What is the Subject of the Self-Portrait?: Me?

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1652>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1652

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2004

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Jacques Leenhardt, « What is the Subject of the Self-Portrait?: Me? », *Critique d'art* [Online], 24 | Automne 2004, Online since 22 February 2012, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1652> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.1652

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

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- 1 The ambiguity of the way this title is phrased is plain for all to see. And it will take all of Vincent Descombes' patience (p. 15) to show us that if the philosophers of modernity have for the most part used this concept of "subject" in nonsensical ways, its use in the title is at least correct in terms of the stated criteria: the subject is identifiable as an individual, and present in the world in the manner of a causal power. We are duly comforted: in a sense, the subject of the self-portrait *L'Homme à l'oreille coupée* is indeed Vincent Van Gogh, for it is he who painted it. But V. Descombes is well aware that by reducing the notion of subject to the field of action, he is merely sidestepping the problem raised by the self-portrait: what about the human "subject", the *I* from which the image is produced in this picture. This human subject is a reflexive subject rather than or as much as an active one, an *ego* expressed in the first person and not in the third, as the author of the self-portrait. And yet, as V. Descombes notes, there are some who persist in thinking that there is a unique "subject" behind these uses, a subject supporting what is currently known as the "philosophy of the subject".

- 2 At a certain juncture, V. Descombes' quest casts both confusion and light on to the debate ushered in by two exhibitions—*Moi !* and *La Grande parade*—as well as one or two critical books about the notion of portraits and self-portraits. It is probably no coincidence if the word “self-portrait”, which seems to have existed since the year dot, made its appearance extremely late in the French language, apparently in 1928, at the very moment when Wittgenstein was forging the weapons of the philosophy of language which V. Descombes is today intent on turning back against the illusion underpinning “philosophies of the subject”. The self-portrait is an object which takes shape in language—the thing has existed since Greek antiquity—at the time of the decline of individualist society, centuries after Descartes laid the foundations of the metaphysics of the subject. This was the moment when doubt got the better of the certainty which seemed to cling to the rationalist notion of “subject”, while artists challenged both their means, the necessity of their art and, as Camus put it, their very existence¹. But the self-portraits of Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo and Bacon, to mention just a few examples used by Pascal Bonafoux in his slim book *Autoportraits du XXe siècle*, and even Dalí's *Soft Self-Portrait*, are something quite other than a phrase. And if Ben's *Look at me* is one of those phrases to which Magritte held the secret, *This is not a Pipe*-style, there is a pressing need to say what relation this phrase, or this image, has with the activity of the self-portraitist, not to say this latter's ego. This is a programme that lies ahead of us, for V. Descombes attacks just “philosophies of the subject” which, with their words: *self*, *selfhood/ipseity*, *ego*, *subjectivity* and *per se*, muddle the mind rather than enlighten it. Point taken, and duly noted.
- 3 The difficulty of an analysis of images called “self-portraits” has to do, firstly, with the fact that we are only acquainted with them by way of the discourses we make in their regard. It also has to do with the fact that they include complex objects like mirrors, as is attested to by the self-portraits painted in 1646 by Johannes Gump, and in 1960 by Norman Rockwell. In the 20th century, what is more, self-portraits introduced infinitely varied techniques, which merely makes their manner of meaning even more complicated.
- 4 Jean Clair emphasizes that the introduction of mirror games changed the deal². So, from the end of the 18th century on, we increasingly see the painter conceiving of himself, or representing and depicting himself, which is perhaps not altogether equivalent, portrayed as the artist. The space of the self-portrait this opens out onto differing metaphorical chords where the painter appears portrayed as a monkey (Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, *Le Singe peintre*, 1739-40), a clown, Pierrot or *The Albatross*, as in Baudelaire.
- 5 Baudelaire is the person who would take the themes of the artist as buffoon, clown and acrobat to the highest level of concentration, as Jean Starobinski puts it. The Romantic writers found the vital resources, which art coopted by the bourgeois no longer offered them, in the circus, in the theatre of Tightrope-walkers, and in the bedazzlement of the track to the stars reproducing a cosmos entirely given over to the incredible. Here they rediscovered an original audience, ready to set sail for the impossible, and also, in the funambulist exercise, a synthesis of body and mind, whose aerial verticality talked to their need for liberty and impertinence. From Degas' *Mlle Lala au cirque Fernando* (1879) to Seurat's *Cirque* (1891), from Toulouse-Lautrec to Picasso, the world of the parade would act as a revealer of a need for the marvellous, forever being reasserted.
- 6 Baudelaire in fact encumbered the figure of the clown with a tragic weight that most artists who would take up the theme in his wake, with the possible exception of Seurat, would not fail to underscore: the intoxication of art was unable to shroud the terrors of

the abyss haunting them. Art is just illusion, and the return to earth, after the headiness of the tightrope-walker's prowess, a school of pain. This would produce the more or less endless series of sad clowns, melancholy Pierrots, and even the tragic and Christlike figures of Georges Rouault. And this story is still continuing; it has traversed the 20th century and reached us in the 21st in the images of Olivier Blanckart and Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux (*Clowns*, 1997), Bruce Naumann (*Torture of Clowns*, 1987), and the videos of Patrick Sorrin (*The Battle of the Tarts*, 1994). It emphasizes the change slowly occurring since the Romantic period through the different forms of expressionism, turning the "painter", as traditionally conceived, into an "artist". Having abandoned representation, the craftsman in the classical tradition makes way for the artist who is seeking less to put across a world than his personal feelings, his moods, and his passions. This latter, like Gilles or Pierrot, is condemned to gesticulation, mimicry and grimace. The "physiognomies" of Lavater, the caricatures of Daumier, and other "expressive heads" which would invade the terrain of the portrait, right down to the grin of death in Helene Schjerfbeck's series (1944), refer in the end of the day to the actual status of the painting, aphasic art, art beyond language, which must turn its silence into an inimitable voice, if not a correct phrase...

NOTES

1. *Moi ! : autoportraits du XXe siècle* (edited by Pascal Bonafoux), Paris : Skira, 2004, p. 17
2. *La Grande parade. Portrait de l'artiste en clown* (edited by Jean Clair), Paris : Gallimard ; Ottawa : Canadian Museum of Fine Art, 2004, p. 31