bacon which was recorded in May 1966. At one point, the artist refuses to accept that the deformations in his paintings could be understood as effects of violation. Pondering on the question why his sitters might be offended by the way they are portrayed, Bacon points out: 'Because people believe – simple people at least – that the distortions of them are an injury to them ...'¹⁴ In return, Sylvester attempts to convince the artist that his sitters might be right and that the deformations are, indeed, an expression of the painter's desire to inflict damage. Bacon's emphatic refusal, then, shifts the discussion from a psychological level to the issue of pictorial representation: 'Whether the

distortions which I think sometimes bring the image over more violently are damage is a very questionable idea. I don't think it is damage. You may say it's damaging if you take it on the level of illustration'.¹⁵

These statements, however, are embedded in a broader argument about Bacon's practice of painting and, in particular, about his being negatively affected by the physical presence of models such as his friends George Dyer, Isabel Rawsthorne or Henrietta Moraes. He describes his response as follows: 'They inhibit me. They inhibit me because ... I don't want to practise before them the injury that I do to them in my work'.¹⁶ Bacon rejects the identification of pictorial deformation with physical injury but, nevertheless, confesses that he feels constrained to exercise the distortions right in front of his sitters. In the same interview, though, the artist discloses the strategy by which he avoids the inhibition caused by a living model: the use of photographic images.

In fact, the entire excursus on the inhibiting effect of the physical presence of his models is a reply to Sylvester's question why Bacon prefers to work from photographs. Asked by Sylvester if photographs prove to be more suggestive, the artist makes a remarkable statement: 'Well, my photographs are very damaged by people walking over them and crumpling them and everything else, and this does add other implications to an image ...'.¹⁷ Bacon's reply occupies a central position in the interview for two reasons: firstly, it relates the suggestiveness of the photographic image not to the way it represents reality, but to its material changeability. Secondly, it marks the transition from a discussion about Bacon's use of photography towards considerations about the practice of pictorial representation and physical injury.

This passage from the 1966 interview brings together pivotal topics within Bacon's oeuvre: the role of photography in his working practice is highlighted and the artist's awareness about the materiality of his photographs is confirmed. Moreover, distortion is presented as a two-edged representational means. On the one hand, it seems to facilitate the kind of intensification of reality Bacon was looking for. On the other hand, it creates pictorial effects that might be interpreted as forms of corporeal damage. In addition, Bacon indicates that photographs not only served as surrogates for reality, i.e. the living sitter whom they replaced: rather, they are described as auxiliaries to circumventing an inhibition caused by the idea of violence and injury.

But, what does it mean that the photographs of Bacon's friends were used as devices to avoid the painter's inhibition about inflicting an alleged bodily harm? Does the fact that photographic prints substituted for the living models suggest that it was easier for Bacon to attack the physical integrity of the human body's appearance when it was already bound up in representation? Would it, then, be appropriate to characterise the artist's use of photographs in terms of violence or destruction? May it even be considered as a kind of displaced aggression that finally sustains those interpretations of Bacon's work that focus on iconoclastic tendencies? In the following, I shall argue that a study of Bacon's working documents, in contrast, suggests that we should think about the artist's approach towards both pictures and the body in rather different categories.

Photographs scattered about the floor, or: The corporeality of pictures and bodies

'You see here in my studio, there are these photographs scattered about on the floor, all damaged. I've used them to paint portraits of friends, and then kept them. It's easier for me to work from these records than from the people themselves; that way I can work alone and feel much freer. ... They were useful to me simply as a tool'.¹⁸ In this statement from the late 1980s Bacon summarises most of the issues already mentioned above. Yet, he also introduces the term 'tool' to specify the function of these photographic portraits. The artist, however, confines his definition of photographs as tools to their role as *aide-mémoire*, i.e. a visual means to recall certain features of his friends. My discussion of items from Bacon's studio, though, will demonstrate how these prints were actually turned into physical tools to explore how pictures and the bodies they depict are inextricably intertwined.

The first example is a tattered double exposure photograph which was taken by John Deakin in the mid-1960s. The picture shows Bacon's then lover, George Dyer, sitting on a chair in the artist's studio. What becomes evident at a first glance is the poor condition of the print: it is severely torn and folded, lacks several fragments and exhibits traces of usage such as accretions of paint or surface abrasion. From the point of preservation, the item resembles other working documents which emerged from Bacon's detritus.¹⁹ More important, however, is the fact that Bacon intervened into the representation of Dyer's body. With the help of only a few brush strokes the painter covered parts of

fig. 144



fig. 144 John Deakin, double exposure black and white photograph of George Dyer: a working document torn and overpainted by Francis Bacon, c. 1965, 30.1 × 21.0 cm (RM98F15:70A) (unfolded)

the image and, thereby, removed the leg on the left-hand side and a portion of the head. This pictorial manipulation which was exercised with an economical gesture, then, reshaped the outline of Dyer's body which had already been blurred by the double exposure. Thus, the anatomy of the sitter's face, for instance, was rearranged in order to contain features of both superimposed heads. The same pictorial traits recur in paintings such as *Portrait of George Dyer Talking*, 1966, and *Portrait of George Dyer Staring at Blind Cord*, 1966, where they are restaged as bodily deformations.

Another item gives an even clearer impression of how pictorial in(ter)vention and tactile usage were linked in Bacon's working practice. This photograph, also taken by Deakin, portrays Henrietta Moraes posing nude on a bed. Its condition, once again, is rather poor. Large fragments of the print are missing and the paper had been folded several times. Two features of this object are of particular interest: firstly, the wavelike curve above the chest which was painted

fig. 145



fig. 145 John Deakin, black and white photograph of Henrietta Moraes: torn and manipulated by Francis Bacon, c. 1963, 20.7 × 24.9 cm (RM98F17:124) (rotated to the left)

onto the image of Moraes' body to separate the head from the torso. Secondly, the triangular shape created by the overlapping parts in the lower section of the print which had been fixed by three paper clips. Due to the manipulation of the photo, Moraes' legs appear creased and truncated. A closer look reveals, however, that the folded paper forms a kind of handle to hold the object during the process of painting. This is confirmed by coloured fingerprints on top of the paper clips and other working documents from Bacon's Studio, such as the photograph of Isabel Rawsthorne, which features a similar structure. If the object is held like a hand mirror, Moraes' body is turned from an originally horizontal position into an upright posture. The image which results from both the physical modification of the print and its slight rotation can then be related to the centre panel of *Triptych*, 1970. In the painting the umbrella-like shape that forms the background for the figure seems to echo the irregular contour of the original working document. Moreover, the body is decapitated and the torso shows the same characteristic double arched outline above the chest as

fig. 146



fig. 146 John Deakin, black and white photograph of Isabel Rawsthorne: torn and manipulated by Francis Bacon, c. 1965, 27.3 × 14.7 cm (RM98F16:262)



fig. 147 John Deakin, black and white photograph of George Dyer: torn and manipulated by Francis Bacon and mounted on an envelope, c. 1965, 41.5 × 25.3 cm, (RM98F1:19) (reassembled)



indicated on the photograph. Furthermore, the folds which obfuscated the legs in the photograph reappear as pictorial elements that may also suggest a mutilated body.

fig. 147 Thus far, the items discussed above all exhibit signs of usage and pictorial revisions. Another photograph of George Dyer, however, provides further evidence for the artist's acute awareness of the materiality of his working documents. In this case Bacon pasted a dramatically torn print onto a large brown envelope. What is worth emphasising here is that he evidently did not discard the seriously damaged photograph but decided to reuse it and to investigate its physical condition. Moreover, he not only acknowledged the decline of the print, but intensified its impaired state by further crushing and folding the paper. With the help of a safety pin and a lot of adhesive tape Bacon forced the fragile photograph into a relief that bulges away from the surface of the support. Thus, the image of George Dyer which is literally torn apart and decomposed by the gaps in the paper turned into an almost three-dimensional structure. Depending on the vantage point, this object, then, provided Bacon with various contortions of Dyer's upper body and face. In working documents like this the artist rehearsed the distortions which he later transposed into paintings of the human figure. This assumption is sustained by works such as *Three Studies for Portraits Including Self-Portrait*, 1969. Both the left and centre panel represent Dyer's head from slightly different angles with many of the features already existent in the manipulated photograph; the most obvious citation is the amorphous form which emanates from the face. It refers to the enormous gap that splits the photographic print apart and exposes its support. In the corresponding areas of the paintings Bacon left the canvas almost blank and, thereby, suggested a rupture in the surface of the image. Furthermore, the distorted traits of the painted faces as, for instance, the displaced noses, the compressed chins, or the recesses through which the background seems to invade the head resemble the distortions exhibited in the damaged photograph. The disfiguration of the painted heads thus originated from Bacon's creative exploitation of the material changeability of his working document. Therefore, the latter served as a physical tool to explore the body's entanglement with the medium in which it is represented. Bacon realised that material alterations of the picture inevitably result in changes of the depicted body's appearance. The artist's appreciation of this medial imperative opened up a fertile potential that is not sufficiently apprehended in terms of violence or injury.

fig. 148

fig. 148 Detail of fig. 147 showing Dyer's torn face fixed to the envelope by means of adhesive tape and a safety pin (RM98F1:19) (reassembled)

Reconsidering the debris, or: The human body and painting as material practice

Each of the items that I have discussed was produced in the second half of the 1960s. Although Bacon certainly refined his tactile artistic strategies in this decade, there is enough evidence to assume that he acknowledged the physical aspects of his working documents as early as in the 1950s.²⁰ What becomes clear from a study of the objects that emerged from the debris of his Studio is that he recognised the productivity of material change and, even more important, knew to exploit it.

fig.149

That issue, however, is rarely touched in Bacon's interviews. Therefore, it must be deduced from the way the artist employed and manipulated his working documents. Although the source material is usually very damaged, creased, and



fig.149 John Deakin, black and white photograph of George Dyer: torn and manipulated by Francis Bacon, c. 1965, 23 × 15.2 cm (RM98F15:70B) (unfolded)

smudged, Bacon's approach towards it should not be mistaken as aggressive or destructive. The artist's elaborate treatment of photographs rather questions interpretations that consider the pictorial distortions in his paintings as expressions of violence.

The *material turn* in Bacon studies, in consequence, does not diminish the undoubted quality of Bacon's work – and it is not meant as a profanation. It will rather deepen our understanding of the complexity of his art. A reconstruction of Bacon's artistic strategies may provide insights into his general attitude towards pictorial representation. It will demonstrate that Bacon's reflection about the human figure was deeply grounded in a practice of painting that thoroughly investigated the corporeality of both pictures and bodies. In fact, the interdependencies between the physical picture and the pictured body appear to have been a major stimulus in Bacon's material practice.

NOTES

- 1 Sam Hunter, 'Francis Bacon: The Anatomy of Horror', *Magazine of Art*, vol. 45, no. 1, Jan. 1952, pp. 11–15; 11.
- 2 John Rothenstein, 'Introduction' in Ronald Alley (ed.), *Francis Bacon. Catalogue raisonné and documentation*, London 1964, pp. 7–21; 15.
- 3 Otto K. Werckmeister, 'Stirling, Bacon' in Otto K. Werckmeister: *Zitadellenkultur. Die schöne Kunst des Untergangs in der Kultur der achtziger Jahre*, Munich 1989, pp. 63–81; 72. Author's translation.
- 4 Wieland Schmied, *Francis Bacon: Commitment and Conflict*, Munich 2006, p. 12.
- 5 Lorenza Trucchi, *Francis Bacon*, London 1976, p. 11. Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, London 1992, p. 81.
- 6 Milan Kundera, 'The painter's brutal gesture' in France Borel (ed.), *Bacon: Portraits and Self portraits*, London 1996, pp. 8–18.
- 7 Peter Jones, 'Bacon and Bataille', *Art Criticism* vol. 11, no. 1, 1996, pp. 27–54; 37.
- 8 Carolin Meister, 'Athletik der Entstellung. Zum symptomalen Realismus bei Francis Bacon und George Bataille' in Erika Fischer-Lichte and Nicola Suthor (eds.), *Verklärte Körper. Ästhetiken der Transfiguration*, Munich 2006, pp. 249–64; 257f. Author's translation.
- 9 Rachel Tant, 'Archive' in Matthew Gale and Chris Stephens (eds.), *Francis Bacon*, exh. cat. Tate Gallery, London 2008, pp. 165–68; 166. Margarita Cappock, *Francis Bacon's Studio*, London 2005, p. 29. Dawn Ades, 'Web of images' in Dawn Ades and Andrew Forge (eds.), *Francis Bacon*, exh. cat. Tate Gallery, London 1985, pp. 8–23; 10.
- 10 For a successful approach to the subject of violence and the practice of painting see, for instance, Armin Zweite, (ed.) *Francis Bacon: The Violence of the Real*, exh. cat. K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, London 2006.
- 11 Michel Archimbaud (ed.), *Francis Bacon: In Conversation with Michel Archimbaud*, London 2004, p. 151.
- 12 David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*, London 2002, p. 81.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 14 *ibid.*, p. 41.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 43. Considering the fact that Bacon commonly used the term *illustration* to denominate the diametric opposite of his own artistic efforts, the rejection of Sylvester's suggestion could not be more poignant.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 41.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 38.
- 18 Archimbaud, *Francis Bacon*, p. 15.
- 19 For valuable insights into Bacon's visual archive and methodology see, for instance, Cappock, *Francis Bacon's Studio* and Martin Harrison, *In Camera: Francis Bacon, photography, film, and the practice of painting*, London 2005.
- 20 For a discussion of earlier examples see, for instance, Marcel Finke, 'Francis Bacon's alter ego? Critical remarks on the Barry Joule collection', in Martin Harrison (ed.), *Francis Bacon – New Studies*, forthcoming.