

Orthotic Roses

by Judith Leemann

... a turning to the thing in hand
according to its nature,
thus letting that nature become
manifest by the handling.¹

JUDITH It was an odd set of circumstances that led me to spend the last weeks of September 2004 in that alley stretched between our two houses. I loved best the dark nights when I could stand outside unobserved, my face pressed to the windows for hours on end. What dreams I had when finally I slept.

LEFT Orthotic roses trained to arbor.

RIGHT The training of plants and people.

SIMONE WEIL Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns.²

MARK Look. See that? This one does the same.

SIMONE WEIL If my eyes are blindfolded and if my hands are chained to a stick, this stick separates me from things, but I can explore them by means of it.³

LEFT The wind picks a lock, the wall a shadow.

SIMONE WEIL It is only the stick which I feel, it is only the wall which I perceive.⁴

JUDITH A boy with glasses is always a dog.

RIGHT Muybridge?

JUDITH Yes.

LEFT A boy with glasses is a dog, lame on one side thus the circle.

BATESON A stem is that which bears leaves. A leaf is that which has a bud in its angle. A stem is what was once a bud in that position.⁵

JUDITH Wind rushes through a canyon of buildings - everything oriented to let this terrible wind pass.

LEFT Peripheral, as all haunting must be.

BATESON In the world of ideas, it takes a *relationship*, either between two parts or between a part at a time 1 and the same part at time 2, to activate some third component—

JUDITH Direct me.

BATESON It takes at least two somethings to create a difference. To produce news of a difference, i.e., information, there must be two entities (real or imagined) such that the difference between them can be immanent in their mutual relationship.⁶

JUDITH I can't find the article about the twins.

MARK And there are still songs to be sung.

SCIENTIST Let's get started. After I read you the following joke, please look at the options, choose the appropriate punch line, and read it aloud.

PATIENTS Okay.

SCIENTIST A new housekeeper was accused of helping herself to her master's liquor. She told him, "I'll have you know, sir, I come from honest English parents."

PATIENT WITH RIGHT-HEMISPHERE DAMAGE AND A FUNCTIONING LEFT HEMISPHERE The master said, "All the same, the next time the liquor disappears you're fired."

PATIENT WITH LEFT-HEMISPHERE DAMAGE AND A FUNCTIONING RIGHT HEMISPHERE Then the housekeeper saw a mouse and jumped into her master's lap.

PATIENT WITH NO BRAIN DAMAGE AND TWO FUNCTIONING HEMISPHERES The master said, "I'm not concerned with your English parents. What's worrying me is your Scotch extraction."⁷

JUDITH Exactly my situation. My first words were in German. At the age of three I began learning English, and from then on it was my primary language. Immediate family in the U.S., extended family in Germany. To this extended family I appear fluent in German, but I know this fluent German self to be a diminished version of the English self. It has such trouble with humor, with subtlety, with anything calling for gravity or grace.

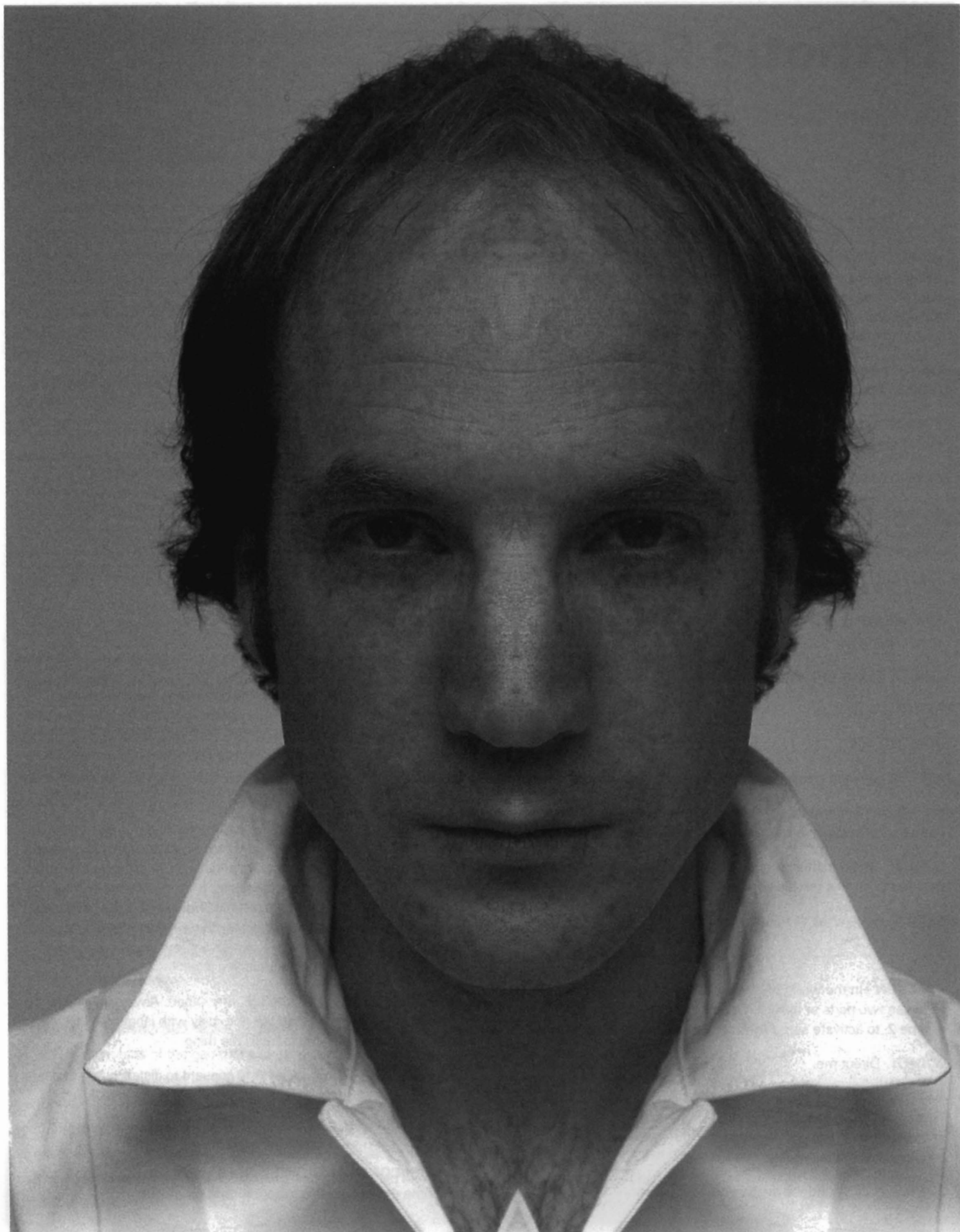
FIRST SECOND LANGUAGE A voice, almost unconscious, keeps performing an inaudible, perpetual triangulation - that process by which the ancient Greeks tried to extrapolate, from two points of a triangle drawn in the sand, the moon's distance from the earth - I could be having entirely different conversations - there is another place - another point at the base of the triangle, which renders this place relative, which locates me within that relativity itself.⁸

JUDITH My whole family in Germany - apart. Always this distance of language. This diminished ability to play with language. I must appear to them a dull and factual little thing.

SIMONE WEIL To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love.⁹

JUDITH There's no subtlety once I cross this border. No way for me to protect myself from appearing stupid.

FIRST SECOND LANGUAGE Speak through it. Some good may yet come of allowing this misapprehension of self.



SIMONE WEIL The simultaneous existence of opposite virtues in the soul-like pincers to catch hold of God.¹⁰

FIRST SECOND LANGUAGE She holds conversations in which she uses words not knowing whether they are at all the words she means.

SIMONE WEIL But what potential in this disabled first second self!

LEFT An asking after the self.

RIGHT An effort.

LEFT Stiffness.

RIGHT Stuttering.

LEFT Deliberate use of wrong words.

RIGHT Deliberate shrinking of surface area.

LEFT Language deficiencies come to the fore.

RIGHT Play is retarded.

LEFT Play is disabled.

JUDITH We are asked to cover one eye - to give up for a moment the capacity to compare. Then a time of uncertainty - we're left in the lurch. Do I take my hand down or keep it up? Are we still playing?

MARTIN The hand's gestures run everywhere through language, in their most perfect purity precisely when man speaks by being silent. Every motion of the hand in every one of its works carries itself through the element of thinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element. All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking.¹¹

SCIENTIST (1928) Show me your right hand. Your left. Show me your right leg. Now your left.

By age six, Judith can respond correctly.

SCIENTIST (*raising the bar*) Now show me my right hand. Now my left. Show me my right leg. Now my left.

By age seven, Judith can respond correctly to this.

SCIENTIST (*sitting opposite Judith, across a table on which are a pencil and a coin; the coin to Judith's left and the pencil to her right*) Is the pencil to the right or left of the penny? And is the penny to the right or left of the pencil?

By age seven and a half, Judith can answer this correctly.

SCIENTIST (*asking Judith to go to the opposite side of the table after she has said that the coin was to the left of the pencil*) Now is the penny to the right or to the left of the pencil?

JUDITH The left.

SCIENTIST Really?

JUDITH Yes.

SCIENTIST And the pencil?

JUDITH The right.

SCIENTIST How did you do it?

JUDITH Easy, I remembered how they were before.¹²

It takes Judith until the age of nine to consistently answer this correctly.

SCIENTIST When asked if an object is "to the left" she often replies that it is "on the left"; replacing the vocabulary of relative position with that of absolute position.¹³

BATESON Your right hand is an asymmetrical, three-dimensional object; and to define it, you require information that will link at least three polarities. To make it different from a left hand, three binary descriptive clauses must be fixed. Direction toward the palm must be

distinguished from direction toward the back of the hand; direction toward the elbow must be distinguished from direction toward the fingertips; direction toward the thumb must be distinguished from direction toward the fifth finger. Now build the tautology to assert that a reversal of any one of these three binary descriptive propositions will create the mirror image (the stereo-opposite) of the hand from which we started.¹⁴

DOCTOR AS LITÓ Three axes. Get the diagnosis. Hurry! I mean, do not panic.

DOCTOR AS HIMSELF Patient presents with three to four days of vertigo. Examination shows spontaneous nystagmus toward the right. Acute loss of peripheral-vestibular function on the left.

JUDITH The hole not to fall into.

BATESON The letter that you do not write, the apology you do not offer, the food that you do not put out for the dog—all these can be sufficient and effective messages because zero, *in context*, can be meaningful; and it is the recipient of the message who creates the context. The power to create *context* is the recipient's skill. He or she must acquire that skill by learning or by lucky mutation, that is, by a successful raid on the random. The recipient must be, in some sense, ready for the appropriate discovery when it comes.¹⁵

LEFT HEMISPHERE The Victorians invented a vicious leather device with a belt and buckles for strapping the left hand firmly behind the back.¹⁶

RIGHT HEMISPHERE Old ladies, twin sisters. Just one pair of dentures between the two of them. One comes home from a party and passes the dentures off to her sister. Mmm, says the sister, plum torte.

JUDITH To watch one night of the show is to watch it with one eye covered.

BATESON To watch two nights of the show is to have the possibility of perceiving depth. Though one eye is less strong than the other. Partial occlusion.

JUDITH One side of the brain more practiced than the other.

BATESON One half of our ability dark, in a cloud. Do not step here. Step here. Does this one do the same? Yes and no.

JUDITH Made of the same parts, but those parts arranged and used differently - they aren't the same. A right hand is not a left hand.

BATESON We use our right hands more. Asymmetrical by habit and by use. And the whole consists of this - the better and the worse hand. The whole hand.

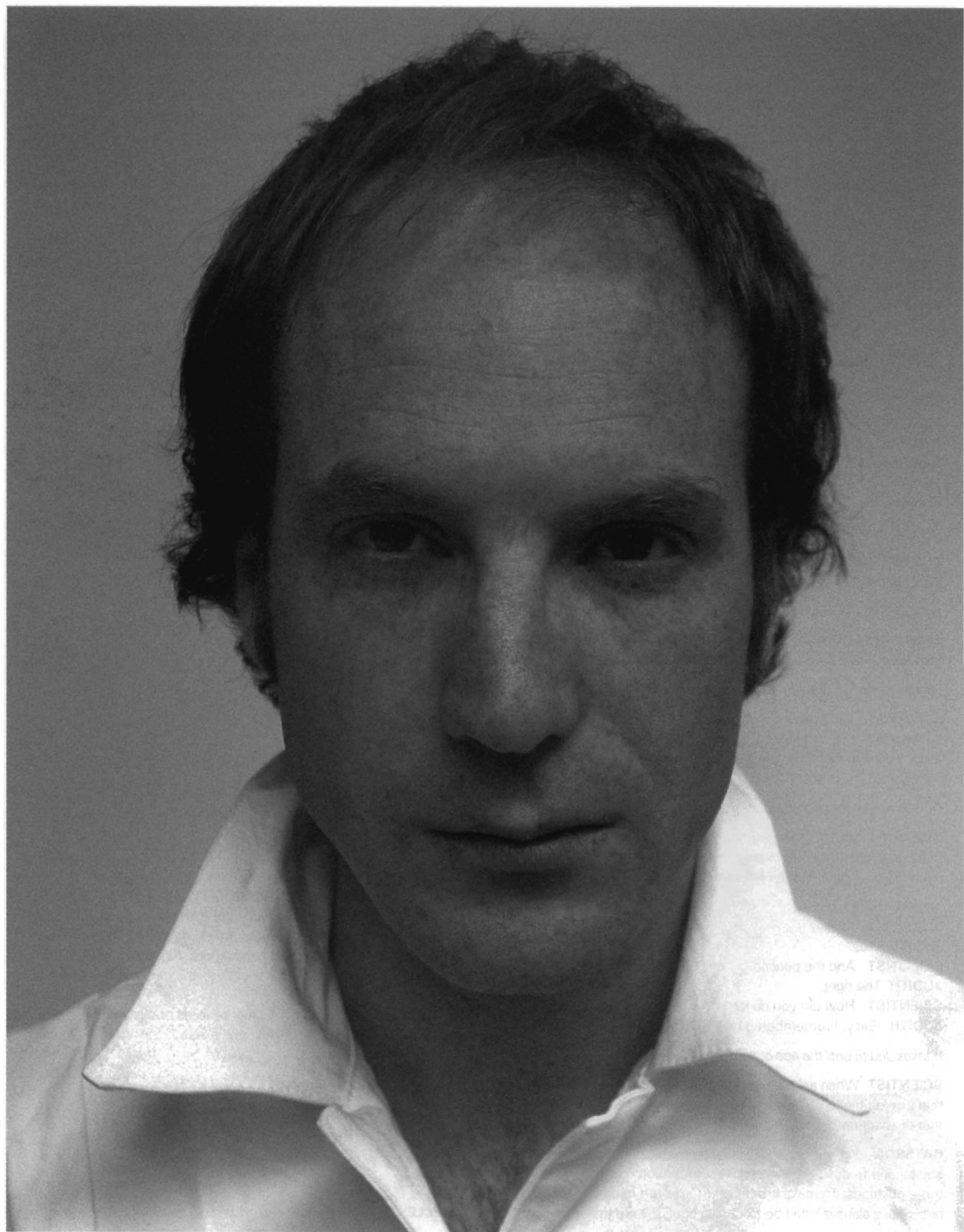
JUDITH A person who is bilingual consists of this - a more practiced half and a less. A more fluid half and a less.

BATESON You mean fluent.

SIMONE WEIL (*offstage*) The soul-like pincers.

Judith and her uncle walk along the Alster towards the center of Hamburg.

UNCLE I may occasionally lean into you. I haven't got my balance yet.



DOCTOR Ten days ago he lost one inner ear. Left him in the middle of the night, producing a void where previously his brain had received up and down, front and back, left and right. His brain shuddered and shook, grasped, slipped and caught. His eyes, under direction of such a brain, darted independently of one another, no longer kept parallel.

UNCLE Like this: when you move your head, you experience *it* as moving and the world as still. For me that ceased to be the case. The world did not hold still. When I moved my head the world rushed around me.

JUDITH How much of the world? Just the room, or the trees and sky outside the room as well?

UNCLE The trees and sky as well.

JUDITH The neighborhood?

UNCLE Yes, that too.

JUDITH And the *Nahbereich*?

UNCLE And more.

JUDITH As far as the grandparents?

UNCLE That I can't say. But the old inner city, the newer part of the city and the far shore of the Elbe - that whole span of container ports and docks - all spun.

DOCTOR The brain gave itself over to cleaning out his body. Still now, he walks at an angle to intent.

On the path along the Alster, a policeman has just put a red triangular warning sign over an uncovered square manhole in the path. It announces itself:

HOLE NOT TO FALL INTO I am the hole not to fall into.

UNCLE At first, I had to pick out a point on the horizon and keep my eye fixed on that, otherwise I couldn't walk.

HOLE NOT TO FALL INTO Think of a story as a little knot or complex of that species of connectedness which we call *relevance*.¹⁷

UNCLE (*many months later*) It's much better now. Every once in a while, though, the inner ear gives out briefly. I lurch to the side as if I'd just put my foot in a hole.

LEFT What disables transitional space?

RIGHT A retarded monkey.

LEFT A disabled monkey.

RIGHT Ein behinderter Affe.

LEFT Eine kranke Schwester.

FIRST SECOND LANGUAGE I can't understand their jokes at all.

SCIENTIST There must always be two beginnings to any explanation, observation and fundamental principles. The two are non-substitutable; each is authoritative in its own right. Each requires its own description, and we must proceed by developing a double description which includes both.¹⁸

LEFT Fearbone

RIGHT Frightface

LEFT Scarepee

RIGHT Scarebeat

LEFT Drumbeat

RIGHT Brumbone

LEFT Drumbone

RIGHT Dogfact

LEFT Dogfac

RIGHT Facklefahne

LEFT Faggotsticks

SCIENTIST A problem that develops with syllabic scripts, and even more so with alphabetic scripts, is that they have to be written in a clear order. The difference between "DOG" and "GOD" in an alphabetic text depends crucially on whether the letters are read from right to left or left to right.¹⁹

JUDITH Cover one eye. Give up for a moment the capacity to compare.

BATESON Functional connectedness in recursive order is not marked by seamless patterns of interconnectedness. The presence of gaps in recursive looping in ecological systems permits the necessary marking of distinctions and differences.²⁰

JUDITH The holes not to fall into.

BATESON Proceed with the search for other cases under this general rubric.

JUDITH How's this? Sunday's newspaper, science section. On the front of one page a story of balance and vertigo, of loss of inner ear function, of osteoliths, and the three axial canals. On the back of the same page a story of roots and trees, of how a tree knows up from down, relying on small stones within cells.

RIGHT Things cluster at and around particular times.

UNCLE A mirroring effect I am familiar with from my dreams, in which everything is forever splitting and multiplying, over and again, in the most terrifying manner.²¹

JUDITH I also found this one. Several days ago two infants - twin boys - were killed by a neighbor who couldn't stand their crying anymore.

BATESON Yes. We can't stand their crying anymore.

FIRSTBORN TWIN Every time the bluebird sings, my heart takes wings to the sky.

SECONDBORN TWIN With bluebird grace I fly to my place in your eyes.

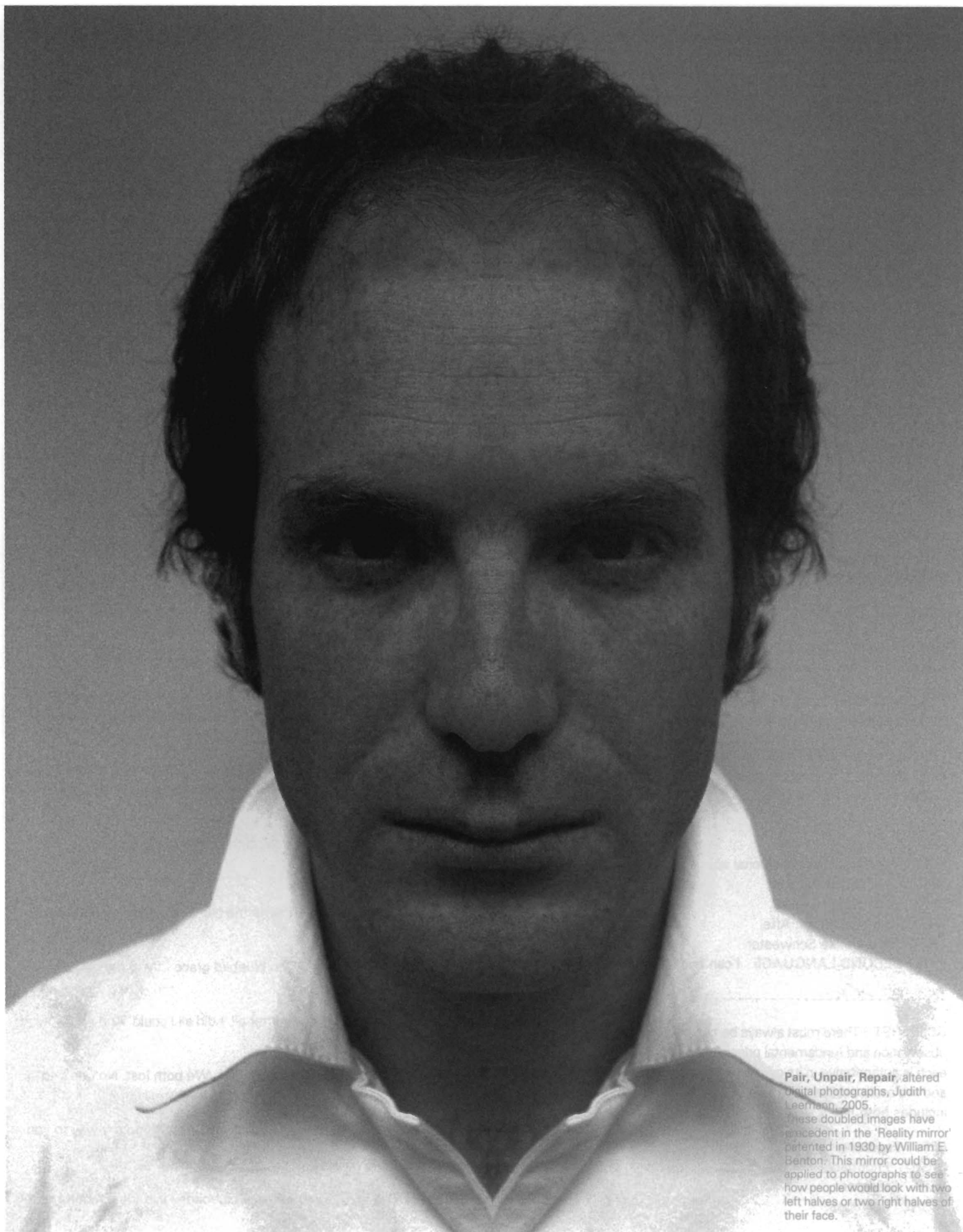
FIRSTBORN TWIN Cause after all, I did all I could. And you did your best. Just the same—

SECONDBORN TWIN Nobody won. We both lost. No one's to blame.

FIRSTBORN TWIN But I'll fly away to you. I'll find my way to you.

SECONDBORN TWIN If I'm only pretending—

FIRSTBORN TWIN We'll be like bluebirds - live the beautiful lie. ²²



Pair, Unpair, Repair, altered digital photographs, Judith Leermann, 2005. These doubled images have precedent in the 'Reality mirror' patented in 1930 by William E. Benton. This mirror could be applied to photographs to see how people would look with two left halves or two right halves of their face.

The structure of this text owes a three-fold debt: to Wilfred Bion's book *The Dream* (1977), to Gregory Bateson's 'metalogues,' and to the practice of creative response as modeled by Goat Island in their teaching. Almost all of the cited texts have been rudely distorted from the original, though sources have been diligently noted.

- 1_Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1968), 196.
- 2_Simone Weill, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Octagon Books, 1983), 174.
- 3_Ibid., 111.
- 4_Ibid.
- 5_Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 17.
- 6_Ibid., 76.
- 7_Chris McManus, *Right Hand, Left Hand: The Origins of Asymmetry in Brains, Bodies, Atoms and Cultures* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 184.
- 8_Eva Hoffmann, *Lost In Translation* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 170.
- 9_Weill, *Gravity and Grace*, 115.
- 10_Ibid., 155.
- 11_Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 16.
- 12_McManus *Right Hand, Left Hand*, 67-68.
- 13_Ibid., 69.
- 14_Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, 93-94.
- 15_Ibid., 51.
- 16_McManus, *Right Hand, Left Hand*, 268.
- 17_Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, 14.
- 18_Peter Harries-Jones, *A Recursive Vision: Ecological Understanding and Gregory Bateson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 47.
- 19_McManus *Right Hand, Left Hand*, 237.
- 20_Harries-Jones, *A Recursive Vision*, 14.
- 21_W.G. Sebald *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: James Laughlin / New Directions, 2000), 149.
- 22_Dolly Parton *Little Sparrow*, compact disc, Sugarhill #3927, 2001.