

REMEMBERING FORSELF-PORTRAYAL. FROM POSTMODERN ABSENCE OF CANON TO GENRE AMBIVALENCE AND DECLINE

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Abstract: *The phenomenon of self-portrayal resulting from accumulations and developments during the Italian Renaissance period is under discussion in this text through the optics of Postmodernity. Changes that have occurred with the progress of technique in mirror positioning - auxiliary equipment in self-portrayal – have led to a radical change in the ways of creating and perceiving of self-portrait. Conditionally transmitted in self-portrayal, the "Casimir Effect" helps to understand the notion of self-portrayal decline. Postmodern self-portrayal represents not only the creator but paradoxically it includes the viewer within itself too, in a more general sense, its potential audience as well in one with the events in which it is encompassed as a phenomenon.*

Key words: *self-portrayal; myth; nfinity; Casimir effect; postmodernity.*

When an artist, after determining his individuality, conspiratorially decides to resist anonymity, the family tree of portraiture divaricates. From today's point of view, self-portrayal, which, as a conscious and autonomous artistic practice, we associate with the Italian Renaissance, arises subversively and secretly.¹ In its deconspiracy, besides Vasari², we also refer to a helpful, often telltale mediator.

¹ *Examples include: Masaccio's self-portrait in "Raising the Son of Theophilus"; self-portraits of Botticelli, Pinturicchio, Perugino and Cosimo Rosselli (in the Sistine Chapel); Philippine Lippi (Brancacci Chapel); Cosimo Rosselli (Sant'Ambrogio, Florence), Melozzo da Forli or Marco Palmezzano ("The Entry into Jerusalem", Loreto); Self-portraits in altar paintings: Mantegna ("Presentation at the Temple", 1545, Berlin), Ghirlandaio ("Adoration of the Magi", 1488), Perugino ("Adoration of the Magi", approx. 1476); Self-portraits "hidden" behind sacred characters: Taddeo di Bartolo (in the image of Thaddeus the Apostle); Andrea del Castagno (in the image of St. Luke the Evangelist, San Tarasio Chapel, Venice, 1442); Mantegna portrays himself in the form of a giant sculptural head (Ovetari Chapel, Padua).*

² *Giorgio Vasari (July 30th, 1511 - June 27th, 1574) is an Italian painter, architect, writer and historian. He remains in history as a writer because of his remarkable "The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects" - a three-part biography book devoted to the life and work of Italian Renaissance artists. The book was published in 1550. Vasari was the first to use the term "Renaissance" (rinascita) in printed text. In 1568 he rewrites and expands "The Lives..."; includes a treatise on the technical methods used in the arts and adds engraved portraits of artists.*

Mirror helps the artist to see and build the desired vision of his own image. Through it he carries this image into a drawing with an attached starvation in the eye and a strangely reinforced asymmetry. Collectively considered, as a running action in the flow of time, self-portrayal reminds us of the myth of Narcissus, unlocking the urge for it sown doom and ending. In this sense self-portrait can be interpreted as a result of a meeting between two mirror surfaces – the eyes of the artist and the mirror as an object. A hedonistic and beautiful hypothesis remarkably reminiscent of the Buddhist postulate about the two mirrors, creating *infinity* even when there is nothing between them, as long as they are located one against the other.

The creation of art, and in particular of self-portrait, in the present time we belong to, happens in conditions of postmodern absence of rules. The negative attitude towards established canons is a distinctive feature of postmodern theories and practices (Lyotard, 1996, p.8). Since the end of the fifteenth century, when in the multiple artistic centers of Italy the uniform typology of portrait is worked out, over a sufficient amount of time distance, the inspirational poetic portraiture is gradually sacrificed, at the expense of the universal questioning of postulates and norms. "If we simplify things to the extreme, we can assume that "postmodern" is mistrust in meta-histories." – says Lyotard in the introduction to "The Postmodern Condition", and adds: "This mistrust is a consequence of the progress of sciences; and progress implies it in turn." (Ibidem). The disintegration of "big stories", which coincided with the collapse of authorities, according to Lyotard's findings, is replaced by "little stories", while pleasure and enjoyment become the highest value and purpose of culture.

In the introductory paragraph, we refer to the word *self-portrait*, along with the notions of *myth* and *infinity*, rationalized as metaphors. With the use of these intellectual figures, we aim to activate both the idea of creation and the hypothesis of the end of self-portrayal. Is the common use of myth and infinity with regard to self-portraiture – a phenomenon that has appeared on the artistic scene since the Renaissance – appropriate? Part of the answer to the question, which includes an explanation of the notion of myth, we can find in Levi-Strauss³. According to him, "myth always refers to events in the past ... But the meaning of myth is that these events occurring at a certain point in time ... exist beyond it. The myth explains both the past and the present but it explains the future too" (Levi-Strauss, 1996). The French anthropologist associates myth with an imaginary type of "time-consuming" technology that reminds us of Kronos⁴ in turn, the god - the personification of time that leads to death.

³ Claude Levy-Strauss is the son of a portrait artist.

⁴ From Ancient Greek: Χρόνος - Time

The second concept, infinity⁵, which we have already metaphorically and daringly "pushed" in this text between the mirror-eye and the mirror-object, is a non-definable philosophical abstraction. In an attempt to justify the mirrored Zen metaphor with which we made an analogy to self-portrayal, in post-modernity times - "a consequence of the progress of sciences", we come to the startling hypothesis of power, generating from nothingness. It is introduced for the first time by the Danish physicist-theorist Hendrik Casimir in 1948. The Casimir effect postulates that gravitation⁶ brings toward one another two parallel mirrors placed in a vacuum. If we provisionally relate this "gravitation" between the mirrors to self-portrayal, we can activate a hypothetical model by which to distinguish the stages through which the transformation of the mirror-object, drawn by mutual attraction with the mirror-eye, passes. As everyday users or consumers⁷ we are already dependent on some of stages specific features of technology and devices that integrate into themselves modified mirror variants. Moreover, as participants and/or witnesses from a near distance of acceleration in the processes of convergence between physical and physiological mirror, self-portrait artists are overtaken by an unforeseen risk - falling into cognitive dissonance⁸; the state of collision in their consciousness between aesthetic norms, knowledge, belief, attitude, or creed with contradicting visual information flowing without a disruption from the dynamized environment which blocks their ability for identical cognitive perception. Then comes a phase in which artistic intuitions do not work, and the psychological arrow of time⁹ is unbalanced. When the Renaissance artist successively shifts his gaze from the mirror to the board

⁵ *In modern science, physics avoids the use of the term "infinity", and in certain cases it is replaced by the condition "without any boundaries."*

⁶ *"What will happen if you put two parallel mirrors opposite one another in a vacuum? Your first reaction is likely to be - "nothing." In fact, however, the two mirrors will attract one another simply because of the vacuum between them. This startling phenomenon was first foretold by the Danish physicist-theorist Hendrik Casimir in 1948, and nowadays carries the name of Casimir effect, and the corresponding force between the mirrors is known as the Casimir force", Astrid Lambrecht, a summary to: "Casimir Effect - Power from Nothing ", Physics World, Vol. 15, No. 9, 2002*

⁷ *Celebrities' posts at Instagram often collect millions of "likes" and tens of thousands of comments, by turning the cameras towards themselves to demonstrate their faces and bodies, as well as their own self-perception.*

⁸ *The term is introduced by Leon Festinger in 1956 in the book "When the Prophecy Fails". It describes a situation in which the individual is more inclined to "adapt" reality to his belief than to accept new facts that contradict them.*

⁹ *In his book "A Brief History of Time. From the Big Bang to the Black Holes" Stephen Hawking analyzes the arrows of time by summarizing them up like this: "But there are at least three arrows of time that distinguish the past from the future. These are: the thermodynamic arrow, the direction of time in which chaos is growing; the psychological arrow - the direction of time in which we remember the past, but not the future; and the cosmological arrow - the direction of time in which the universe expands and does not shrink. "*

and vice versa in order to observe and gradually achieve the desired and /or the perceived self-image into a self-portrait, then all the events, the stages of self-portrayal, follow the natural direction of time. With the technical devices, this sequence is destroyed. Although the direction in which we feel that time is flowing, suggests that we will remember the past, but not the future, the mirror-reflected moment that appears subversively (with the help of devices) in self-portrayal, creates a meta-feeling that separate events from the future are settled in the past in a destructive pursuit of incitement a paired self-image. Self-portrayal can be seen as a happening - a result of a subjective state of mind or a situation in which the artist and subsequently the viewer too at the same time experience conflicting feelings. In postmodernity, the Casimir effect is formally transferred in self-portrayal in a paradoxical way – through a predetermined legitimacy it presents the image of each of the two merged mirror-opposites. This is a presentation that resulted in meaningful incompatibility. If, in the Renaissance, self-portrait is a branching out of the trunk of the portrait genre, it becomes, in time, its ambivalent double; self-portrait ceases to present only its creator, it incorporates the viewer too and, in a more general sense, its potential audience together with the events in which it fits in as a phenomenon. Through this meme Casimir effect which we described, after "passing" through postmodernity, self-portrait from a relative of the portrait, in its final phase it fluctuates¹⁰ freely in the visual field of art. The accompanying this "passing" genre fluctuations and emancipation are only indicators in the anamnesis that harbingered the risk of extinction.

We find logical the relation compatibility - incompatibility between the characteristics of postmodernism and those of self-portrayal phenomenon to reveal its complete and correct diagnosis. Therefore, theoretically the assumption that self-portrayal is in decline, requires that we consider the practices of its creation in the light of peculiarities and the signs of postmodern time, i.e. to give an anamnesis¹¹. It

¹⁰ *Fluctuation (from Latin: fluctuare – variation, wavering) is a random deviation from the average (usually equilibrium) significance of physical magnitudes characterizing a system of large numbers of particles. In physics, fluctuation susem at hematical apparatus related to variations or dispersion of random quantities. Fluctuations are caused by quantum-mechanical effects and are generally indelible. Fuctuations can be mentioned also when we speak of temperature sover a prolonged period of time. The quantum field the or yproves that, inaccordance with the principle of uncertainty in the physical vacuum, virtual "particles" (separate energy) with opposing spins are constantly born and disappear, which cause the so called zero fluctuationin the field. Spontaneous wave emission is part of the list of known effects attributed to these zero fluctuations. This jitter effect with spontaneous waves of energy is called vacuum fluctuations and is a deviation from the state of rest. This rest in the vacuum is a probabilistic informational potential or, in other words, mentality at rest (cogitality - from lat. Cogito - think).*

¹¹ *Anamnesis, case history, or medical history (from Greek: αναμνησις – "recollection", "remembrance") is a medical term used to denote detailed and consistent receipt of information from the patient or his or her relatives about the nature of the disease.*

is also possible this remembering to be a commemorating of a residual image with no recognizable content, but when looked at from the horizon of hypermodernity¹² it reminds us of retrospection with a postmodern key.

The above-mentioned absence of canon in art, as a distinctive feature of postmodernity, is expressed both in the eclecticism and diversity of artistic languages and styles, as well as in intertextuality, manifested in citation and parody. The irony and kitsch thrive in conditions of overproduction of art made possible by technical progress and new technologies. The main aesthetic binary oppositions loose importance, high and mass art merge, and the relation between designated and meaningful (sign) is a matter of agreement. This insight is significant in the field of art because it questions the modernist and romantic understanding of the uniqueness and originality of art created by the artist as an individual act. The loss of national identity is only a link to the compromised idea of authorship (Foucault, 2016). Adding to the interactivity and gaming essence of art, as well as the pursuit of an entertaining and diverting character, we understand that irreversible things happened in the sphere of art. How do they relate to self-portrayal and is it, as a phenomenon, able to prophylactically protect its manifestation (the self-portrait) from dementia¹³ and collapse?

One way to approach the answer is to trace the process of self-portrayal, in our intriguing time, through the look of an "inner man." Without hesitation, we choose Andy Warhol as an "informant", a leading representative of pop art, popular with applicable to the current self-portrayal insight, that "in the future everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes." He created multiple, based of photography¹⁴, series of self-portraits using screen printing technique. Through them, Warhol gives us, kind of, his own look of "a dedicated" to his personal world man, and more generally to the world of his contemporaries - artists. At the Museum of Andy Warhol in Pittsburgh, from samples of photos from his early youth period, which can be seen as the forerunner of contemporary "selfie", to the dramatic self-portraits-serigraphy, created in the last year of the life of the "king of pop art" are preserved. Through the changing images we can observe the cultural fixations of the artist but we can also trace their relevance to the reflections of the above-mentioned distinctive features of postmodernity in art. Experimenting with his own image, Warhol bequeathed us self-portraits-syntagmas, distinct semantic units-markers of what is happening with self-portrayal in an artistic time devoid of canons. The serigraphs-self-portraits of

¹² Definition of the new situation from the beginning of the 21st century, introduced by the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky. In 2004, in co-authorship with Canadian philosopher Sebastian Charles he published "Hypermodern Times," a book dedicated to time-diagnosing issues.

¹³ Dementia is a syndrome characterized by multiple disturbances of cognitive functions, without affecting consciousness.

¹⁴ For his screen printed works, Warhol takes pictures with an early model of Polaroid, maintained in production for him specifically

Warhol, which create different and context-specific meanings, sublime¹⁵ in the series of self-portraits dating back to 1986, completed only months before his death. One of the last created – a self-portrait with a distorted face and hair stranded in all directions, passes through the silk of the sieve, not only his late vision of himself, but his premonition of death too. In our view, Warhol's later self-portraits are an act of para-theatricality¹⁶ too, only subconsciously switched to a regime of a protective mechanism. Self-portraits - a fading echo of the phrase "canon is death" - the doctrine of postmodernity.

A six centuries-old solitaire – a myth planted in the Renaissance garden of portrait, the self-portraiture fades away into the fuzzy boundaries between audience and the work in postmodernity. Will there be room for it in the jungle which burst out of chaos of dynamic contexts in the art of hypermodernity¹⁷? In his autobiographical book "Tristes Tropiques" (1955), Levi-Strauss combines anthropology, travel memories, and philosophical reflections on the relationship between cultures and nature and, more generally, on humanity and humanism. Doesn't the answer to the question raised by us lie in the paraphrase of one of his pessimistic conclusions: "The world began without a man and it will end without him"¹⁸?

¹⁵ *Sublimation is a physical process in which solids pass directly into vapors. The solids pass into vapors without melting. By cooling the vapors, the final product is produced, a material in solid state again. There is a concept in psychology introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche, which was used to interpret the spirit as a reflection of libido. Sometimes it is considered a type of defense mechanism.*

¹⁶ *Polish director Jerzy Grotowski crosses the boundaries of theater and moves on to para-theatrical experiments devoted to the study of "active culture," in which there is no separation between the artist-performer and the consumer of culture, and the discovery of "the poet" in everyone who renounces the convenience of conventions, and wishes to participate in a joint creative act.*

¹⁷ Gilles Lipovetsky. In 2004, in co-authorship with Canadian philosopher Sebastien Charles published "Hypermodern Times"

¹⁸ Vyara Popova, in her new book on photography (East-West, 2018), interprets Paul Virilio's interests in technology and art. Her conclusions, in our view, can also be attributed to self-portrayal: "According to dromologic revolution of modern technology, once the space is annihilated, remains only the dimension of the eternal *now*. This is a virtual "eternal now" - like the actual God's eternity. A screen (virtual such - considering the computer screen) *eternal now* which remains completely indifferent. Since there is no past to which one might relate to, there is only a collection of databases. Therefore, if there is no past, there is no memory too; its lack, however, undermines self-identification. But the future is also reflected from the horizon through a *duration* that is constantly here and now. Since there is no future, there is no projection on the horizon of time. Thus, the timelessness of the real becomes a jail for the Ios, bombarded with images. ... Visual contamination of consciousness produces dizziness and vertigo, which vertigo escalates, supplemented by a lack of physical space experience. This obsession provokes hallucination: the difference between the real and the

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imaginary cracks. Dominant visual illusory also leads to a sense of unreality - as is the case with the denial of bodily incarnation."