

# OUTPUT

**Title**

Sex, Lies and Turpentine

**Submission No.**

3

**Authors/Creators**

John Calcutt

The essay claims that The Honourable Mrs Graham, the sitter in Gainsborough's 1775-77 portrait, may have been an industrial spy, murdered in France after an unsuccessful attempt to acquire secret information concerning French porcelain manufacturing techniques. The essay's footnotes provide a fragmented commentary on the work of contemporary Scottish artist Michael Fullerton.

# CONTEXT

My research consistently addresses a set of interlinked questions. Beneath the superficial dissimilarity of my various outputs, these questions remain constant, persistent, structural.

Each output, however, may issue from a differing of their hierarchical arrangement. The outputs may also appear to differ insofar as – crudely speaking - some attempt to address these questions primarily through form, whereas in others they are engaged with on the level of content.

These questions are presented in outline form below:

# CONTEXT

***Ekphrasis: What is the nature of the relation between visual art and language?***

This is a longstanding question within the traditions of western philosophical thought, extending back at least to Horace's dictum, *ut pictura poesis*, and continuing through Lessing to more recent thinkers and writers such as Mallarmé, Lyotard, and W J T Mitchell. As Mitchell suggests, the territorial border between these two provinces is always under dispute, constantly shifting, historically volatile and, finally, ideological. This, then, begs my next question:

***How is the relation between visual art and writing about visual art to be reconfigured under specifically contemporary conditions?***

First, I would argue, one must attempt to come to an understanding of the contemporary by means of historical investigation. As a researcher I would consider myself first and foremost an historian, rather than a would-be literary stylist.

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# CONTEXT

***When writing addresses itself to an external object such as a work of art, must it necessarily assume a second order status in relation to that external object?*** In other words, what is the nature of the identity and status of such writing: is it fundamentally supplementary, parergonal, or incidental? A key concept in my methodological approach is provided by Derrida's reflections on the parergon.

This question is to the forefront in this Output. The decision to 'relegate' my comments on Fullerton (the main focus of the publication) to the footnotes was intended to throw into question conventional understandings concerning relations between 'primary' and 'secondary', and related binary concepts (including 'before' and 'after').

This is an idea that I had previously explored in other contexts. Thus in one of my curatorial projects (Like It Matters, CCA Glasgow, 2005) I exhibited the sculptural works of three young artists (Karla Black, Mick Peter and Michael Stumpf) alongside projected films by artists of another generation (Bas Jan Ader, Robert Rauschenberg and Carolee Schneeman). The Intention was to suggest that our understanding of the earlier artists' work might be modified in light of the work of the younger artists: in other words, that 'influence' could operate retroactively, in a kind of reversal of its commonly understood power.

# CONTEXT

***To what extent should writing aspire to transparency, and to what extent should it insist upon its intractable materiality?***

Writing is the medium through which much of my research is conducted, and through which it is always expressed. The relation between form and content in such writing about art thus becomes a central issue. It is widely agreed that art in the modern period (i.e. since c.1850) has been characterized by an insistence upon a foregrounding of the means of (re)presentation. The techniques of naturalism and illusionism have been systematically challenged and dismantled in order to better serve the demands of historically changing notions of realism. The writing that has attempted to address this art has, by contrast, remained relatively undisturbed by such innovation. In many instances my writing attempts to assert a quasi-autonomy in relation to its objects of enquiry, whilst situating the reader as a co-producer of meaning, an active mediator between quasi-autonomous 'texts'.

# CONTEXT

***What is the nature of historical investigation?***

Siding with theorists such as Hayden White and Mark Poster (among many others), I would claim that the work of the historian consists of various textual operations: it is inescapably inter-textual (i.e. all historical artefacts may be thought of as texts of one kind or another). Put simply: history is a mode of writing. This claim triggers my next research question:

***Does history – as a form of writing – have any special claim upon truth?***

How is it to be distinguished from fiction? In the light of these inevitable questions my research attempts to explore relations between truth and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, within the written text.

This, needless to say, is another key research question in relation to this Output.

Facts are only partial constituents of truth, and fictions may function as truths as a result of the manner in which they are 'taken up' by the reader/viewer/listener. This is an area of theoretical research which, according to Terry Eagleton, is as yet under-developed in critical circles.

# CONTEXT

The following examples of some of my earlier work are intended to demonstrate that my current outputs are to be understood in the context of a line of enquiry and a methodological approach that stretches back to the mid-1990s.

# CONTEXT

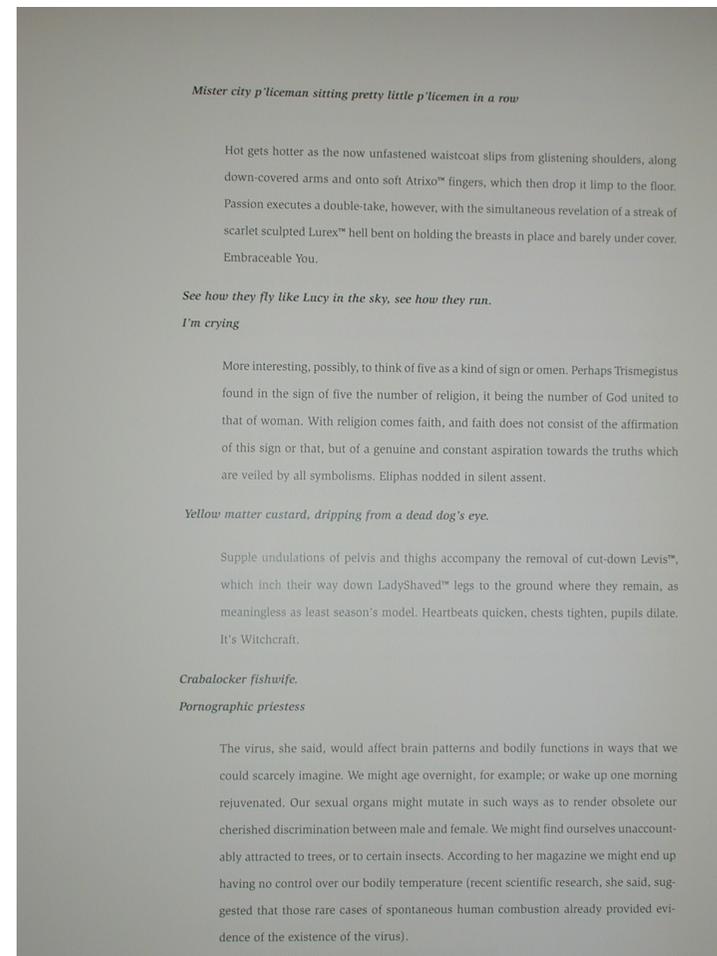
Catalogue essay for *Full Fathom Five*, exhibition in Ohio State University by members of GSA SoFA staff, 1996.

The essay comprises short paragraphs interspersed with lines from The Beatles' *I Am The Walrus*.

Several narrative threads are woven through the paragraphs: a sea journey by a figure named Cristoforo; the imagined thoughts of Trismegistus, an ancient Mage immersed in numerology; a striptease show.

All of the imagery in the essay is inspired by the work of the five artists.

Some of the thematic concerns of the essay are also a response to the nature of the event itself (an exhibition of works by five UK artists held in Columbus, Ohio).



# CONTEXT

Catalogue essay for *Alison Watt: Fold. New Paintings 1996-97*. Fruitmarket Gallery Edinburgh, 1997.

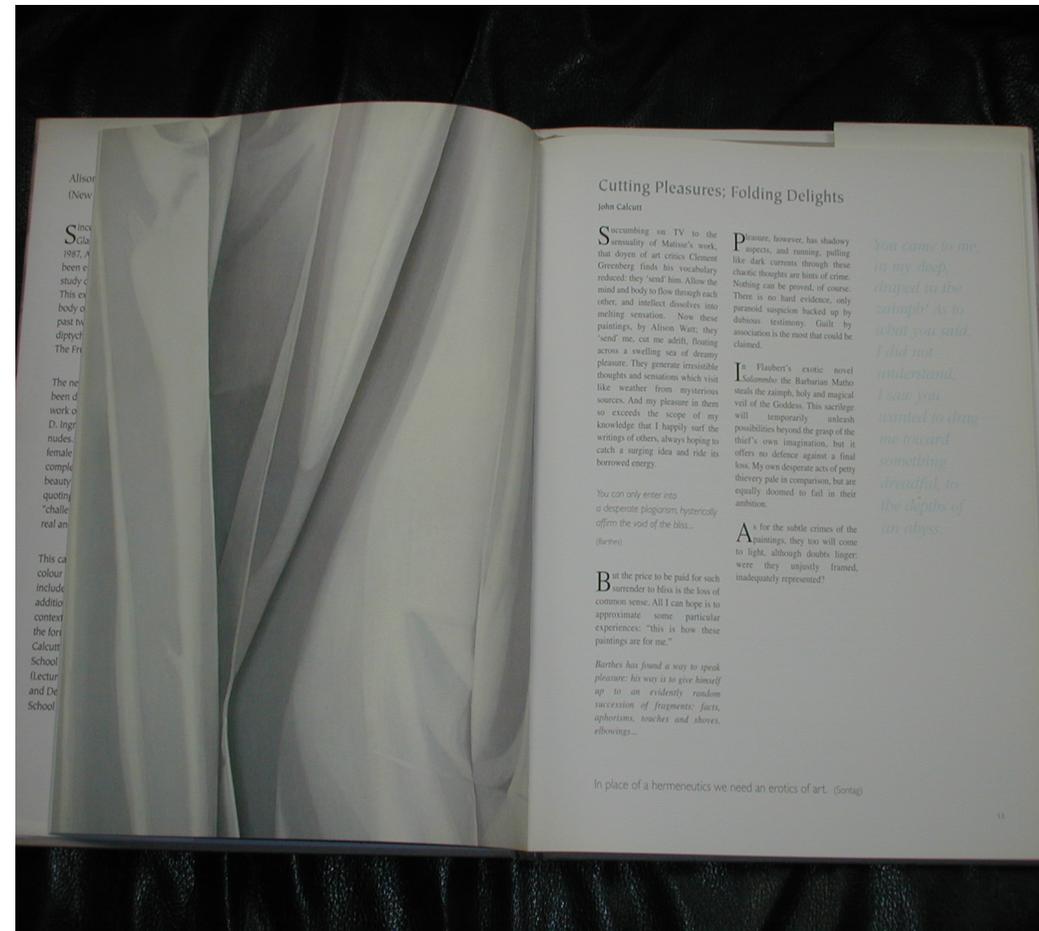
The essay has a montage structure.

The essay is typographically varied, employing a range of typefaces, font sizes and colours.

The thematic currents flowing through the essay are addressed to questions of folding, cutting and sexuality.

The contents and appearance of the essay were determined by an interpretation of the artist's work in which imagery of folded fabric and pictorial techniques of 'slicing' were foregrounded.

The essay employed ideas from a range of thinkers, including Derrida, Deleuze, Barthes and Lacan, whilst its typographic format is indebted to the example of Derrida's *Glas* (1974).



# CONTEXT

## *Views of the West of Scotland.*

Essay on the work of Sans Façon, 2001

The essay comprises 9 paragraphs.

Between each paragraph data are interspersed.

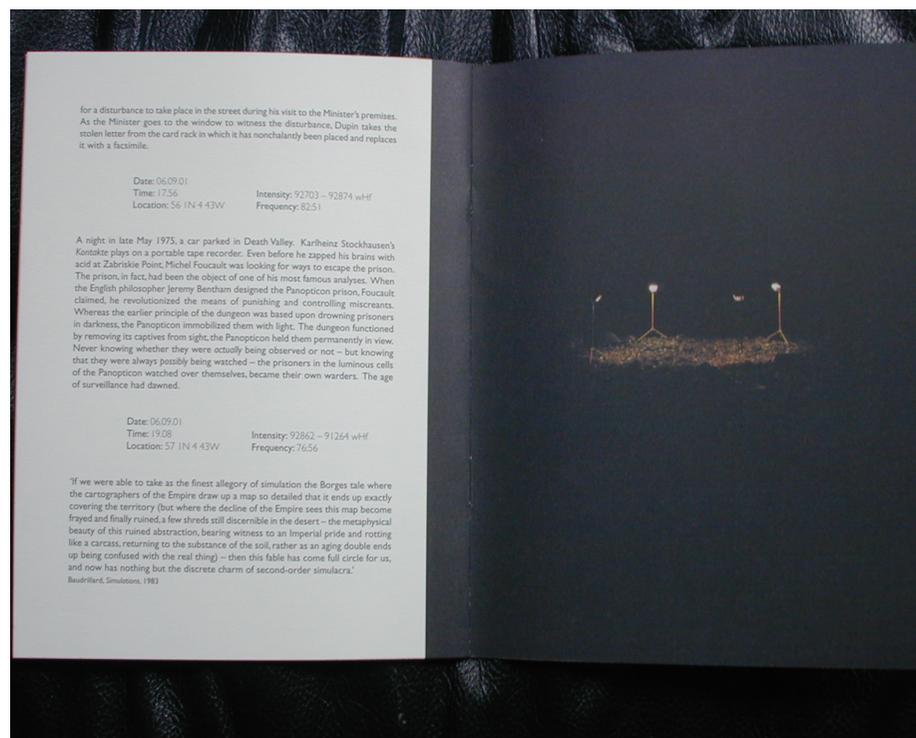
Each paragraph addresses a different idea.

The essay, in its totality, addresses questions of visibility, surveillance, illusion, and paranoia.

The work of Sans Façon was a response to the various covert signs of military presence in the area surrounding Cove Park, the location of the artist's residency that gave rise to this project.

The essay is a response to these works by Sans Façon.

The essay derives some of its ideas from Heidegger, Lacan, Foucault and Plato.



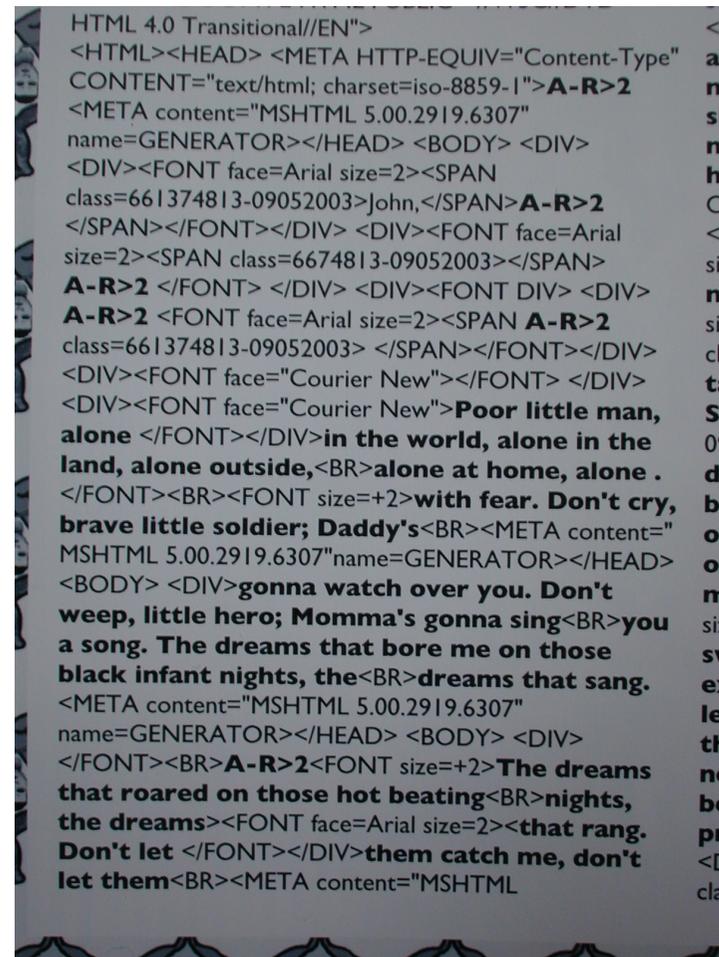
# CONTEXT

Excerpt *Where Are You? Story of the Eye*  
(A monograph on Portuguese video artist  
Antonio Rego. Written 2003, published  
2011).

This is a short extract from a full-length (c.80,000 word)  
monograph on the artist's work.

The textual extract here refers to one of the artist's videos (*A-R*)  
in which a voice-over, accompanied by relentless drumming, recounts  
a traumatic childhood memory of violence in war stricken Angola.

This is an example of an attempt to explore the materiality and visuality  
the printed word in order to create an emotive effect.

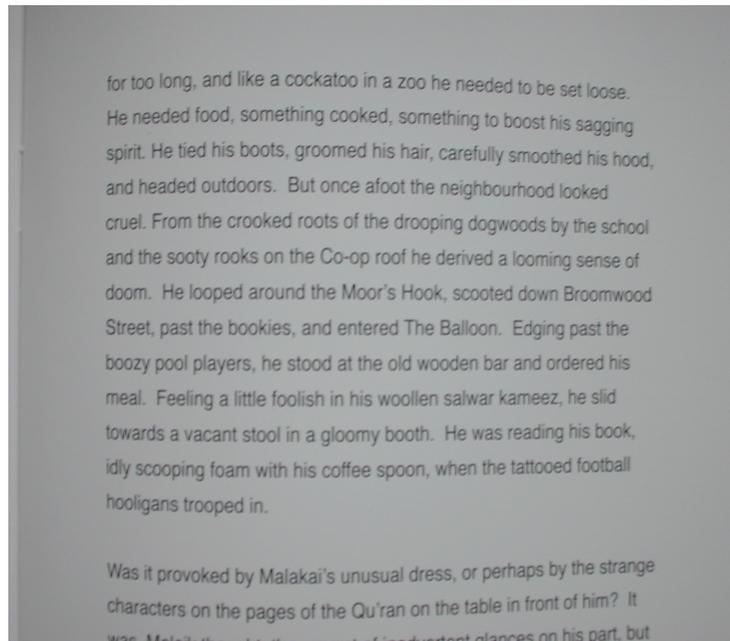


# CONTEXT

Essay in *You Do Voodoo*. Group exhibition catalogue, 2007.

The exhibition featured “13 artists whose work involves aspects of magic, ritual and supernature.”

The essay appeared as two columns on the page, the right-hand column offering comment upon the left-hand. The commentary (see below) was supposedly written by Sir David Nixon after Calcutt's death.



*Critical opinion is divided on this section. Some claim that Calcutt's wordplay is "an annoying mannerism" [Shaw, 1983], or "mere self-indulgence - an unfortunate characteristic of much of his later work " [Crooks, 1996]. Choudhry [1989] is more forgiving, detecting in the obsessive use of words containing "oo" a faint and distant echo of Perec's "La Disparition" [1969] in which the author dispensed entirely with the letter e. In this insistent use of the "oo" form, McLeod [1996: b] detects Calcutt's extension by typographic means of the theme of looking, the "oo" form being visually suggestive of a pair of eyes. Thereby, McLeod suggests, the text appears to 'look 'back at the reader. Developing McLeod 's thesis, Kuehne and Klein [1998] draw upon the work of Octavio Paz and Vilém Flusser to propose a theory of the magical properties of the text-as-image. Although not actually appearing in Calcutt's brief story, the word Voodoo is, they argue, "the absent presence that lies at its heart and secretly animates all those other instances of the "oo" formation that are included." [78]. From Fujii's study [2001] of his surviving notes it appears that Calcutt was keen to include reference to Douglas Adams' Hoolooovoo at some point in his story. The Hoolooovoo, as conceived by Adams in The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, is a superintelligent shade of the colour blue, a fact that would have allowed Calcutt to augment this chromatic sub-theme in his text. Furthermore, its inclusion would have satisfied the various demands: for the "oo" typographic structure, for lexicographical obscurity, and for appropriate assonantal value. Modern readers should perhaps be relieved that Calcutt abandoned this ill-conceived attempt.*

# CONTEXT

Essay on the work of Nicolas Party, *Map No. 25*, Summer 2011.

A collaboration in which the artists designed the magazine pages in response to the text.

Another attempt to explore relations between image and text, but adopting a different strategy insofar as:

- i. This is a collaboration with the artist in which the artist "has the last word".
- ii. Writing is not used to approximate the image, but is 'overwritten' by it.
- iii. Image and text are simultaneously present. Looking and reading are brought into a closer relationship.



# CONTEXT

Among the contemporary writers on art with whom my work (as exemplified by Outputs 1, 2 and 3) may share certain coincidental similarities are:

Duncan McLaren (especially those art reviews collected in *Personal Delivery*, Quartet Books, 1998.)

Maria Fusco (and the writers associated with *The Happy Hypocrite*)

Neil Mulholland

Fiona Jardine

Specific models, however, were provided by the following:

“The impossible object: towards a sociology of the sublime”.  
Dick Hebdige, *New Formations*, 1 (1987) pp. 47-76.

*Blasted Allegories*. Brian Wallis (ed). MIT Press, 1989

*Silence Please. Stories after the works of Juan Munoz*.  
Louise Neri (ed). Scalo, 1996.

*La Belle Captive*, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Rene Magritte.  
University of California Press, 1996.

# CONTEXT

I have developed a working relationship with the artist over a period of ten years or so, having written an essay for his first solo exhibition in 2003 (*Are You Hung Up?* Transmission Gallery, Glasgow). This output, then, represents the most recent moment in an ongoing dialogue with the artist. The public manifestation of this dialogue is evident in several published articles and essays, and a solo exhibition of his work (*Suck On Science*) that I curated at the CCA, Glasgow, in 2005. The current output was published in the first major monograph of Fullerton's work, *Pleasure In Nonsense*, and was thus intended to provide an overview of his production to date.

Essay for Michael Fullerton exhibition catalogue, "Are You Hung Up?", Transmission Gallery, 2003. (Co-contributor, Neil Mulholland.) ISBN 0-9529002-1-1.

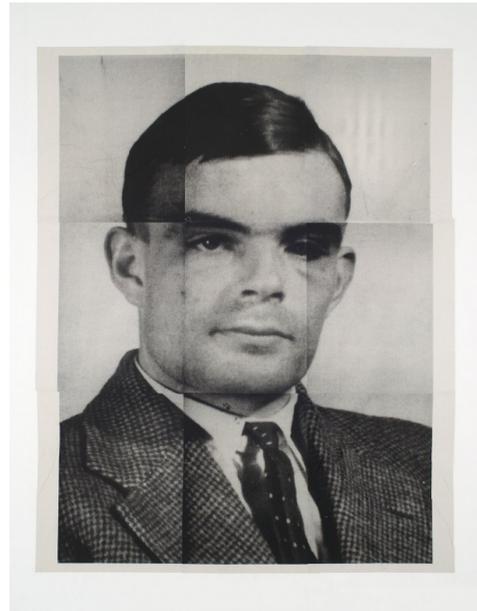
'Michael Fullerton: Excerpts from a conversation with John Calcutt.' *Process*, Issue 1, CCA, Glasgow. February 2005.

Essay on the work of Michael Fullerton for catalogue to accompany "Unreliable Witness", Tramway, Oct – Dec 2008.

"Triangulation Theory". Essay on Michael Fullerton, *Map* magazine Issue 15, Winter 2008.

# CONTEXT

I began by reviewing Fullerton's oeuvre, seeking to identify recurrent themes and subject matter. I was already aware, from my previous research, that his work often explored the question of painting's relation to information, the dissemination of information, and dissimulation (and related issues of faith and belief). Already established in the published discourse surrounding his work was the fact that Fullerton frequently cited the example of Gainsborough.



Michael Fullerton, *Alan Turing*,  
Screenprint on news print,  
Dimensions Variable, 2010.



Michael Fullerton, *Resistance (Violet  
Bushell Szabo)*. 2005.

# CONTEXT

In seeking to integrate these various strands, I decided to apply a simple principle of reversal: the main text of the essay would deal with Gainsborough, whilst Fullerton's work would be addressed (in)directly in the footnotes. The theoretical models informing this decision were provided by: Derrida's writing on the parergon, and the strategy he employed in *The Double Session*; Derrida's "Circumfession" in Geoffrey Bennington's *Jacques Derrida* (1993); the thoughts of both Michael Baxandall and Norman Bryson on art history's conventional understanding of 'influence' and the determining effect of historical precedence; Mike Bal's concept of 'preposterous history' (in Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, University of California Press, 1999).

here in the diabolical domains of the simulacrum where paradox is the law: in order to say the same thing as Derrida, we are obliged to go in for reconstruction (where we would like to speak deconstruction), we are constrained to analytic dryness (where we would like to communicate the breadth and genius of a writing), and we expose ourselves to the necessary risk of making mistakes (where we would like to be sure and exact). This *double bind* (DES, 34; LOB, 118 ff.; SI, 56, 64; UG, 154ff.) just is the law of repetition: what repeats must be the same (there is sameness only if it repeats, and the only repetition is of the same), but can in no case be the identical (D, 123, 127; SI, 88; WD, 294–300). It's the same thing with Derrida's work, which, we can say without prejudice to him, repeats itself. This work, which is remarkable for its diversity *and* its consistency, its powers of dispersion *and* of gathering, its *formation* (PS, 9), cannot be divided into styles or periods: even the quite widespread idea that there are first of all very philosophical texts and then, after *Glas* (1974), a more "literary" and less "serious" tendency, is doubtful as to its empirical accuracy and irrelevant to

13

been most alive in me, the vein I wonder if Geoffrey Bennington can have found, and it's as though Geoff, very close, pronounce it Djef, because I love him and from the depths of my admiration without memory, as though I were insinuating to him the principle of a reply to this improbable question of what blood has been for me since ever, since, seeking a sentence, I have been seeking myself in a sentence, yes, I, and since a circumblygone period at the end of which I would say I and which would, finally, have the form, my language, another, of what I have turned around, from one periphrasis to the next, knowing that it took place but never, according to the strange turn of the

From *Jacques Derrida* by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida.

# CONTEXT

I elected to focus upon Gainsborough's portrait of *The Honourable Mrs Graham* not only because it is housed in the Scottish National Gallery (Fullerton is a Scottish artist based in Glasgow), but also because it depicts a member of the Scottish aristocracy, an interest in social class being one of Fullerton's thematic mainstays.



# CONTEXT

In researching Mary Graham's life and times I became aware that, with a few twists and tweaks of historical fact, I could fabricate a biography in which she would be presented as an industrial spy, thus providing a 'site' in which Fullerton's interests in portraiture's manipulation of truth, power and appearance (alongside an interest in sexuality) could be explored in a ghost-like fashion.



Thomas Stewart (after Jean Laurent Mosnier), *Chevalier d'Eon*  
oil on canvas, 1792.

Chevalier d'Eon was a French soldier, diplomat, spy and transvestite living in London from 1762.

# CONTEXT

A decision was also made to conduct a considerable amount of online research (Google searches, Wikipedia, etc.). A virtue was made of what might otherwise be seen as a lack of rigour. Fullerton himself frequently researches his subjects online, and similar searches may be necessary for the viewers of his work if they are to understand the significance of many of these subjects (e.g. David Shayler, Violet Bushell Szabo, Roger Windsor, etc.).

The ready accessibility of online research material, allied to its reputation for unreliability, is also highly appropriate when dealing with questions relating to visual representation, the unregulated dissemination of information, and the associated problems of verifiability, all of which are thematic concerns within Fullerton's work and my essay.