

Makhzin- Interview May 2016
On Using “I” and First-person Narration
Moyra Davey with Iman Issa



Moyra Davey, Still from Les Goddesses, 2011

*For several years now I've been engaged in an itinerant conversation with Moyra Davey. It began when I wrote a short paragraph on her film *Les Goddesses* for Artforum concerning her use of first person narration. At the time, I was thinking a great deal about what it means to use oneself as the source of one's work—trying to make sense of the “I” through which we choose to speak and articulate positions, sentiments, and facts. Moyra's film appeared to pierce through these issues head on and became a new lens through which to view the rest of her work. Her photographs, videos, and writings completed over three decades started to form a coherent whole in my mind, and I was eager to revisit her work from my newly found angle. Until now, I'd never had the chance to properly unpack these ideas. This conversation is an attempt at doing that.*

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Iman Issa: One of the key moments that brought me further into your work was seeing *Les Goddesses* in 2011, both at the Whitney Biennial and during your solo exhibition at Murray Guy. At that time, I was struggling with the use of what one might describe as the “personal voice”. I felt uncomfortable with the enormous leeway an artist can have when using such a voice. As if it gave one license to draw connections between different elements and narratives with no justification beyond the incontestable claim of subjective inclinations. At that same time, I was convinced that certain elements and topics could only be accessed with it. Seeing your work was revelatory; I felt it was using the personal voice differently. How would you describe your relationship to that voice?

Moyra Davey: Fundamentally I'm interested in storytelling, although I don't often put it like that. Some background on *Les Goddesses*: I had just moved to Paris for ten months and was flooded with memories of

when I lived there at the age of eighteen, and had hugely struggled with the city and the people I knew at the time. I wanted to write about what I considered “unspeakable” memories. That was the idea, the “agenda”, even though a big part of me thought it was impossible. A well-known writer, whose name escapes me, counseled that I should write from a place of the greatest discomfort. Knausgaard is able to do it via auto-fiction.

For myself, I can only imagine that via fiction—a novel, a story—genres I have never tried. *Les Goddesses* was an attempt to get close to painful material, and I came up with this device of linking my story to these historical, literary women: Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley. This was something of an enabler; a way to create parallelism and give the ‘muck’ a foil.

But Borges points out that people “long for confessions”, and viewers have told me the same, that they prefer the grittier, autobiographical material in my narratives. *Les Goddesses* became somewhat of an idealized portrait of my family. And so in this new video that I’ve just begun to edit, tentatively titled *Hemlock Forest*, I’m asking what it would mean to revisit *Les Goddesses*, but to show us (my sisters and myself) as we are now, not via photos taken thirty-five years ago when we were in our heyday. I cite what you wrote in Artforum, about *Les Goddesses* having a “desperate” quality. I thought you hit the nail on the head.

II: The idea of an “agenda” is interesting in relationship to your work. It makes me think of the autobiography of Inji Aflatoun, an artist who, in the 1960s, was accused of being a communist and put in prison for several years. The last lines in the book read something to the effect of, “Now that I’m leaving prison, it is time to end these pages. What is coming is not for public ears. It is private...” Comparing this to *Les Goddesses*, I would say that your agenda comes across more as a search. That is what I meant by the word “desperate”; someone trying to find something without clearly stating what it is, or knowing how to search for it.

MD: I interpreted your use of the word desperate to denote a space of risk. And there is risk-taking in *Les Goddesses*. I left stuff in there that to this day still makes me cringe. One of the themes I’m working on with in *Hemlock Forest* is the idea that some shots are “low hanging fruit”; they’re easy. There’s little risk. I can’t let go of the idea that accident and risk are vital elements in any work.

II: This makes me think of a [Rainer Werner] Fassbinder quote you often cite, “The more honestly you put yourself into the story the more the story will concern others as well.” I am not sure I relate to or understand this quote, but I’m interested in the use of the word honestly. What does it mean to put oneself honestly in a story?

MD: The quote is from a filmed interview and he briefly qualifies the word honestly, but I don’t include that comment in my citation. He might put it in air quotes, but then he decides he is not going to go there. He’s just going to go with his idea, even if part of it is problematic to him. I’ve actually collected four such quotes. I have one by PJ Harvey who says almost the same thing, another one by Chantal Ackerman and one by Laverne Cox. I think it all kind of comes back to the idea that you start with the particular and this enables you to speak about larger things.

II: With many of your works, I get the feeling, as a viewer, that I’m supposed to work with you to try and unravel something. Even in the videos in which you are a main subject, you are never central. You walk in and out of the frame; sometimes parts of you are cut off. You point us to things you are using or inspecting, but also just film your surroundings and yourself moving, looking, and thinking. You speak a scripted text, yet your delivery is far from smooth. If you could expand a little more on what it means for you to put yourself “honestly” in the work? How would you say your own intentions enter the work?

MD: That question, regarding how honestly do I do it, is still a huge question and I’ll come back to it, but let me say something about intention. Whenever I start a new video project, I always show it to my partner and he looks at me and says, “What is this about?” And I can almost never say. And to be frank, even after

it's done, I have a hard time summing up and saying it's about this and this and this. I don't know if it's laziness or stubbornness, but I have a resistance to doing that.

I am really fascinated by Fassbinder's idea and the other iterations I mentioned because, in a way, it's a very old-fashioned idea about writing: "In the particular is contained the universal." In the case of Fassbinder, it was unusual. It was not the way he usually spoke, and I think that's why it struck me. It's a paradoxical idea: you take material from yourself that's highly personal, idiosyncratic and strange, even to yourself, you make your work from that, and somehow that is supposed to address more people than if you started with an abstraction. I mentioned Borges and his idea that people are drawn to the confessional. Viewers or readers feel they can trust you if there is an element of confession. But, do I feel like I'm being honest in my work? Sometimes. When you're constructing these narratives and stories, you are always "shaping" the material even if everything you are saying is true. Everything you omit is probably just as relevant, but you cut it to direct the narrative in a certain way. Regarding intentionality, I'm not an activist, nor do I have an overtly political message. There are obviously many things I care about and I take positions, but I come at them sideways and let them surreptitiously slip into the work.

II: This makes me think of your essay *Notes on Photography and Accident*, and the part where you speak about Martha Rosler's critique of the documentary. You seemed to think there was something reductive about the way her critique was generally received...

MD: Was it about the contradiction of taking a critical stance on a milieu in which you yourself are implicated?

II: It is related to it. I think you were speaking about how Rosler's essay was propagating the idea of inserting oneself in the work. You mention that this was commonly understood as a need for making visible the subjective point of view of the maker. You say that one of the possible responses to Rosler's argument would have been to create a world of one's own instead. I don't know if I understood you correctly, but for you, there seemed to be a difference between assuming a subjective point of view and creating a world of one's own?

MD: I was critiquing a genre of photography in which the artist stages everything. A practice I thought might have developed as a solution to Rosler's critique of documentary—the idea of abandoning any attempt at working with the world (too risky, too taboo) and just creating your own studio-world. I was speculating that this is why there was this turn towards a directorial mode or staged photography, genres I often find difficult to engage.

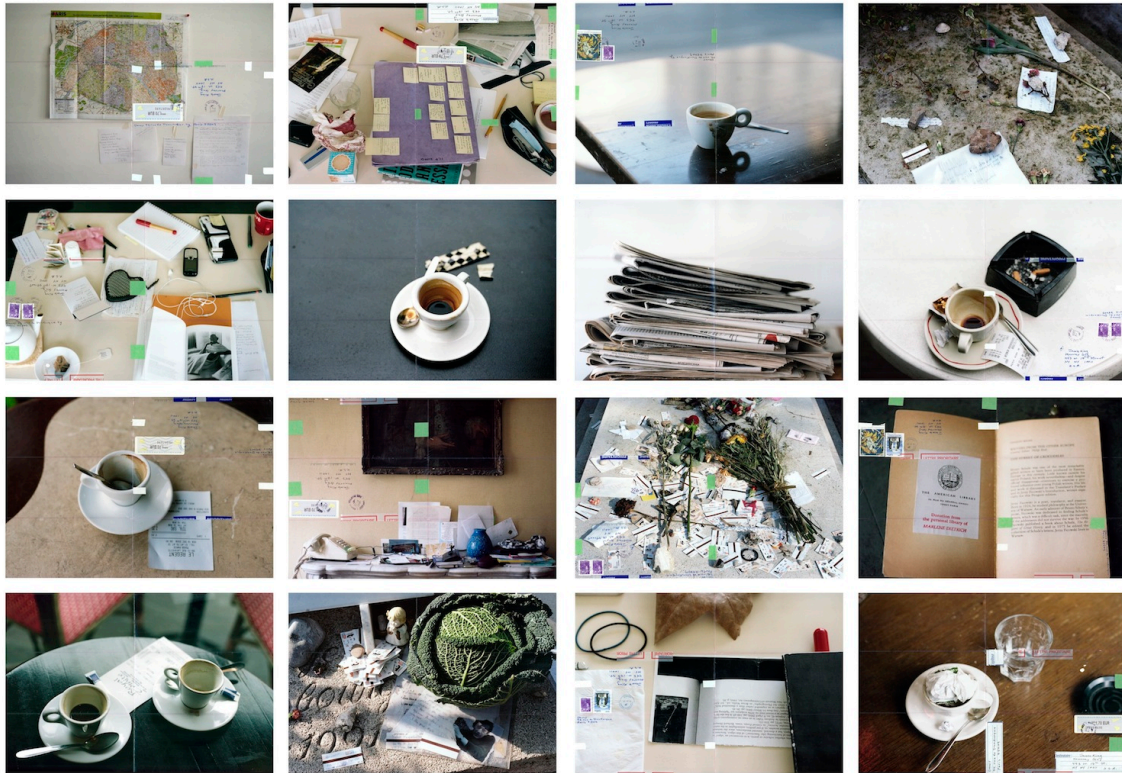
II: It seems to me that in your own work, it would be difficult to clearly demarcate what is staged and not staged?

MD: It is staged, but I leave room for accidents and surprises in the staging. I use myself, and I'm pretty unreliable as an actor. That fact means that there are going to be a lot of slip-ups and those can be interesting because that's where you see the spontaneity in the delivery, and maybe that's where something "real" happens. Things are definitely staged: I'm not in the street. I'm in my apartment and the camera is on a tripod. But when I go through the takes, I always look for the ones where there is something weird, something out of place, an unconscious slip. That's how I create this space that's both staged, but also not completely within my control.

II: Something else that comes up a lot in your writing is the idea of the subject matter choosing you. "The image makes the photograph, not the photographer." I'm thinking of this in relationship to your interest in accident when it comes to photography, or images in general.

MD: When I wrote *Les Goddesses*, I wasn't thinking of using the black and white photographs of my sisters from the early eighties. I remembered one photograph in particular, a tightly cropped image where my sisters look like "caryatids" holding up the frame line. I connected this to the epithet *Les Goddesses*,

which had been conferred on Mary Shelley and her sisters. As the video progressed, an arc developed: the presence and meaning of photography in my life from child to student to the present moment, and especially all the ideological arguments that came and went in the eighties and nineties, the things you were allowed to do, the things that were “forbidden”. I guess it makes sense that the photographic dimension would appear later. You start with a text, but once you begin to translate to video, that’s when you’re going to get ideas that are more purely visual.



Moyra Davey, Sixteen Photographs From Paris, 2009

II: This brings me to your mailers. I’ve always wondered about your decisions of where to make the folds and place the tape?

MD: The tape and folds are utilitarian. I discovered that by accident, because the first time I mailed folded photographs I just taped them up in a lot of different ways. I sent about fifteen pictures to my friend John Goodwin in Toronto, who wanted to make a small poster/flyer. I had no idea that the colored tape would create this abstract, geometric pattern on the surface of the image. I liked the effect and kept working with it. Sometimes I cut them open to check, but usually I don’t see the final piece until it arrives and has been opened by the recipient. It’s still a work in progress. At the same time, I don’t want it to become a signature. I’ve started making more traditional, framed photographs again, and have been showing these alongside the folded photographs.

II: Would you say that you have rules when you are filming or taking photographs? Are there forms of intervention in the material that are off limits?

MD: I do have rules. I was in India recently, and all my old prohibitions came back, as well as the question: why should I take more pictures? In Kolkata, I saw Raghurir Singh circa 1970 everywhere I looked. In Varanasi, I witnessed scenes straight out of Louis Malle’s *Phantom India* from 1968. I wish I were the type of artist who could go to a place and already have an idea of something that I wanted to focus on. I’m much more of a retroactive artist. I’ll go somewhere, take some pictures, then I’ll come back and write about the

experience and something will get generated from that. Photography on its own is tricky for me, and I know it was my hang-up around taking pictures that led me to triangulate photography with writing, and video. Working this way, with the three mediums, makes possible things that would otherwise not be possible for me.

II: This, in my mind, relates to the idea of things falling into your lap; that if you are able to have the right prompts or run across things in the right manner, things will come to you.

MD: I believe that. I'm a compulsive reader. I waste so much time on the newspaper. Yet, I'm always trying to read in a way that is purposeful, or paradoxically, magical: looking for the key that will unlock something in my brain. Looking to be interpolated. A lot of things come to me via reading, a lot of unexpected enablers. How far will I leave it open to accident, and how far will I direct things? I've learned that I have to be open, receptive and patient, even though I might often feel like I'm struggling and frustrated. In Kolkata, I was taken to the colonial cemetery where all the British are entombed in massive, neo-classical monuments. It's a pretty spectacular place. Afterwards, I read in the booklet that a man named Thomas Prinsep was buried there. And I remembered that Julia Margaret Cameron had photographed Prinsep's, her niece, May, and her brother-in-law, Thoby Prinsep. And I remembered that Virginia Woolf's mother was Julia Prinsep Jackson, also a favorite model of Cameron's. And then I discovered or re-remembered that Cameron was born in Calcutta/Kolkata, and the story of her boarding a ship to Ceylon with her husband and their coffins when they were in their twilight years. I got home and started re-looking at Cameron's photographs, and reading about her. She had a really intense colonialist history going back several generations in her family. This is where I am now. Alternately, I could end up somewhere completely unexpected and away from these original triggers.

II: I like this idea of having prompts and triggers. I was also thinking of how you deal with the material after you come across it. To me, there is something sensitive, a light touch about the way you handle your material, but then there is also a claiming of the material that happens on your part. One thing I'm intrigued by, for example, is the way you decide on your titles and the section headings in your videos.

MD: Sometimes the titles are very simple and it's because they literally refer to the day a diary entry was made. And sometimes I work and shape the titles, because I see patterns and repetitions, and I'll begin to put words in dialogue with one another. In *Les Goddesses*, I use a lot of women's names for titles. That was partly because there was this coincidence of names connecting my family to Mary Wollstonecraft's. In the end, it's a combination of sometimes sticking with a title that began as an identifier, a marker for a given segment, or alternately, consciously playing with words and ideas to create a poetic resonance.

II: Aside from *Notes on Blue*, which was a little different. In most of your videos the edits are very minimal; mostly transitional?

MD: I did my own edits up until *Notes On Blue*, and yes, everything was very simple. Chantal Akerman's aesthetic was formative. After she died, I started to remember how important she was to me, how for many years, I would watch everything she made. I love Babette Mangolte's camera work, how straightforward and structural it is. Akerman is actually a pivotal figure in my new video.

II: This brings me to another quote you cite by Godard: "Filmmakers who make installations instead of films are afraid of the real." I find this to be such a generative quote in relation to your work.

MD: What was really curious about him saying that was the fact that it came around the time when he had a show at the Pompidou, and had made a lot of installations using film and television. Another of my old-fashioned beliefs is that the two hardest things are filmmaking and writing because that's where you are most exposed. Film and writing are where it's hardest to disassemble and, arguably, you are risking more with a film projected before a captive audience than with an installation where a viewer can walk in and out at will. That's how I interpret the Godard quote.

II: I interpreted the quote as relating installation to intentionality, as a heavy-handed intervention in the material. But I like what you say about risk. I find it amusing that someone who is basing most of her work on personal accounts is constantly speaking about exposure as a risk. It is something you are clearly uncomfortable with.

MD: There's some compulsion here. I have this fixed idea that self-exposure is necessary. It has to be a component.

II: With your writings and work, I constantly have the feeling that you're outside of yourself, despite the confessional tone. This is evident in how you seamlessly switch to the third person in some of your writings...

MD: I like that you say that, Iman, because that's always my hope, that it will feel like I'm outside of myself, that it's me and not me at the same time. I think I've just figured out how to do that in writing, what line cannot be crossed.

II: Since photography is so central to your work, I've been curious about the role technology plays for you. I'm thinking of someone like Zoe Leonard, for example, with her silver prints from the 1990's, or her camera obscura from more recently. With her, the technologies seem so timely; so necessary to revisit. I'm curious how this relationship to media and technology figures for you. If a medium can be a medium for things to come through, how does one consider that medium, or work with it?

MD: It comes through loud and clear in Zoe's work. I love that about her work; the intentionality and how every photograph is thought through in terms of medium and size. She'll try many different sizes before she decides on a final one. It's admirable. Zoe is a model. I would aspire to be like that, but I'm more haphazard.

II: I'm not always aware of the medium in your work, but it doesn't strike me as haphazard. The last work of yours I saw, *Notes on Blue*, mixed film with video?

MD: There is super-8 in it, and a tiny bit of 16mm. That was very intentional, in homage to [Derek] Jarman—he gave permission to pull the old film camera off the shelf and shoot. It was fun, even though some of the film jammed in the camera and one reel was completely blank. These days, I have a pretty fraught relationship to technology. I'm learning Premiere, so that I can at least do a preliminary edit on the new video.

II: There is one last thing I wanted to ask you about: your contribution to the Robert Walser show. I heard you mention his *Microscripts* and the fact that they were written in tiny handwriting, in an archaic script, using pencil. This goes along with your careful attention to techniques, surfaces, and tools in general. Will you speak about how you decided on the subway writers' photograph series as a contribution to that exhibition?

MD: Donald Young asked a group of artist to each make a work in response to Robert Walser. He also asked me if I would write something. I had been wanting to take pictures of people writing on the subway for a really long time, but this was in the category of things I didn't allow myself to do: photographing strangers on the subway was taboo. At the same time, I really wanted to do it. When I got the invitation from Donald, I immediately thought of the *Microscripts* in relation to subway writers with their notebooks and cross-words, and I decided: I'm doing this. I'll deal with the consequences later. I was also reading [Jean] Genet alongside Walser and I started to see the correspondence between them. How they both led quasi-ascetic, monk lifestyles, for instance. So I wrote a text where I cross Genet with Walser, and wrote about my impressions of reading them together, mostly at night. I had a mixed response to Walser: certain things blew me away, and others left me indifferent, such as the novel, *The Tanners*. Many of his books and stories have this absurd, surrealist quality, and those especially I'd read at night. Same with Genet's

unfinished *Prisoner Of Love*. Certain books are good to read in the middle of the night while you're waiting for the sleeping pill to kick in. They co-mingle with your dream life and feed your imagination.