

NIKOLAI RUSCHUKLIEV'S SELF-PORTRAIT – SEMANTIC DYNAMICS

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Abstract: *Self-portraits dominate the work of the artist Nikolay Ruschukliev. The text analyses the stages which the genre preferences characteristic for this artist go through in the context of the relationship between self-portrait and the concept of life's meaning and changes in its content. It also traces how the artist manages to commit to his conscious choice permeating his whole existence to create self-portraits and his reasons for having the "meetings" with himself. It is an attempt to answer questions posed by the paradoxical inverse relationship between the size of the synthesised messages to the world in which the artist lives and his ability to give sincere and honest answers to simple questions addressed to and from his self. Addressed are the issues how the ideologically provoked thresholds in life after filtering are transformed into an act of defence of personal truth, and why that very "self-awareness" is the necessary prerequisite for the achievement of this truth. The idea sustained is that the self-portraits of Nicholay Ruschukliev may be the key to understanding its transformation into genuineness about the world ... whereas the viewer who has touched this world "sinks" in the reflection of their own emotions, feelings, desires and fears.*

Key words: *attempt, self-portraits, Ruschukliev, genuineness.*

Several essential motives provoked the current study and each of them was a consequence of a previous fact, circumstance or event, i.e. in a direct conditioning. The causality in some of them (it must be admitted) has shrunk to its own searches in painting portraits and self-portrait in particular. In order to understand their nature and find and analyze the answers that we came across, it was logical to make an attempt to distance, objectify as far as the subject could be a carrier of objectivity. In order to figure out the meaning of our own activities, we had to keep that allowable close distance, in which the potential answers on one hand to recognize us as an addressee and meanwhile to have the dimension of a cognitive performance. It was only natural that the

focus of the study is the self-portraits of the Master¹. The fact that the local city gallery² keeps some of the contributions, justifies the same idea.

During the reflection process on the subject and the contents of the current text, a lot of seemingly random things and coincidences happened, but subsequently they proved fictitious. There was no causal link between them, but they were only connected by their meaning. For such phenomena C.G. Jung³ introduces the concept of “synchronicity” and in his introduction to the “I Ching - Book of changes” (Jung, 2005) he defines it as a “concept formulating a diametrically opposite view from that of causality”, considering that the coincidence of events in time and space means more than pure chance – and namely, special interconnection of objective events both among themselves and with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers. For reference points in the process of study-trial on Nikolai Ruschukliev’s self-portraits we used these “cracks” in the otherwise apparent homogeneity of the reality with the feeling that their modified meaning is rooted in the mind and intuition of its creator, intends to be stated in a synchronic way. Perhaps this is the way which the changing meaning of self-portraying can be traced back in its integrity.

The way of studying the art of self-portraying of this author, which presumably has its own personality, focuses on and requires the analyses of the stages through which it passes in the context of their link with the concept of life’s meaning and its content. The analytical insight applied to the study requires answers to many reasonable questions. How through the choice of expression and the I-portraying can complex messages be articulated in relation to the world in which the artist-protagonist lives? Where is the place of the delicate art filter, set to let through only the sincere and honest answers on the existential questions, when they are asked from the first person perspective and what is the required degree of self-awareness in this case? Is it possible art to be merged with life making it fate? How are the provoked ideological life thresholds transformed and motivate intention to assert oneself and to what extent is self-knowledge a prerequisite? And if we find out the answers of these questions, will it be sufficient to stare in the “mirror” of our own emotions, implicit feelings secrete desires or imputed guilt to portray our personal truth and to turn it into truth about the world in which we are destined to live in...

¹ The author graduates in 1989 with the first class of Prof. Ruschukliev.

² In the Art Gallery “Nikola Petrov”- Vidin, 15 works of Nikolai.Ruschukliev are kept. 4 of them are self-portraits. They were taken as donation from the author in 2001 and 2004.

³ Carl Gustav Jung/ Karl Gustav Jung (1875 – 1961) was a Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist disciple of Sigmund Froid. A branch of psychology called “analytical psychology.” Jung explored and wrote about mythology, religion, anthropology, alchemy, dreams and more.

Deliberately disarmed and with a dose of naivety we cross into a guarded personal territory, we looked around with the inherent disciplic trust of that Virgil¹ – an accomplice familiar with the terrain, who would protect us from the possible traps, which we seemingly were about to set for ourselves. Once again the support from the professor was provoked (author's note: I've sent a letter with the request for an answer for a few more questions, organized like a poll²). From the fragmented, seeming breathless like a confession answers, we learn that at the age of 13 Nikolai³ paints his first self-portrait, maybe encouraged by his aunt –an arts teacher in the hometown of the future painter. The year is 1945. The family of the prosecutor – judge Konstantin Nikolov is repressed. The family was left without any property and livelihood, and there was no other way for them but to send one of their three children to relatives in Pleven. From the following sentences from the Answers, we understand the feelings mixed with anticipation, experienced by the young man captured by a muse in timelessness, in which undesirable and sad “truths” precede the ambitions to find and initiate the artist in yourself. „...Seventy years since then, I am still painting. ...I've stood a lot of blows, and that is why I have resisted so far. This is why I often look into myself. Recently I have drawn myself by memory at a young age It is not like a documentary, but as a state. Missed, even wasted youth ...” In his aim not to lose “the tracks of lost time”, the painter aims to compensate the “lost youth” with his self-portraits as an indirect feeling for the paradoxical confidence of the artist that through art he can move freely in time and change its course. He created them to serve as grooves by which he assembles the elements for his spiritual space and to fill it with imaginary self-portraying states and also to correct the continuum of real and surreal world. These “painted recently” imaginary and unreal self-portraits we will define as **compensating time portraits**. Some of them are stored in the City Art Gallery – Plovdiv as a part of his personal donation⁴ made in May 2013. According to memories all of the 60 self-portraits, which were painted were organized in an exhibition in 2008- “Self-portrait states and November”. The exhibition was arranged at the gallery at №6 Shipka. According to Galina Nikolova- Ivancheva, they were created for about three years, but represent a sort of autobiography. In the opening speech of the exhibition she astutely

¹ Considered to be one of the most significant poets of ancient Rome, Dante Alighieri in the “Divine Comedy” “takes” him as his leader in the eternal realms of Hell and the Purgatory.

² The questions can be found at the end of the text.

³ Nikolai Konstantinov Nikolov is the mane of the artist. He adopted the pseudonym Ruschukliev in 1961, after he is in Ruse, where he is appointed as a high school art teacher.

⁴ Prof. Nikolai Ruschukliev donates to the City Art Gallery – Plovdiv 33 of his paintings, 20 of which are self-portraits painted between 2008 and 2013.

notes: „...passing over the threshold of self-knowledge, the artist reaches his cultural seclusion – the self-portraits contain the idea of loneliness and the eternal search of the artist”¹ and quotes an inscription – a quote from Paul Cezanne- from the wall in the professor’s studio: “The world doesn’t understand me and I don’t understand the world, that’s why I’ve withdrawn from it.” Withdrawn in his states, he creates self-portraits, with which he removes the state of indifference and draws the viewer into a co-experience of their emotional substrate. After a “meeting” with them the artist Professor Andrey Daniel says: „...I liked someone else’s work. A few days ago- at the opening of the exhibition of Prof. Nikolai Ruschukliev from the Veliko Tarnovo University. I think he is great but underrated Bulgarian painter.” (Daniel, 2008)

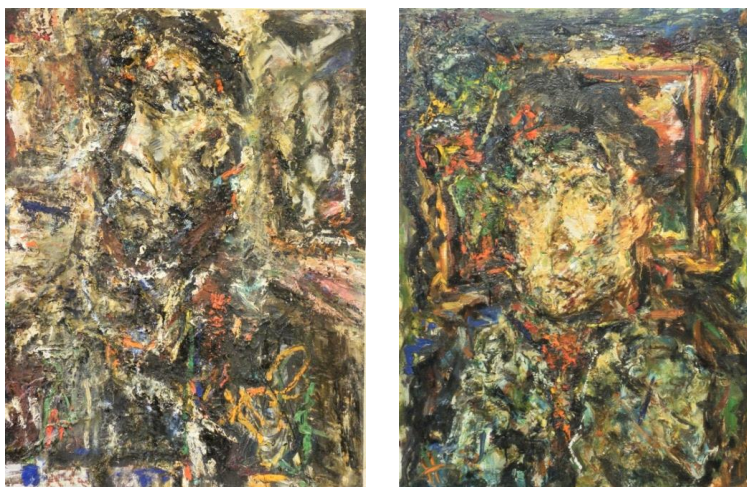


Figure 1. Self-portraits donated to Art gallery Plovdiv, 2013.

For the self-portraits in Plovdiv’s exhibition-donation, the author reveals that “they affect the philosophical themes of the road in man and beyond man..” and the words “confession and sincerity”² are an inclusive denominator with the others painted in the above mentioned 70 years. **The portraits compensating time** are made in the typical for the artist after the 90’s working method; with accumulation of thick layers of oil paint “impasto”, with a reminder of places for bas-relief. They are positioned on the border of the visual comfort for works attributed to the media. „Usually I accumulate a lot of paint – not for its own sake, it becomes more expressive” (Ibid.) (analogy occurs with time-based arts) is a laconic, personal clarification of the author’s

¹ D. Galina Nikolova – Ivancheva is a disciple of Prof. Ruschukliev; the text is published in: http://ivancheff.blogspot.bg/2009/01/blog-post_16.html

² Words with which he defines his self-portraits in a Poll-Letter from 24. 06. 2015.

technique. If we also add an entropic tonality (sought and achieved) in our imagination, naturally a parallel between them and the portraits of Frank Auerbach¹ is promoted. Both of them create a bold and spontaneous, full of tension painting, and near the automatism of the gesture.

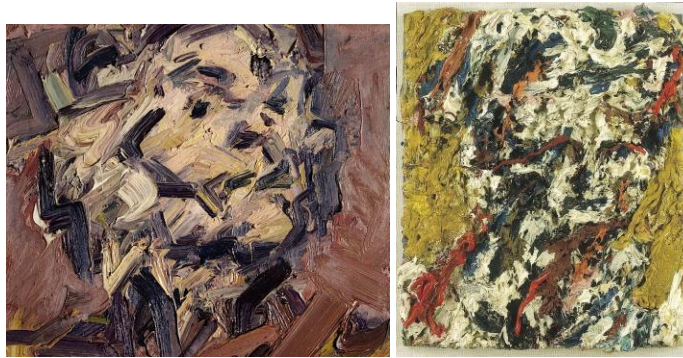


Figure 2 Frank Auerbach, Head of J.Y.M., oil on board, 60/58.8 cm., 1992; Frank Auerbach, Head of E.O.W., 1964

From the biographies of them both, we can see that their fates in the early years of their lives were common; the differences came later on, resulting from the political systems, in which their life developed and their art was formed, with their opposing social and moral characteristics. Matches continue to emerge in front of us as we try to understand what art is, what excited them and how they learned their lessons in life. Ruschukliev's answer to the question if he had a "teacher" or an inspiring example in his work for creating self-portraits was: "Yes – Rembrandt". Auerbach described his impressions of Rembrandt as "magically depicting life in movement and one of the first artists that really excited me." (Milliard, 2013). Stubbornness, with which both draw the same "model" throughout their career as artists, we can also attribute a synchronistic series of similarities, which marks our analysis. We find it in the example with the portraits/chapters of Catherine Lampert² – frequently a model and a companion of the author and his permanent model Julia- with

¹ Born in Berlin, Germany in 1931 British painter. Experiencing influence of the classical and the art of the 20th century- expressionism, Soutine and his teacher D. Bonberg. Member of the "London School" group- figurative artists who are opposed to abstract art, along with R.B. Kitaj, Fr. Bacon, L. Freud, L. Kozof. Frank Auerbach has a reputation of a reputation of a leading contemporary British artist.

² Independent curator and art historian. Director of the Whitechapel Gallery (1988-2001), Catherine Lampert is the author of Frank Auerbach. Speaking and Rainring, Thames & Hudson, 2014; Since 1978, Frank Auerbach painted over 60 portraits of Catherine Lampert, with which friendly and professional relations are associated.

Frank Auerbach and Ruschukliev obsessed to “gaze” in himself (with a brush in hand).



Figure 3 "Self-portrait", 50/61cm., 2004; from the fund of Art Gallery „Nikola Petrov“-Vidin, donation

The coherence between self-portraits, which we define as **compensatory time** and the others painted by Ruschukliev after 1900 is obvious in regard with the formal expression. They are related by the elevated and enlightened color of tangible relief layers. The fields with a suspended light are highlighted with clear, painted dark tone synclines, sunk to the base of the painting. With them, the artist manages to control and keep the explosions from the crowding scenic matter. In terms of content, these self-portraits suggest the feeling of an almost physical presence of the subject, as the author states that he is present in this otherwise extramural conversation. “Classified as a degenerate”¹ once (in one of the three Bulgarias, in which he says he’s lived) (Velikova, Racheva, 2013: 38-40), the son of the „beaten but still alive enemy of the people” has overcome his trials, “survived and is still painting”... with the belief that it’s “his mission assigned from God” (Ibid.). And he generously donates to galleries all across the

¹ In a letter of inquiry from 24.06.2015.; Personal story told in several interviews given regarding the award of the “Ruse” prize for art and exhibition on the occasion of the jubilee for the 80th anniversary of the Ruse Art Gallery, November, 2012.

country, in order to keep the “conversation” with as many people as possible. It is a conversation about dignity and meaning to assert ourselves honestly and with hard work. This solid cycle of works-self-portraits, we define as **testaments of vindication**.

The volume is in itself and **the compressing of time**. In the work around the designs, the artist trusts his available arsenal of extensions-reflections in mirrored surfaces, photographs, old and new sketches and drawings. In his words, even the fleeting reflection with aberrations from the window of a cupboard suddenly gives him an idea, which “the naked mirrored truth does not show or hide”(Ibid.), as delicately, more likely addressing himself, advises his companion: „it’s interesting, try again” (Ibid.). And he still continues to create them frantically with confidence, that we’ll surely feel the drama in the “bubbling” underneath their surface color, “erupting” in places with their belling intensity to “declare” the pieces of scattered truth. In the synchronic painting approach around its disclosure is the key for understanding the changing meaning of the self-portraits of Nikolai Ruschukliev; in them, the time has lost its linear move and has authorized the artist to measure it with another measure – portraying. With portraits –relics from another possible time, in which the causality of the connections is transformed into a split of chasing each other **altered meanings**.

In order to dose the philosophical bias in the analysis (to whatever our chosen topic and conductive working hypothesis for the synchronic events), we applied a reverse chronology of time. As when driving in a heavy traffic – a frequent look at the rearview mirror confident that we have adequate dynamics of movement. And since the accelerated dynamics in the art scene (during the period covering the issue of self-portraits of Nicholai Ruschukliev) the focus was on another setup, “the retired from the misunderstanding him world artist”, was not in it. To be rediscovered their messages in the terms of the fallen smog of dynamics, we looked back in her dim glasses, similar to the appropriate manner of generations of artist to check the qualities of the pattern. In a chronological descent in time, naturally we stopped in the year 1989- the beginning of the catalytic process of the semantic dynamics in the work of Ruschukliev and also the beginning of the independent, creative path of the author of the text.

We intended the sentence above to be as an ending of this paper, but because it does not possess an element of synchronicity (a principle that we chose in our analysis) logically concerns of an eventual esoteric reading occurred. Since divination is foreign for us, we inserted explanations to the appearance of random coincidences and things for which we mentioned at the beginning. In an effort to reduce possible outer context, naïve and personal sounding like description and insertion of the documentary, we used these images.



1. Wishes added to the letter from 24. June 2015.
2. Picture from 16. 10. 2015r. (selfie)
3. Frank Auerbach, „Self-portrait”, pencil, charcoal, (Palimpsest), National Portrait Gallery – London
4. Banner in front of the main entrance of the Tate Britain exhibition: Frank Auerbach, 9 Oct. – 13 March, 2016.
5. Chamber exhibition of Prof. N. Ruschukliev; HG “N.Petrov”-Vidin, Oct.-Dec. 2015r.

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