

Distortions in contemporary art (painting)

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Abstract. The article highlights the connection between inner and outer world, between portrait, as a classical artistic genre in painting, and particular psychological aspects which exerts influence upon painting style, technique, methodological procedure and last but not least upon the concept that articulates in a coherent manner the narrative thread of an artwork. There are presented a few examples of distorted portraits belonging to important international but also Romanian artists whose interest is focused on exploring the idea of (lack of) identity in nowadays society. The development of psychology as an independent discipline in the 20th century was a real treasure as it started helping humankind, including artists, to deepen particular psychological aspects and connect them to their daily artistic practice.

Keywords: *portrait, distortion, painting, psychology,* .

Introduction

At the end of 18th century psychology started gaining recognition as a science. The psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn developed the field of psychologic art once the book *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: a contribution to the psychology and psychopathology of configuration* was published in 1922 and it presents the analysis of particular drawings of ten schizophrenic patients who have a strong connection to the visual art field. Visual artists like Max Ernst or Jean Dubuffet got inspired from mentally ill people's artworks, thus changing the perspective of what an artwork should look like. The concept of *aesthetics* changed its value, by being assigned different characteristics according to the atmosphere of the 20th century.

The traumas caused by revolutions, the two world wars, the invention of atomic bombs, the industrialisation etc., increased the level of human being's anxiety and loneliness, causing lack of moral balance which can be easily noticed not only in painting, but also in cinematography, literature. Carl Gustav Jung highlights this idea in the scene entitled *The Shepherd* in a dialogue with a shepherd that prefers an isolated life far away from the crowded cities: "You might be right. But this wonderful free life – one can't let it go. Life in the cities means deformity. One more or less in civilization – what difference does the individual make?"¹ . He strongly believes that living in an urban environment means giving up at your own freedom and thus increasing the level of anxiety: "How many cowards and

¹ Nick, *Carl Jung the Black Books Volume 4: The Librarian and the Shepherd*

<https://www.walden43200.com/in-depth-analysis/carl-jung-the-black-books-volume-4-the-librarian-and-the-shepherd/> (27.02.2024), Carl Gustav Jung, *The Black books*, W. W. Norton & Company; Slipcased edition, New York, 2020, p.266

weaklings do you have among your cultural labourers, who participate only because of their cowardice and weakness, but at heart would like to do something else, if their **anxiety** would permit them?”²

Carl Jung, too, had conceived of the unconscious as shaped by the accumulated experience of humanity. This experience is deposited in the form of archetypes. These are inborn predispositions that respond to certain basic types of experience such as desire and loss.

This lack of inner balance is synonym to *distortion* that is translated in visual arts, theatre or literature fields in a totally different language that rethinks the concept of *beauty*. The emerging of *Avant-Garde* movement (Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Max Ernst, etc.), as an aggressive reaction against the traditional art, of the experimental film (Maya Deren), of *Fluxus* movement (Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, John Cage, etc.), of psychological thrillers (Alfred Hitchcock), the invention of photography (Daguerreotype – the first photographic process) that threatened painting which was thought to be dead, along with the emerging of the *Nihilist* movement that used to deny the meaning of life, the philosopher Nietzsche being known for the famous statement *God is dead*, all these being mentioned, one can state that starting with the end of 19th century and during the 20th century society suffered great changes in terms of technology, infrastructure, science, advantages that came up also with the other side of the coin. Depression flourished and it was more difficult to reach the true self, by getting beyond the social masks, as Jung mentions: “Whoever looks into the mirror of the water will see first his own face. Whoever goes to himself risks a confrontation with himself. The mirror does not flatter, it faithfully shows whatever looks into it; namely, the face we never show to the world because we cover it with the persona, the mask of the actor. But the mirror lies behind the mask and shows the true face.”³

Distorted portraits

The term *distortion* comes from the Latin word *distortionem*⁴ and means the state of being twisted out of shape; generally speaking, a distorted portrait makes reference to another level of reality which involves a different type of anatomy, like an abstract one. There is a strong connection between the inner reality, which is a subjective one, and the outer reality that is at the opposite, it’s objective, but at the same time it’s highly influenced by the inner reality that transforms it accordingly.

Abstraction takes an identifiable object or form and transforms it until they no longer look realistic. Abstract art gives artists freedom and allows artists to freely communicate their ideas in a way that is not limited by reality. The artist can leave out details, change the point of view, exaggerate the size, distort the shapes and colours, or twist and simplify the forms. The question that arises is what can be or it is considered a portrait and much more a distorted one?

1.1. Distorted portraits (Portraits without a face) in international contemporary painting

A lot of contemporary artists starting with 20th century, like the informal artist Jean Fautrier or the expressionist painters George Grosz or Max Beckmann (belonging to *New realism* art movement) or Francis Bacon (one of the most important *School of London* artists) were tempted to interpret in a shocking way the human being’s face features in order to mirror particular psychological aspects, or the surrealist René Magritte dared to represent faces without a face in his artwork series entitled *The Lovers* where he paints faces covered with white fabric that betray mystery.

Exploring the material implications of different media, Gerhard Richter has navigated between realism and abstraction. Richter actively distorts his works by dragging paint across the surface. This obscures the marks he has previously made. A perfect example of painterly distortion, this multi-step

² Idem.

³ *The persona - The Mask That Conceals Your True Self*, 24.12.2021, [https://eternalisedofficial.com/2021/12/24/the-persona-carl-jung/Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious](https://eternalisedofficial.com/2021/12/24/the-persona-carl-jung/Archetypes%20of%20the%20Collective%20Unconscious) (27.02.2024), Carl Gustav, CW 9, Part I: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, p.43.

⁴ *Distortion*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/distortion> (29.02.2024).

process of creating an artwork and then immediately covering it with more layers. The focus is on the process of creation and how Richter uses distortion to create a sense of mysticism. But before the philosophy of Foto fixation of Gerhard Richter, we must remind Belgian artist Luc Tuymans which had interventions of or from photography putting accent on a blurring technique and making the subjects to look ill.



Figure 1. Luc Tuymans, *Der Diagnostische Blick V*, Lithography 119.50 x 78.00 cm.⁵

Takashi Murakami is an internationally renowned artist. He is best known for his witty and playful works that blur the boundaries between high and low culture. Drawing from anime, traditional Japanese painting and popular culture, Murakami's work incorporates a wide range of motifs. Murakami's work is at the intersection of art, fantasy and popular culture, and the combination of a wealth of references is the basis for his unique style of art. The artist coined the term "super flat" to describe his well-known aesthetic of visually distorting iconic images.

Beatrice Wanjiku is a contemporary Kenyan contemporary painter known for her unsettled, captivating and mysterious portraits whose style is between figuration and abstraction and in which she investigates particular psychological aspects.⁶



Figure 2. Beatrice Wanjiku, *Lifts Beyond Conception IV*, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100 x 2 cm.⁷

⁵ Luc Tuymans, *Der Diagnostische Blick V* <https://www.artpartout.be/en/luc-tuymans/der-diagnostische-blick-v> (06.03.2024)

⁶ *Beatrice Wanjiku*, <https://www.duendeartprojects.com/artists/72-beatrice-wanjiku/biography/> (29.02.2024).

⁷ *Lifts Beyond Conception IV*, <https://www.saatchiart.com/art/Painting-Lifts-Beyond-Conception-IV-SOLD/54893/2222400/view> (29.02.2024).

1.2. Distorted portraits in Romanian contemporary painting

In Romanian painting there can be noticed international Western influences especially in the post-communism period (1990-2010) when one tried to recover the cultural regression caused by the long period of totalitarianism, by getting in touch with the international art scene. Contemporary Romanian painters like Adrian Ghenie or Francisc Chiuariu and many others were also interested in deepening this concept of *identity* linked to the historical periods which distorted the moral structure of humankind.

For example Francisc Chiuariu's artwork below entitled *no. 6* takes part from his recent series of portraits which represent particular leaders who left an unerasable trace in history and implicitly in the collective unconsciousness. The face features seem to liquefy in a dramatic and strange way, melting any face details resembling to a mask, the symbol of a physical, psychological and spiritual degradation.⁸



Figure 2. Francisc Chiuariu, *no. 6*, oil on canvas, 80x60 cm, 2020⁹

1.3. Distorted portraits in abstract/conceptual art.

Piet Mondrian is best known for his geometric works of art. His work was all about balance and proportion, mostly based on squares and rectangles. He absorbed the lessons of cubism in Paris and then returned to Holland, where he developed a new form of abstractization derived from musical notes, as portraits of our aesthetic emotions. Abstract art allows to portretaise also other aspect of human, and portrait as a gender evolves by this kind of visual interpretation. Mondrian militates in the essay *Neo-Plasticism. The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence*, that art objective is to the universal against individual and that reflects in the pure plastic expression, as pure geometry against descriptive expression. Kazimir Malevich, brings nonobjectivity and the system independent of any aesthetic consideration, experience, and mood as the ultimate limit of representing the abyss. He is of the opinion that creativity is the essence of man and that everyone should be a part of this process.

Counterbalancing *The Realistic Manifesto*, by Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner, argues that the Cubists and Futurists only deluded themselves in trying to rescue the visual arts from the swamps of the past. Wassily Kandinsky's (*Plan for the Physico-psycological Department of the Russian Academy of Artistic Science*) and Johannes Ittens research works allow us to experience a work of art by re-

⁸ Magda Cârnci, *People you know | Francisc Chiuariu*, <https://www.annartgallery.ro/ro/expo/peopleyouknow> (27.02.2024).

⁹ Idem.

experiencing it, to re-create it and to awaken the essential and living character that is in its form as our own personal life. The work of art is reborn in us.¹⁰

Written language has become a form of portraying humans in relation to history and time, by indicating ideas represented visually in drawing and text form in the works *One or three chairs* by Joseph Kosuth. On Kawara, Japanese conceptual artist, resorted to the numbering system and dates to indicate the time and space related to human activity, like a special diary. Kawara later develops a series of postcard, that can be seen also as ready-mades and that are influenced by his travelling and mostly are regarding the slow time, or the stillness of it.

Yayoi Kusama with her first self-portrait develops a unique way to the dot” a prickly pink seed, an embryonic circle of the eternal, a full-stop on the beginning and a launchpad into the cosmos. Produced when she was just 21 years old, here is the polka dot at the beginning of its life, and a visual statement of the unity of humanity with the planets.”¹¹

Nothing remains isolated and we perceive form as the embodiment of an idea. The work of art is an expression of our innermost self. Jose Ortega y Gasset, in his essay *The Dehumanisation of Art*,¹² says that all modern art is fatally unpopular because it divides people into groups and makes them have opinions. We would rather look at our conclusion by using this principle of Ortega y Gasset in the construction of our conclusions and take in consideration that they might be unpopular.

Conclusion

So, we believe that distortion is a process of abstraction and that it is deeply connected to the following elements: our inner self and our mental health including traumatic and paranoid episodes, the process of the brain that leads to different types and degrees of abstraction, the interpretation of distortion based on our previous experiences, the way we perceive human beings and the way we can perceive a portrait today. The use of symbolic elements in today's contemporary art, both international and Romanian, can be justified by considering the collective unconscious. The lack of identity as a theme is a result of the communist regime, but also of other specific political systems that do not allow complete freedom, just as Cubism replaced the horrific representations of Gothic art with geometric figures. Just as primitives drew living forms and then resorted to the abstract signs of cosmic animals, we visually represent things that repulse or scare us. The repulse for the living things can be still seen in a traditional culture as the Oriental Christianity. But we cannot base our conclusions on the fact that the past influences the future of arts more than the actual political, economic, social, and cultural environment, as we can see in the examples presented in the text above. In fact, the most plausible hypothesis is that the art is a mirror to the world, and the distorted portraits are mirrors of the people, expressing realities that other ways may remain obscure, unseen and what beauty is that distorted portrait is, depends on who is looking and cannot be defined by a simple description of examples through the art history.

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