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When the Artist and Her Model Are One,

or Why Do Artists Make Self-Portraits?

Theses of a DLA Dissertation

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The Subject Matter and the Methods of the Doctoral Research

I am an artist of paintings, therefore, as a matter of course I am mainly interested in the art of painting and more specifically, in nude portrayal, self-portrayal, and the painting of nude self-portraits. In my dissertation I deal with questions of self-portrayal and I aim to answer the question why an artist portrays herself or himself, which raises a number of further questions. To be able to provide answers to the arising questions, as well as to establish the ideological and ontological background to my works, I invoke a handful of important innovations and discoveries from the fields of psychology, philosophy, aesthetics, physics, and from several other scientific fields of study that are relevant to my work. Though I am not an expert of any of the above mentioned fields of science, I do believe that it is essential to demonstrate those texts and scientific discoveries which may be of importance with regard to my dissertation and which justify my choice of subject in paintings. The interdisciplinary interpretation of any work of art is a requisite of contemporary writings on art. Today, as *Thomas McEvilley* writes, interpreting art is far from being historical, since “*biological and physiological sciences also play a substantial role in understanding art. Moreover, besides taking the classical investigational aspects of the history of art (genre, form, iconography, etc.) into account, he actually considers the interpretation of a piece of art based on such fields of study as one of the means of “filling the work of art with meaning”, understanding and interpreting it.*”¹ *Hans Belting*, in his polemical essay of 1983 titled “*The End of the History of Art?*”, also considers that “*the history of art is connected with other scientific disciplines, since art itself is also related to other human activities.*”² Art is one of the most ancient activities in the world in which the subjective self of the artist as *creator* is represented simultaneously together with the surrounding world. In order to understand art, it is essential to go back to the roots of the history of thinking and the evolution of self-consciousness.

The Structure of the Doctoral Dissertation, the Results of the Doctoral Research and the Deduction of Those Results

In Chapter 1, entitled “*The Evolution of Self-Consciousness*”, I aim to find the answer to the question when self-perception emerged, which is “*an essential characteristic of human*

¹ Keserü Katalin. *Emlékezés a kortárs művészetben. [Recollection in Contemporary Art]* Budapest: Noran, 1998. p. 6. Hereinafter: Keserü, 1998.

² Keserü, 1998. p. 6.

being-in-the-world (etre-au-monde).”³ I attempt to find out when we first knew that we existed, and realized that we were *us*. *Piaget* thinks that one may get answers to the essential questions of the traditional philosophical theory of cognition if one analyses how the child’s forms of cognition evolve.⁴ Therefore, I intend to present the process of self-cognition through the stages of development of the child up to the moment when the child is able to recognise himself or herself (in a mirror), and he or she can distinguish himself or herself from other persons. In order to get to know and recognise ourselves, we need “others.” The face of the “other” is the mirror which serves as a “*self-object*” for us in which we can see ourselves. For a baby, it is his or her mother who represents the mirror; he or she will become such as he or she sees his or her self through his or her mother’s face⁵.

According to *Gide*, the mirror is the representer, the symbol of the artist himself, who hopes to recognise his true self from his own works⁶. *Leonardo*, for example, regards his own artist’s mind as a mirror: “*which always turns to the colour of the object reflected by it, and contains as many pictures as there are in front of it.*”⁷ In Chapter 2 entitled “*The Mirror Stage as the Shaper of the Function of the Self. The Mirror and the Artist, or the Mirror in the Service of Cognition and the Expansion of the Self*” I deal with the theories of *Lacan*, *Gödel*, *Kohut*, and *Girard* relating to cognition as well as the roles of the mirror in the art of painting. My analysis of the mirror metaphor has led to the proposition that the original sight of the object and the reflected image cannot, by all means, be considered each other’s equivalents, that is to say, the mirror does not necessarily tell the truth. For instance, concerning the paintings *Venus with a Mirror*, *Bertamini* states that there is optical distortion, since in accordance with the laws of physics, *Venus*, gazing into the

³ Kortárs Művészetelméletek: *Maurice Merleau-Ponty és az észlelés fenomenológiája*. [Contemporary Art Theories: *Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of Perception*] URL: http://mmi.elte.hu/szabadbolcseszeti/index.php?option=com_tanelem&id_tanelem=896&tip=0 Web. 9. November 2013.

⁴ Piaget, Jean - Inhelder, Bärbel: *Gyermeklélektan*. [The Psychology of the Child] Budapest: Osiris, 1999. p. 19.

⁵ Winnicott, D. W. (1967). *Mirror-role of the mother and family in child development*. In P. Lomas (Ed.), *The Predicament of the Family: A Psycho-Analytical Symposium* (26-33). London: Hogarth. p. 33. In: Target, Mary: *A kötődés reprezentációja súlyos személyiségzavarban szenvedő betegeknél*. [Representation of Attachment in Patients Suffering from Severe Borderline Personality Disorder] URL: <http://www.c3.hu/scripta/thalassa/98/1/3target.htm>. Web. 23. November 2013.

⁶ S. Nagy Katalin. *Önarcképek. A művész szerepváltozásai*. [Self-Portraits. The Role Changes of the Artist] Budapest. Palatinus: 2001. (6) Hereinafter: S. Nagy, 2001.

⁷ Kollár József. *Tükörország Narcissusai*. [Narcissi Through the Looking Glass] p. 253. In: *Evolúció és megismerés*. [Evolution and Cognition] Eds. Kampis György, Ropolyi László. A 9. Magyar Kognitív Tudományi konferencia előadásai. [Presentations at the 9th Hungarian Conference on Cognitive Science] Typotex, 2001. Hereinafter: Kollár, 2001.

mirror, sees not herself, but the painter. In Tintoretto's painting, *Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan*, the difference between the real scene and its reflected image questions even the phenomenon of simultaneity. The mirror provides a reflection; it displays our double, or duplicate. As a result of the artist entering the internal space of the mirror and unfolding its hidden dimensions, through the artist, the mirror becomes a means for self-cognizance, hiding, the expansion of space-time meaning, and a means for alienation.

In order to understand the things and events making up the diversity of the surrounding world, we need to pass them through the filter of our nervous system. To be able to form and express the contents of this reduced perception, man has developed - and keeps refining - the systems of symbols⁸ which we define as language. Mankind, by creating languages, provided existing reality with an interpretable form.

In the third part of the dissertation, "*The Means of Expression: the Picture, the Word, and the Writing*," I scrutinise the various forms of expression. Firstly, I write about the intertwining of language and things. Secondly, on account of developments in language I deal with *Ramus's* grammar built on similarities. Thirdly, I discuss the "*Port-Royal Logic*", which defined the binary disposition of signs by connecting the signifier and the signified. Then, in relation to the separation of things and words, I present *Hölderlin's*, *Mallarmé's*, and *Artaud's* counter-discourse in which they advocate a need to return to the original, symbolic function of language. The same idea is expounded by *Roland Barthes*, in *The Death of the Author*, where the text is automatically woven like a piece of fabric, and there is no need for an author any more. Finally, I discuss the discoveries of *Michael Faraday*, the physicist, in connection with the manifestations of the unconsciousness, and the significance of visual thoughts and that of creative visions. However, it is in the fine arts that visions, apparitions, and visual thoughts will find their real fertile ground.

Velázquez's masterpiece, *The Ladies-in-Waiting*, is the "*theology of painting*;" it demonstrates the ritual of the portrayal of the representation, the eternal rite of creation. The artist enters the mythical time by recalling themes. Repetition in his works appears as a medium of perception and it serves the function of consolidating experience, so its role is to make a back reference so that the sign conjures up the signifier as its evoking sign. In Chapter 4, "*Sacred and Profane Time, Rituals*," I go in search of the "*eternal element*" of man which can be evoked over and over again in celebrations, ceremonies, rites, and

⁸ Modern grammar defines language as a system of symbols. It traces every discrepancy or equivalence in meaning back to formal signs as well as to the relationship between these signs. In: Zsilka János. *Nyelvi rendszer és valóság. [The Linguistic System and Reality]* Budapest: Európa Kiadó, 1996, p. 61.

myths, by the use of various substances inducing ecstatic states and by the ritual of creation. “*Sacred time is inherently reversible; as a matter of fact, it is mythical time, which is repeatedly made present.*”⁹ It can be observed, for example, in nature peoples’ burial customs, where they return to the origins of existence by repeating cosmogony. The permanency of life and its metamorphosis can be demonstrated in the living example of mystery plays, the mass. The ritual sacrificial death, the first and one-time experience of eternal nature can be evoked in Jerzy Grotowski’s *Theatre of Rituals*, in mystery plays, and also in Hermann Nitsch’s *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*. Through the visions and hallucinations induced by various narcotics like mescaline it is possible to knock down the boundaries of space and time and to experience the transcendence of life. Antonin Artaud, after participating in the *Ghost Dance of Peyote* in the mountains of the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico, gave a detailed account of how it was possible to reach the moment of eternity in time and to enter the “abstract,” which he named as “*substance.*” “*The archetype of every work of art is the creation of the universe.*”¹⁰ Jackson Pollock, in his painting actions combined with a ritual dance performed on the large canvas stretched out on the ground, each and every time revived the ancient rite of creation.

Man preserves his eternal part in the shared activities; at the same, he also strives to immortalize what is unique in him. In Chapter 5, titled “*A Demand for Self-Representation,*” I seek an answer to the question as to what kind of eternal demand compels man to portray himself. Man longs to survive himself, no wonder that the *plastered skulls of Jericho*, the earliest artefacts of mankind dated around 7,000 BC, are about the defeat of death and survival. The skulls, remodelled with plaster, completed with the missing parts and painted, were meant to serve as *representations of the living*. Artists attempted to preserve themselves also when they first signed their artefacts, since the concept of “*true presence*” is closely connected with marks of signature.¹¹ By signing the work, the artist at the same time confessed his faith in the uniqueness of his piece of art. Another form of “signature” is the figural representation of the artist in paintings when the creator appears in his own work of art. The artist immortalises himself in the commissioned great Renaissance works, in religious and votive paintings, and becomes the witness of his own time; shows what must be seen, or, simply, smiles scornfully from one

⁹ Eliade, Mircea: *A szent és a profán. [The Sacred and The Profane]* Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1996, p. 61.

¹⁰ Nagy, S., 2001. p. 8.

¹¹ Arasse, Daniel: *Művész a műben. [Le Sujet dans le tableau - ‘Essays in Analytical Iconography’]* Typotex, Budapest, 2012. p. 49. Hereinafter: Arasse, 2012.

of the friezes of the *Palazzo Ducale*. When the signature declares paternity (authorship), then, the artist's relationship with his work is marked by a name based on the father-son relationship - which is in accordance with the practice of the period of *Quattro Cento* of describing the process of artistic creation with the terminology used for the notion of human begetting.¹² On the other hand, during the artistic creation and begetting the artist may fancy himself as *God*. In order for man to immortalise himself, he is in search of a true image, "the imprint of the face of God" (Genesis 33.4).¹³ The definition of the person of *Christ* may be traced back to the vocabulary of the Romans; they borrowed words which originally meant "mask" and "role". Jesus merged two natures in himself when he wore the mask of the invisible God. The imprint of this mask can be seen on the shroud which got its form from its wearer still in his life. It is also this mask that can be felt in *Dürer's* and *Mantegna's* self-portraits.

Creation means continuous recollection. As *Lajos Fülep* states, "our past and recollections have an impact on and melt into every single intuition and projection of ours."¹⁴ In Greek mythology *Mnemosyne*, the personification of memory, is regarded as the mother of the Muses. Just like imagination, recollection is also of visual character. In Chapter 6 "Shared Images. The Conventions of Nude Portrayal" I attempt to trace those shared images which have meant the same to us for centuries, and which, therefore, must be very deeply rooted and innate to us. Shared images or archetypes mirror human characters and we use these models when we want to visualise the God, the ruler, or the hero within us. Archetypes become materialised in our shared stories, myths and fables, which also describe how the physical, material world was created from primordial forms of motion.¹⁵ It was by remembering these archetypes, an imagined order and system that the ancient Greek were able to preserve and systemise their knowledge, and interpret new knowledge. They referred to basic geometric correlations which were essential to construct a harmoniously formed figure as "*canon*," and *Villard de Honnecourt*, in his *Sketchbook* of c. 1230, laid down the *substance of things*, defining it by sketch-plans. In art it is essential to exercise memory, to revive tried and tested movements, compositions and forms. It is for this reason that *Manet*, in his painting *Luncheon on the Grass*, adopted the

¹² Arasse, 2012. p. 50.

¹³ Belting, Hans: *A hiteles kép. Képviták mint hitviták. [The Genuine Image- Disputes of Image as Disputes of Religion] [Das echte Bild: Bildfragen als Glaubensfragen]* Atlantisz, Budapest, 2009. pp. 94-95.

¹⁴ Keserü, 1998. p. 14.

¹⁵ Paul A. Laviollette: *Az ősrobbanáson túl. [Beyond the Big Bang]* Alexandra, Pécs, 2004. p. 15. Hereinafter: Laviollette, 2004.

compositional sketch of the threesome on the right from *Marcantonio Raimondi's* engraving of c. 1515, *The Judgment of Paris*. There are certain bodily positions which have been repeated by almost everyone who has devoted his or her artistic career to nude portrayal, and which have been practically elevated to the level of ideograms. Such is the portrayal of the lying nude, originating from *Giorgione*, which has been reiterated by *Tiziano, Manet, Modigliani, Matisse, Tom Wesselmann* and many others because they considered that this form potentially contained what they wanted to express by it. For example, by removing the perspective and painting *Olympia* as a two-dimensional figure turned toward the viewer, *Manet* applied *Gombrich's* “eye-witness principle”, in other words, he wanted to portray the scene so that the viewer had the feeling of being present there at the scene.¹⁶ Artists wishing to find a symbol of a harmonic natural order in a woman's body turned to *Praxiteles's Aphrodite of Knidos*, and those wishing to depict suffering, passion, and ecstasy evoked the contorted body of the *Menade* by *Scopas*. The artists who selected the nude as the subject matter of their art believed that they could find a form which would be good in itself. “Many went further than that and reckoned that it was the nude in which the lowest common denominator for ideal form could be found.”¹⁷

Chapter 7, titled “*Role Play. The Artist as Medium,*” deals with the self-creating power of the artist and the roles in which he or she appears before us. We get our roles ready-made, we react to something or someone archetypically in a typical, always recurring situation. On the other hand, during mimesis, or “magical identification,” we may re-live these roles ingrained in us; we can get into another person's role, adopt his external characteristics, repeat his deeds, and revive his desires.¹⁸ On the review of the roles depicted in the history of art, the question arises: is it the artist who invents the role or is it the role that shapes the artist? When a role is formulated for an artist in a given society, this will have an influence on what people expect of the artist, and his or her pupils will carry on with the tradition. However, *Gombrich* does not believe in the existence of “the spirit of the age,” or collective spirit. As he states, the artist will always remain an individual who creates.¹⁹ He is naturally influenced by his era, but he also goes beyond,

¹⁶ Ernst Gombrich, Dieder Eribon: *Miről szólnak a képek? [Looking for Answers]* Balassi, Budapest, 1999. p. 75. Hereinafter: Gombrich – Eribon, 1999.

¹⁷ Kenneth Clark: *Az Akt. Tanulmány az eszményi formáról. [The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form]* Corvina, Budapest, 1986. p. 333.

¹⁸ René Girard. A mimetikus elmélet [*Mimetic Theory*] URL: <http://vilagmehes.wordpress.com/2009/01/21/rene-girard-%E2%80%93-a-mimetikus-elmélet/> Web. 24. November 2013.

¹⁹ Gombrich-Eribon, 1999. p. 156.

transcends as well as advances the art of his age. The artist-creator often assumes the role of the Creator. In *Michelangelo's The Creation of Adam*, the mirror effect produced by the symmetry of God and *Adam* elevates *Adam* to “the image of God.” However, in *Botond Kardos's Creation*, God is missing, and it is the artist who has to create himself. An extreme example for the portrayal of the artist's role is *Michelangelo's* self-portrait painted on Saint Bartholomew's flayed skin in *The Last Judgment*. The legend of the artist becomes the legend of the body when the emulation with the divine rival ends in the artist losing his body.²⁰ When the artist creates images on and with his own body, then he is in search of a solution to the problem of “*embodiment*”, which has always been a problem regarding images. Orlan, by undergoing a series of facial plastic surgeries, reinvents her own body in idealistic images; and in her quest for the perfect form, she chooses the so-called *Zeuxis-practice*. The body is not a congenital feature granted by nature, but it is a historically constructed entity of the individual. In her series of *History Portraits/Old Portraits* (1988-1990) *Cindy Sherman* uses her own body as a kind of new “*effigy*”, and by wearing a range of historical costumes, she refers fiction in photography back to earlier paintings. To *Sherman*, her own body is merely a function, which represents empty “spaces of social identity” that might be filled in and roles that might be worn as clothes in a given historical and social context.

“*Following and influenced by Cindy Sherman, she [the author of the present dissertation] also slips into various clichés, however, in contrast with the forerunner, she does not become dissolved in these situations, but rather multiplies herself and provides an interpretation of the well-known iconographic patterns from a female perspective. She looks at the showering, bathing and towelling female nudes with the eyes of a woman and paints them as self-portraits, from a perspective where the painter and the model are the same.*”²¹ I regard several works in the history of art as inexhaustible wells of inspirations. “*For the artist, during portrayal it is important to be able to accept the archetypical human situations so that he or she may express his or her attraction or aversion to them. It also seems essential to what extent we are able to enter into the spirit of these situations and what kind of tensions result from this role-play, what sort of interferences are created between the archaic or consecrated historical meaning and its present form, which is,*

²⁰ Michelangelo experiences the divine mission of the artist as a conflict with the Creation. He is concerned about God's punishment for having wasted his creative talents beyond measure. In: Arasse 2012. p. 145.

²¹ Edit András's writing about Rita Mátis's paintings. In: András Edit: *Kulturális átöltözés. Művészet a szocializmus romjain. [Change of Cultural Costume. Art on the Ruins of Socialism]* Argumentum, Budapest, 2009. p. 67. Hereinafter: András, 2009.

perhaps, devoid of poetry.”²² The paintings of *Cagnacci, Velázquez, Renoir, Vallotton, Bonnard, Ferenczy, Csernus* and *Konkoly* also depict basic human actions, which have inspired me to create my own versions for them. In the last chapter (Chapter 8) I present my own working method and I write about how and what I adopt from works that are well-known from the history of art and that are important and meaningful to me. If my interest has been aroused by a topic, I try to find the perfect form of expression for it. I borrow settings, well-established compositions. I follow the painting method which has been utilised by many artists before me in order to find the ideal form of expression. What I desire to find in the realm of idyllic paintings is a sense of security, that is why I have become involved in the quest for the ideal form, which has been attempted by so many, and which quest has run through the history of mankind since ancient times, to which man has always added something from his own age. I have found this sense of security, namely, the security provided by eternal existence in the nude. In the nude, which is a perfect part of nature, and although the world created by this nude, namely, man-made world has alienated man from this pristine constituent, man longs to return to it.

“I open my eyes to harmony and universal order. The physical representation of intimacy serves no other purpose than to demonstrate and get it accepted that art is about life as well as itself, and that physical and transcendental qualities in art interweave just like in the embrace of lovers.”²³

Summary of the Doctoral Research, Conclusions

My research, which is set forth in seven chapters and the methods and results of which are presented within this framework, is verified in the last chapter, Chapter 8. In this synopsis I make a comparison between my own works and the works of the great predecessors. *The last chapter of my dissertation presents a summary of the matters previously discussed and their implementation in practice*, since in my paintings, including self-portraits and self-nudes, I make use of movements and settings matured and perfected over the centuries, of intriguing methods of painting and gestures, and carry them on so as to step into the process of artistic painting and become a participant in the shared past.

²² Tamás Aknai: *Nincs is részkérdés, nincs részfeladat...Mátis Rita festő. Portré.* [No Part-Question, No Partial Task... Artist Rita Mátis. Portrait.] Echo, Kritikai szemle, Pécs, 2006/2. P13-15. Hereinafter: Aknai, 2006/2.

²³ *Aknai Tamás riportja* [Report by Tamás Aknai] In: Aknai, 2006/2. p. 15.

I believe that the importance of remembrance and the relevance of *recollection* cannot be demonstrated any better than by our getting involved in the process, and becoming a living target of the great questions of life – which serve as a basis of this writing as well. As a matter of fact, recollection is indispensable both for acquiring knowledge and for life. If we take the thinking of the ancients as a starting point, - which McEvelley considers a universal model serving as a ground for western thinking²⁴ -, the ancients could systemise and preserve knowledge, interpret new knowledge and, at the same time, understand and handle life situations by relying on their recollection of an imagined order or system. By the repetition of images, these life situations can be repeatedly evoked. “*Lajos Fülep originates art from the desire for eternity of man who has taken the path from ‘Being’ to ‘Becoming’ and he analyses the process and the result of the creation of eternity on earth (artistic creation), attributing key relevance to the creating artist’s recollection.*”²⁵

²⁴ Keserü, 1998. p.7.

²⁵ Keserü, 1998. p.21.

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