

Violent States and Existential-Therapeutic Work in Mexican *Ex Voto* Painting

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In a striking 1940 self-portrait, Frida Kahlo portrays herself seated alone in a room, wearing a man's suit that is far too large for her slight figure. In place of Kahlo's familiar long hair we see her hair cut short, in a masculine style. The haircut is evidently recent, with long strands of just-cut hair strewn chaotically around the room. It is also self-administered: in her right hand, Kahlo holds the scissors with which it has been effected.

Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940) is gripping, with work, sitter and painter each in their way demanding the viewer's attention. It is also disturbing in its latent, symbolic and threatened violence. The severity of the haircut might itself be described as violent, and the positioning of the cut hair throughout the room seems to indicate that it has been violently hurled away, lock by lock, as the barber proceeded with her work. Its position on the floor is suggestive of corpses, as if the room represents the scene of a massacre, itself the product of a violent state of mind. The scissors (the "weapon" used in that massacre) are still in the sitter's hand, slightly open and palpably sharp, threatening further violence yet to come. The position of the scissors, immediately between the legs clad in male attire, are suggestive both of the male sexual organ and of an act or a threat of castration – a suggestion strongly reinforced by the thick braid lying near the chair on the floor.

A few biographical details make the work all the more compelling. In 1940, Kahlo had recently divorced her husband Diego Rivera, the celebrated Mexican muralist. Rivera was twenty years her senior; the marriage (her first and his third) had lasted 11 years. Kahlo had been a young art student when they first married; Rivera was already a towering figure on the Mexican art scene. The relationship was notoriously tumultuous; both partners had affairs, culminating in Rivera's affair with Kahlo's younger sister, Cristina. The 1940 self-portrait is unmistakably undertaken in response to these traumatic events in Kahlo's life. The suit worn by the sitter is clearly Diego's. The motto of the painting, inscribed as the lyric on a musical score at the top margin of the canvas, is taken from a folk song whose theme is broken love: "*Mira que si te quise, fué por el pelo. Ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero.*"¹



In probing the significance both of Kahlo's self-portrait and of the violent states that it explores, I propose to take my orientation from an earlier artistic tradition with which Kahlo herself was intensely concerned. An *ex voto retablo* (or simply, *ex voto*) is a distinctively Mexican form of religious folk art. An *ex voto* is small (roughly the size of an A4 sheet of paper), made of readily available materials (characteristically oil on tin), often painted in a "naïve" style, and inexpensive. It is a form of art associated specifically with shrines and sites of miracles. The term *ex voto* is a truncation of *ex voto suscepto* – from the vow made. The term captures a crucial element of the practice, that it is a work of art produced in fulfilment of an earlier promise made – specifically a promise made to a saint.² A typical *ex voto* includes an inscription in which the vow is recounted, together with one or more images representing either the moment of trauma when the vow was undertaken, or the subsequent veneration in which the victim of the trauma expresses gratitude for a miraculous intervention – or both. Violence (whether feared or actual) is a common theme in *ex voto* paintings, which portray (*inter alia*) executions, lynchings and assaults. The form has recently been used to explore criminal violence associated with Mexican drug trafficking.³

In his famous reflections on van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes, Martin Heidegger invites us to consider not what the painting *shows*, but rather *what work it does*. Heidegger: "What is happening here? What is at work in the work?" (Heidegger [1950]/2002, p.16). These questions have an important application when reflecting on paintings in the *ex voto* tradition. If we are to understand their significance, and their bearing on Kahlo's art, we cannot confine our attention to their formal or aesthetic qualities, nor to their representational content alone. We must also consider what role these artworks play in the broader set of human practices in which they are embedded. What is the *work* of these distinctive works of art?

The answer to this question is complex (Graziano 2016). The work of these particular artworks is in part theological and religious, playing a role both in the private devotional lives of the individuals depicted in them and in the public life of the religious shrines in which they are characteristically displayed. They have also played a complex economic role, in sustaining a cadre of almost entirely anonymous *ex voto* painters who made their living in and around the famous shrines, producing art for pilgrims – art which in turn is displayed at the shrine, embellishing the reputation of the saint, which in turn brings more business to the painters.

Here, however, I propose to focus on yet another way in which *ex voto* paintings carry out their distinctive work; let's call it *existential-therapeutic work*. In bringing this third form of work into view, we can start from the moment of commissioning. For while there is an

important autobiographical element intrinsic to the *ex voto* form (as signalled, for example, by the frequent use of the word “I” in the mottos), the painting themselves are frequently *not* produced by the person who originally made the vow to the saint. The work is rather commissioned, typically in conjunction with a pilgrimage undertaken to the shrine of the saint. Arriving there, the pilgrim commissions the *ex voto* from one of the local painters, a transaction that inevitably involves the telling of the often intensely personal and traumatic story that is to be represented. There is thus what I will refer to as a *confessional moment* built in to the production of the work – a moment in which the pilgrim articulates and externalises their trauma-narrative.⁴

This confessional moment is only one aspect of what I am calling the existential-therapeutic work. There is a further element, intrinsic to the structure of the artwork itself, which reverberates in the work to which it is put. To bring this out, it helps to consider that subgenre of the *ex voto* form in which the tin panel is divided into three fields. In this form, the bottom margin of the panel is given to the motto, in which the trauma-narrative is recounted, usually together with an account of the vow made to the saint and the act (materialised in the work itself) of fulfilling that promise in the present act of dedication. The top portion of the work is then vertically divided into two panels: the left panel portrays the past trauma; the right portrays the present act of veneration.⁵ Once the work is complete, both of these discrete times have become past – although the work itself plays a role in the present by prompting an imitative re-enactment of the veneration that it represents.

With this formal analysis in hand, we can begin to articulate the distinctive structure of the existential-therapeutic work projected by the *ex voto*. It will be useful to distinguish three interrelated dimensions of that work: temporal, hermeneutic, and mereological.

It should now be clear, first of all, that what I have called the confessional moment in the *ex voto* has quite a complex temporal structure. It involves a form of self-narration that not only recounts the past traumatic episode, but also binds that past together with the subsequent acts of commissioning the work and venerating the saint, all through the temporally complex mechanism of the recollection and re-presentation of a past vow which itself points forward towards a future and now-completed fulfilment. The form of unification of these discrete temporal moments is not merely that of time-ordering; the deeper form of unification is hermeneutic and mereological. That is, it both isolates the past trauma as a discrete past episode in its own discrete space in the visual field and exhibits that trauma as a meaningful part of a greater whole which is affirmed. The existential-therapeutic work reaches its completion when the traumatised individual is able to take up a stance of gratitude in the face of the totality, even if not towards each part considered in isolation. In short, the composition

is closely linked to the creative work of the *ex voto* as a way of linking together past trauma and present circumstance into a hermeneutic whole – a whole that makes sense as a whole and projects forward towards a meaningful future.



Kahlo herself was fascinated by *ex votos*. She and Rivera reportedly had a collection that numbered in the hundreds, many of which were displayed in their home. She also produced several works of her own that were composed in variations on the *ex voto* form (Castro-Sethness 2004-5).⁶ For our purposes, Kahlo's most important exploration of the *ex voto* form comes in connection with her fateful accident, at age 18, in a bus that was struck by a tram. The tram shattered the bus and pinned it against a wall, crushing and killing a number of passengers. Kahlo herself was very severely injured; Alejandro Gómez Arias, traveling with her at the time, later reported that he thought she would surely die. A hand rail from the tram punctured her uterus, shattered her spine, and exited her body through the vagina. Her right foot was also crushed in the accident. Kahlo suffered from the consequences (including chronic pain, impaired mobility, and infertility) for the rest of her life (Herrera 1983, p.49).

It was during her long convalescence from this accident that Kahlo produced her first important variation on the *ex voto* form, a pencil drawing on paper. The drawing is divided into three horizontal bands. In the top band, occupying the top half of the sheet, we see the horrific scene of the accident: the tram has collided with the bus; bodies are strewn across the ground. In one tiny vignette a man seems to be providing aid to one victim; a man prays over another; other figures can be seen trying to escape through the bus windows; still others are bloodied corpses beneath the tram's wheels. In the middle band of the sheet we see Kahlo herself. She is readily identifiable by the setting: the Kahlo family house (the so-called *Casa Azul* – “the blue house”) is in the background; the figure is drawn with the pronounced arching eyebrows that Kahlo adopted as her ‘attribute’. The bottom band of the drawing is an inscription: *19th of September, 1926. Frida Kahlo (Accidente)*. The date in the inscription is significant. The accident in which Kahlo was injured was on the 19th of September, 1925. So the date here is the first anniversary of the trauma. To mark the occasion, it seems, Kahlo is remembering and re-presenting the trauma that had befallen her. The dating of the inscription brings the pencil drawing into alignment with elements of the spatio-temporal form of the traditional *ex voto*. The drawing presents us with the events of the earlier traumatic accident; the inscription fixes the drawing in a discrete time and space, from which the individual is able to reflect back – reimagining and reconstructing the trauma from an external perspective that was unavailable to her at the time.

The connection between Kahlo's 1926 pencil drawing and the *ex voto* tradition is brought out more fully by a curious subsequent episode. Sometime after 1926, Kahlo herself came into possession of a distinctive *ex voto retablo*. The image on the *ex voto* shows a collision between a tram and a bus, and a solitary female figure trapped beneath the wheels of the tram. A figure of a saint looks down over the scene from the upper left corner, her heart pierced by a sword. The represented accident is *not* the accident in which Kahlo was involved, and the *ex voto* was commissioned and composed quite independently of Kahlo's involvement. But the similarity is certainly striking, and Kahlo herself was struck by it. Having acquired the artwork, she proceeded to modify it, making three additions to the image itself. First, she painted the name "Coyoacán" on the side of the bus. This is the name of Kahlo's borough in Mexico City, and had been the destination of the bus involved in the collision. She added a similar destination sign to the tram. And she modified the eyebrows on the figure of the injured woman. Kahlo also changed the inscription at the bottom margin of the work:

'Mr and Mrs Guillermo Kahlo and Matilde C. de Kahlo give thanks to our Lady of Sorrows for saving their daughter from the accident in 1925, at the corner of Cuahutemozin and Calzada de Tlalpan.'

These modifications to the *ex voto* in effect serve as an act of appropriation (not to say: theft) by Kahlo, as she transforms someone else's highly personal votive offering into a reflection upon her own, eerily similar trauma.



As a very young girl, Kahlo contracted polio. The disease was painful and disabling, resulting in significant and permanent damage to one leg and foot. In a diary entry composed much later in life, Kahlo recounts a practice that she developed in the aftermath of this debilitating and isolating trauma. In her room there was a glass door; at the age of six, Kahlo would stand before the glass and breathe onto it, fogging one of the panes with her breath. With her finger she would then draw a door on the glass, through which she would "fly" out of the room, and across the landscape, to a dairy. There she would fly through a second portal and meet a second little girl, an "imaginary friend", "joyful and weightless", who "knew all about my affairs" and "to whom I told my secret problems while she danced".⁷ In the vocabulary of psychiatry, we could describe these childhood experiences as a form of dissociation. Six-year-old Frida responds to a trauma with an experience in which her identity is sundered into an ego and an alter-ego (dissociative depersonalisation). She invents or discovers or at any

rate encounters an alternate reality in which this alter-ego exists and in which the two can interact (dissociative derealisation).

These early experiences of the very young Kahlo help to illuminate an important element in the pencil drawing that Kahlo produced on the first anniversary of her accident on the bus. For in the middle band of the pencil drawing we find not one image of Kahlo but two. In one self-portrait she lies, wrapped in body bandages, on a stretcher marked *Cruz Roja* – Red Cross. Her eyes are closed. In the second self-portrait we see only her neck and head, eyes open, hovering in an indeterminable space, gazing down on the figure on the stretcher. The striking self-duplication provides a powerful illustration of dissociative depersonalisation (here in the form of an out-of-body experience) and derealisation (as the boundaries of the real and the imagined become indistinct). It also provides an important further clue about Kahlo's distinctive form of existential-therapeutic work.

In the face of her violent and debilitating trauma following the accident, Kahlo finds herself drawn into a distinctive form of creative work that had been effective for her before. A crucial part of her response involves a kind of self-sundering in a constructed imaginary space that helps her work through a painful and isolating experience. Six-year-old Kahlo had used the fogged glass and her finger as the medium for this work; as a convalescent young woman, she turns to paper and pencil. As a child she projected a version of herself who both understood her struggles and was at the same time joyful and able to dance. It was at once a form of escapism and the projection of an ideal to be accomplished. Subsequently, despite dire predictions from her doctors, Kahlo was reportedly always determined to dance, and *did* dance (Herrera 1983, p.419), even after her accident and the later amputation, uniting the two versions of herself that had undergone this sundering division. What we can see in the later pencil drawing are the traces of similar work. Here again is a form of self-sundering, and the projection of a version of herself who is not bound by the bandages and traction devices in which Kahlo was confined during the first year after the accident. The second Kahlo projected in the pencil drawing floats free of all such encumbrances, while also occupying a space and taking up a stance of meditative reflection on the tragedy that has befallen her. In both cases we see her engaged in a form of aesthetic play in response to the trauma and to the radically new situation in which she finds herself as a result.

In Kahlo's distinctively aesthetic form of existential-therapeutic work we should recognise a deep resonance with the *ex voto* tradition. As we have seen, an *ex voto* is itself a medium for recollecting and re-presenting a trauma. It is also a tool for the distinctive hermeneutic work involved in making sense of that trauma. And in its fully elaborated, tripartite form, it involves a form of self-duplication: the subject of the *ex voto* literally appears twice, once in

the midst of trauma, and once occupying an external perspective which creates space for contemplation and reflection. When the existential-therapeutic work of an *ex voto* is completed it facilitates a certain kind of healing – not in the medical sense, but in the temporal-hermeneutic-merleau-pontian sense that we delineated above. The person who has undergone the trauma works through the task of finding (or forging!) a meaningful whole out of the discrete and violently fragmented parts of her past, present and future life. The young Kahlo seems to have hit upon a variant of this existential-therapeutic strategy quite of her own accord. She later discovered that her secret psychic experience had a material correlate in a folk-art tradition of her native Mexico. We should not be surprised that that same strategy and tradition came to occupy a central place in her mature work as an artist.



We are now in a position to return to the self-portrait from 1940. *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* is not itself an *ex voto*. But we can see in it a mature and original appropriation of some of the structures – both aesthetic and existential – that we have identified from the *ex voto* tradition.

What the painting presents overwhelmingly is a vision of what I propose to call *self-possession* in response to trauma. In the wake of Rivera's betrayal, Kahlo presents herself as angry, to be sure, but also as supremely strong and self-confident, prepared for a new form of aesthetic action that the viewer can see already realised in the painting itself. The lyric of the song places the woman in the role of a victim, cast aside and abandoned by her beloved. But her comportment presents us with someone who has taken possession of the situation as protagonist, using both symbolic, self-directed violence (the cutting of the hair) and the threat of other-directed violence in taking control of a traumatic situation. Of course the painting also presents us with an act of theft. Kahlo has here stolen Diego's clothing, and along with it his male identity – even as she publically repudiates both his principles and his preferences regarding the attire of Mexican women.⁸ The virtuosity of the painting and the defiance of the self-portrait seem also designed to stake a claim on his greatness as an artist. Taken as a whole, then, the painting shows us a powerful woman who has faced down, reclaimed and incorporated a traumatic experience – and stands stronger than ever as a result.

The natural question to ask next is: *How did she manage to do that?* By what alchemy does one transform a disorienting trauma into this kind of oriented and determined projection into future possibility? These are not questions that admit of simple answers, but we can begin to address them by recognising the use that is being made here of the *ex voto* tradition, and of the existential-therapeutic work associated with it.

Consider first the motto. The inscription has here moved from its traditional place at the bottom margin of an *ex voto* to the top of Kahlo's self-portrait, and has been artfully incorporated in the form of a lyric from a popular song. As in the traditional form, it plays a role in narrating the past trauma that occasioned the present work. But even here, Kahlo has effected a subtle but powerful appropriating twist. The voice associated with the lyric is unmistakably that of the male partner in the broken relationship. So it is, in effect, Diego speaking, placing Kahlo in the position of the addressee, insulted and cast aside. But in the context of the painting it is Kahlo who has chosen these particular words, placing them in Diego's mouth, thereby taking control of his verbal agency. Furthermore, the loss of hair which the male voice uses as the occasion and excuse for his rejection has here been carried out by the woman herself. The effect is to lift Kahlo out of the role of passive victim of the trauma and to re-establish herself as an agent in the upheavals.

A second key to understanding the complex work of the self-portrait is to recognise the forms of self-doubling with which it plays. As we have seen, implicit and explicit self-doubling is intrinsic to the *ex voto* form and to the existential-therapeutic work we find at work there. Self-doubling is certainly not an explicit feature of *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*. After all, the painting shows a single woman, alone in an otherwise empty room. But when we reflect on the existential dynamics of the self-portrait, we can see that there are at least two forms of self-doubling at work there. Both are essential to understanding its place in Kahlo's complex appropriation of her trauma.

The first form of self-doubling pertains to the interplay with Rivera. Recall that in her early childhood experience, young Frida had projected her joyful dancing alter-ego, with whom she was then able to interact in finding a route out of her isolating trauma. The resolution was completed when she was able to reunify her sundered self, culminating in her ability to dance even with her damaged leg and foot. The "two Fridas" divide and then reunite as a stronger whole. In the 1940 self-portrait, Kahlo presents us with a mature variant on this sophisticated childhood play. The alter-ego in this instance is Diego, her "other half" – someone who "knew all about my affairs" and was able to dance (paint). What Kahlo projects here is a narrative, now at its point of culmination, in which Diego's attributes, which she had originally encountered as embodied in another, are here being incorporated within her own person and body, now re-unified as a single whole. The outcome is a figure who is at once both male and female, both Rivera and Kahlo, taking on the attributes and abilities and ambitious projects of both.

The second form of self-doubling is far more intimate. To bring it into view we have to see through the paint to the process of painting that produced it. Place yourself in Kahlo's position, upon discovery of Diego's affair with Cristina, with all the extreme and violent emotions that must have come in its wake. In response, what do you *do*? Kahlo's response (or at least one part of it) was to withdraw to her studio – or to whatever new space she created as an ad hoc studio. And what did she take with her? A canvas, an easel, a palette, paints and brushes, a pair of scissors ... *and a mirror*. It is with this equipment of her craft that Kahlo confronts the new situation. Concretely, what this means is that she spends many hours, sitting in front of the mirror, cutting her hair and producing the portrait. In this specific configuration of space and materials, Kahlo once again reproduces a variant on her early childhood experience. She gazes into a pane of glass and there she encounters an image of herself. And as the work progresses she is faced with not one but two such images: one in the mirror and one on the canvas. In this way she creates exactly the kind of complex space in which the requisite form of existential-therapeutic work can be carried out.⁹



One further issue must at least be raised here, although it is far too large to be addressed properly, much less resolved, in the space that remains. In our reflections on the *ex voto* form, on the existential-therapeutic work associated with it, and on Kahlo's variations thereon, we have so far neglected one prominent visual theme. A defining constant in every traditional *ex voto* is its representation of a saint. Kahlo's variations, by contrast, characteristically omit the saint. One exception is the *ex voto* that she appropriated and modified, in which "our Lady of Sorrows" (painted by someone else, and for someone else) is allowed to remain.¹⁰ The omission of the saint is particularly striking in the pencil drawing from 1927. For there Kahlo marks out one of the places (upper left corner) where a saint would traditionally appear. Instead of the saint, what she places there is an image of the sun, in what must be seen as explicit naturalising of the traditional supernatural form. Kahlo's secularisation of the traditional *ex voto* correlates with the secular analysis I have proposed of its distinctive work. For while we have identified economic, temporal, hermeneutic, mereological, existential and therapeutic dimensions in that work, we have so far said nothing about its specifically theological aspect.

It will not be possible to take up here the legion of important issues that emerge once this lacuna in our analysis is brought into view. What exactly is a saint, theologically speaking, in the tradition(s) in which the *ex voto* finds its place? And what is the social significance of saints in the forms of life around the Mexican shrines and in the broader Mexican cultural situation in which *ex votos* appear? For us, however, the most important questions are neither

theological nor sociological but specifically phenomenological. First, what is the structure of the *experience* of saints for the person who commissions an *ex voto*? Second, what role does the manifestation of the saint play in its existential-therapeutic work? And thirdly (to sharpen the second question into a disjunction) should we see the experience of saintly intervention as essential or incidental to the therapeutic work in which the *ex voto* plays its distinctive part? Both Kahlo and Rivera were themselves committed Marxists, and of course atheism is a central commitment of Marxist ideology. But at the same time Kahlo herself extensively incorporates an eclectic range of religious forms and motifs in her art – some recognisably Christian and others not. So we also confront here a range of political, biographical and art historical questions about the place of religion(s) in her life and art, as well as about the possible divergence between her own commitment to Marxism and that of her contemporaries and peers – particularly Rivera and Trotsky, both of whom were her interlocutors, domestic partners, and lovers. For now it must suffice to enumerate these questions, and to mark them for further reflection and future research.

As a down payment on that further work, I conclude with two final observations about the 1940 portrait – one philosophical and one art historical. First, there is no saint in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, and Kahlo presents herself (whether truthfully or not) as responding to her trauma alone, in an autonomous act of what I have called self-possession. Even as a young child, Kahlo's existential-therapeutic work was in an important sense *solipsistic*. The phenomenological structure of the traditional *ex voto* could not be more different: it serves first and foremost as an acknowledgement that the distinctive work we carry out in recovering our orientation after trauma is not something that we manage alone.

Viewed from an art historical perspective, however, this philosophical observation requires qualification. For while there is no *traditional* saint in Kahlo's self-portrait, there is an unconventional one. Or perhaps there are two. The first is Kahlo herself, who here, as in much of her work, seems to be setting herself up as a modern-day secular saint, complete with icons and attributes, to whom others (other women, in particular) might look in navigating their own experiences of trauma, violence and abuse. The second saint is at most referenced, albeit unmistakably, in the yellow chair upon which Kahlo is seated. For a self-proclaimed modern artist of the 20th century, that chair is not just any chair; it is van Gogh's chair (van Gogh 1888). It is, in particular, one of two chairs that van Gogh had painted at Arles, at the height of his own violent personal trauma and self-harm, and in the context of his own bitter rivalry with a great painter with whom he had shared his domestic life.¹¹ So the second non-traditional saint here is a specifically painterly saint whom Kahlo calls to her aid: St Vincent!

The presence of van Gogh's chair in Kahlo's painting brings with it extraordinary complexities when trying to understand the existential-therapeutic work of which it forms a part. The mapping of that work that I have proposed here must therefore be seen as radically incomplete. We would next need to consider not only Kahlo's relationship with van Gogh, but also the provocative use she makes of the chair. Here it is worth noting its cruciform structure, and the way in which it is displayed in the painting, draped and tangled with mutilated remains of Kahlo's broken body. It is perhaps too much to say that with these allusions Kahlo is identifying herself not only with van Gogh but with the crucified Christ. But it certainly does force us to confront a set of troubling and difficult questions about the role of specifically *sacrificial violence*, not only in religion and the history of art, but in existential-therapeutic work undertaken in response to trauma.

Further exploration of these themes and issues must await another occasion. But even having come this far, we can recognise in Kahlo's self-portrait the material traces of a distinctive form of existential-therapeutic work. In response to trauma, Kahlo draws resources both from her own youthful experiences and from her cultural tradition. In retreating to her studio she quite literally conjures an image of the self that she sets out to become – a reunified whole person who has not denied or disowned or repressed her trauma, but has incorporated it into a larger living whole. That conjured self may or may not have corresponded to the person Kahlo saw reflected in her mirror in 1940. But the creation of that image of self-possession marks out both a pathway and a substantive step in moving beyond a traumatising present while at the same time carrying it forward into a future that she projects as her own.¹²

NOTES

1. "Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are without hair, I don't love you anymore."
2. Here and throughout I use the term "saint" broadly, so as to include the Virgin Mary (*Santa Maria*).
3. A number of examples can be found on the website associated with the 2011-12 Wellcome Trust exhibition: *Infinitas Gracias: Mexican Miracle Paintings*; <https://wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/infinitas-gracias>; last visited 6 Sept., 2016.
4. Here and in other work, I use the term "confession" in a broad sense, indebted to Rousseau and Foucault, in which an act of confession may but need not involve any confession specifically of *guilt*. I shall not hazard a definition here, but the core phenomenon that I have

in mind is a form of externalising self-narration in the service of self-understanding and judgement.

5. Not every *ex voto* painting explicitly makes use of this tripartite form. All include a motto, but some visually represent either the trauma or the veneration rather than both. But there is an important sense in which the tripartite format is the fullest articulation of a structure that is essential to the whole genre, given that every *ex voto* essentially makes reference both to the traumatic episode at which the vow was made and to the episode of veneration in which it is fulfilled.

6. For an example of Kahlo's mature *ex votos*, see Kahlo 1932a, painted in small format on tin in the year of Kahlo's miscarriage in Detroit.

7. Kahlo's diary forms part of the collection of the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo Museums, Mexico City. For a reproduction, see Fuentes 1995. The relevant entry carries the title, "*Origen De Las Dos Fridas: Recuerdo*" [Origin of the two Fridas: Memory].

8. See for example Rivera's notorious later remarks reported by an unnamed correspondent from *Time* magazine: "The classic Mexican dress has been created by people for people. The Mexican women who do not wear it do not belong to the people, but are mentally and emotionally dependent on a foreign class to which they wish to belong, i.e., the great American and French bureaucracy." Anonymous 1948: 22. In the same article he is quoted as saying that Kahlo "has worn nothing but Mexican clothes for 22 years."

9. I discuss self-doubling self-portraiture in an earlier artistic tradition in Martin 2006.

10. For another important exception, see Kahlo 1932b, which incorporates a portrait of a weeping Virgin of Sorrows. For a discussion of Kahlo's uncharacteristic inclusion of a saint in this work, see Ades 1989: 227.

11. For a provocative interpretation of van Gogh's two chairs, see Blum 1956.

12. Earlier versions of this essay were presented to audiences at a 2015 University of Sussex conference on *The Work of Phenomenology and the Work of Art*, at the 2016 meeting of the American Society for Existential Phenomenology (Franklin Marshall College), and at the University of Essex. I am grateful to Joanne Harwood, curator of ESCALA, the Essex Collection of Art from Latin America. Harwood first introduced me to Kahlo's 1940 self-portrait, and drew my attention to the relevance of the *ex voto* tradition for understanding it. This essay would never have been written without her generous assistance. I have profited from comments and insights from many others, including John Adlam, Laurie Bussis, Fabian Freyenhagen, Irene McMullin, Stephen Hubbard, Mark Wrathall, Geneviève Dreyfus, Beatrice Han-Pile, Dan Watts, David Batho, Ian Dudley and Cristóbal Garibay.

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