

Claude Closky
Július Koller
Dominique Mathieu
Gianni Pettena
Endre Tót
Lois Weinberger

Self-portrait | group exhibition | march 13 - may 15, 2022

"...you will want to know what kind of man I was." (Petrarch)

Unlike the portrait, self-portraiture is a genre in its own right that distinguishes and characterises a particular subject, namely the artist. It is the image of an exceptional personality, of a subjectivity one feels is unique and incomparable: a man (to paraphrase Petrarch) who makes his own image into a reflection of what he embodies at a certain point in history.

Born in the Italian Renaissance—at the same time as the portrait and the autonomous status of art and the artiste—, self-portraiture was a new space in which the artist could express himself. Through it the artist could proclaim his existence and seek, like the mirror image of Narcissus, the unique presence that inhabited him and the artistic status he needed. An instrument of social standing, it is also an ideological indicator and a demonstration of the aesthetic principles of each era. According to Walter Benjamin, the portrait not only denotes and identifies; it also situates its subject in history. It is not only a reflection of the self but also an act of personalisation and affirmation of artistic identity in the spatio-temporal position of the person. In Dürer's work, the self-portrait was based upon the *imitatio christi* and the possibility of comparing art to divine creation¹; Van Eyck's reflection in the mirror or his omnipresent silhouette authenticates the facts²; Rembrandt's presence in the darkness testifies to the social conditions of his art: an art of the studio and of private commissions; for Courbet and Van Gogh, it corresponds to the lonely, marginalised anxieties of an artist rejected by the official and social machine of academic standards³; for Hogarth and Picasso, it reflects each of the artist's

1 In *Portrait of the Artist Holding a Thistle* (1493), Albrecht Dürer adds an inscription in German: "My affairs follow the course assigned to them on high".

2 While *Man with a Red Turban* bears the inscription: "Jan van Eyck made me on 21 October 1433", the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (1438) functions a twofold certificate of authenticity: the painting illustrates the marriage vows of Giovanni Arnolfini and the daughter of a great family of Italian merchants, the Cenami family, and thus acquires the legal value of a marriage certificate. The sentence on the wall at the back of the room: "Johannes VE was there or here" and the discreet presence of the artist in the mirror testify to his awareness of his dual status as witness and artist.

3 Gustave Courbet, *Portrait of the Artist*, known as *The Desperate Man*, 1845.

aesthetic and artistic (or sentimental) periods⁴... But what about today? What is at stake with self-depiction in the modern world?

When Leon Battista Alberti states in *De Pittura*, published in Latin in 1435, that Narcissus was “the inventor of painting”—and of the portrait—, he raises the problem of conformity with reality: predicated on reflection and the impossibility of representation, the image is primarily based on criteria of verisimilitude and embodies an anxious quest to plumb the unfathomable depths of the soul. But neither physical resemblance nor the quest for the deeper self are on the menu for contemporary art. The self-portrait is no longer a frontal image of oneself (as in Van Eyck and Dürer’s work) validating the omnipotence of the artist; narcissism is no longer sufficient for knowing oneself and the world. According to André Rouillé, “The portrait is no longer possible in its canonical form. There has been a decisive departure from that: the face is defeated, and the subject has radically changed.”

Self-representation now serves a more general meaning and questions of greater current relevance, be they political, social, ideological or ecological. Depersonalisations that seem to shy away from the subject are in fact a way of better understanding the world’s incipient disorders. Having once tended to idealise, glorify or conquer the subject, contemporary self-portraiture escapes from traditional systems of representation in order to explore the underbelly of humanity: this, indeed, is the approach behind the exhibition *Shelf-portrait* at Salle Principale. Self-representation now adopts a form that is not fixed but constantly changing and in motion. If we no longer physically recognise the artist in their self-portrait, we understand their positions, their engagement, their perspective on the meaning of life (or its meaninglessness) and their need for freedom: it is a militant act more than a representation.

Dominique Mathieu, eager to prepare a simpler and more authentic future as regards our natural needs in a world centred on economics and finance, wants to “enact change” with *Les hommes d’avenir* (2008-2022). Set in enamel, a durable substance able to maintain the artist’s convictions over time, the six drawings depict him as a clown, a resistance fighter, a magician, a farmer, a troubadour and an artisan. The line drawings, the isolated torso against a neutral background, the fixed stare and the accessories reduced to their functionally expressive minimum (hats, a big bowtie, a rifle, a magic wand, a wisp of straw, a guitar, a bag) echo the effectiveness of the message and the simplicity of the function. For the artist, these highly symbolic figures, courageous and responsible for their choices and positions, express a form of resistance.

Endre Tót’s *I am so glad if I can look at you* (from the series *Very Special Gladnesses*, actions performed between 1971 and 1976) features photographs where he depicts himself in banal and weird situations to demonstrate his lack of freedom in Socialist Hungary and the potential for overturning it with joy (reflected in the slogan *I am glad if...*). The self-portrait shows him laughing, hidden under a thick fringe⁵, expressing the need to hide as an artist and the need to express happiness and freedom of thought. On his tee-shirt, the

⁴ In *The Painter and his Pug* by William Hogarth (1745), the palette, which bears an S-shaped “line of beauty”, prefigures his theories on the “serpentine” in *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753).

⁵ We might also refer to the illustrious Greek painter Zeuxis, who is said to have died laughing.

superimposition of the name Tót on three Os—signalling his need for artistic recognition—shows that language requires meaning that is impossible to provide under a totalitarian regime.

Like Endre Tót, Július Koller kicks back against the system with his UFO series. The two black and white photos titled *Council Functional Object* (1978) and *After-Scream* (1983) are records of almost invisible gestures (screaming; hiding a road sign) which both upset the established order and escape from it. By treating his own images roughly, he not only indicates the road to dereliction and the loss of self but also marks the end of subliminal Neo-Platonism inherent in the age-old practice of self-portraiture: the idealism that, until now, characterised these figures of glory.

Claude Closky's textual work *Portrait* (1991 - 2022) also seeks ways of escaping from the ego. To make his self-portrait on commission for Salle Principale, the artist uses a strict protocol: a text counts down all the days of his life from birth to the day the piece was made, on a framed 45 x 62 cm sheet of paper. This list of dates, which rejects interpretation and subjectivity, visualises the anonymity of individuals and the finiteness of human time. His specific vocabulary relating to a topographic nomenclature: "the body, the eye, fat, character" provides a mischievous bodily analogy.

Gianni Pettena also intervenes in public space using language. *Espace vide réservé à Gianni Pettena* (1973) is a 2-metre-by-3 banner bearing the title and tautologically announcing the function of the project: setting aside an "empty" space for free artistic expression in a cultural venue and, by "occupying" the space, engendering the necessary conditions for the exercise of free thought.

Lois Weinberger's melancholy close-up photographic self-portrait *Green Man* (2004) asserts his belonging to Nature. Both a hybrid creature and a mythological, folkloric and religious figure, an image of wildness and a symbol of growth and fertility, his face covered in green paint, his head lowered, he attempts to negotiate a new symbiotic relationship between man and nature. If the artist seeks to reconnect with the vital forces of nature in an environment influenced and dominated by man, his self-portrait represents a penetrating analysis of his ecological position.

The contemporary self-portrait appears as a new genre, more open to the world; it steps beyond the private life of the artist and generates an openness able now to interrogate the essence of humanity. In other words, the image embodies an "excess" of presence and revelation. As the philosopher Paul Ricoeur explains, these images of artists reside "not in the quality of representation, nor in looking like the model, nor in their compliance with supposed universal rules, but in an excess with regard to all representation and all rules."⁶

Corinne Szabo* - February 2022

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *La critique et la conviction*. Entretien avec François Azouvi et Marc de Launay, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1995.

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