

Jens Zwernemann

“Painting and writing have much to tell each other”:

On the Conceptualization of Personal Identity
in Modernist Painting and Literature

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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*Quelquefois je suis vide pendant très longtemps.
Je suis sans identité.
Ça fait peur d'abord.
Et puis ça passe par un mouvement de bonheur.
Et puis ça s'arrête.*

Marguerite Duras, *C'est tout.*

I. "EVERYTHING CRACKS": MODERNISM, ART, AND IDENTITY

Das Auseinanderfallen, also die Ungewissheit ist dieser Zeit eigen: nichts steht auf festen Füßen und hartem Glauben an sich: man lebt für morgen, denn das Übermorgen ist zweifelhaft.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Aus dem Nachlass der Achtzigerjahre*

We are living in times of crisis. From economic and cultural globalization to ecological catastrophes, from international and intercultural conflicts to environmental disasters and financial crashes—the threats to the accustomed life-styles of contemporary societies are manifold.¹ As a result, the present era has come to be characterized by an ingrained feeling of loss. Lost, it seems, are not only stability, security, and certainty, but also moral and ethical values—features which are assumed to have been hallmarks of the past:² “disintegration, [...] that slow process of breaking up, falling apart, which, once you have become aware of it, seems ever quickening and inevitable,” as David Malouf put it in his (albeit historical) novel *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996), is today widely perceived as “an essential element of existence.”³ For the individual, in turn, the loss of reliable fixed-points frequently leads to a form of “internal emigration,”⁴ a drawing-back onto themselves in order to escape the constant change and insecurity of the outer world: “wenn die äußeren Stützen zu fallen drohen, wendet der Mensch seinen Blick von der Äußerlichkeit ab und *sich selbst zu*.”⁵ Most likely, however, this move will not result in the desired feeling of security and stability either. Torn between a multitude of different societal offers and regulations,

¹ In their 2009 “State of the Future”-report, the so-called “Millennium Project” listed a total of 15 main “Global Challenges,” including the explosive growth of the world’s population, lack of resources, and global warming. See <<http://www.millennium-project.org/millennium/challeng.html>>. [29.08.2009].

² This impression, however, proves to be a universal feeling towards the past that is by no means particular either to our times or to Modernism. See, for instance, François Villon’s “Ballade [des dames du temps jadis]” [c. 1461], in which this sentiment is expressed by the question “Mais ou sont le neiges d’anten?” [*But where is last year’s snow?*] and Jorge Manrique’s “[Coplas] De Don Jorge Manrique por la muerte de su padre” [c. 1492], in which the poet stated that “Cualquiera tiempo pasado fué mayor.” [*Every past epoch was better than the present.*]. François Villon, “Ballade.” In: *Le Testament Villon*, ed. Jean Rychner & Albert Henry. Genève: Librairie Droz S.A., 1974. 44-45. 44. Jorge Manrique, “[Coplas] De Don Jorge Manrique por la muerte de su padre.” In: *Poesía*, ed. Jesús-Manuel Alda Tesán. Madrid: Catedra, ¹⁰1985. 148-167. 148.

³ David Malouf, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1996. 139.

⁴ Jonathan Glover, *The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity*. London: Penguin Books, 1988. 173.

⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* [1911]. Bern: Benteli Verlag, ¹⁰n.y. 43.

everybody has to try and synchronize the different, often conflicting components of his or her respective ‘self,’ which, accordingly, is no longer perceived as a stable and unchangeable entity, but rather as an *assemblage* of the national, cultural, ethnic, class, gender, and sexual identity or even multiple identities of the individual.

As a consequence, humankind’s “quest for its own self”⁶ has also become a dominant theme in art and literature, thus demonstrating the close relationship between the various forms of artistic expression and the era which brought them about: While Stéphane Mallarmé, for instance, held that the “manifestations littéraires” of the late nineteenth century were a “reflet direct”⁷ of their time, Umberto Eco has conceptualized art as a “metafora epistemologica”⁸ which represents and preserves the level of knowledge of a certain period or age. Hence, works of art not only show both the advance and the limits of the intellectual progress of a given time, but they first and foremost serve as ciphers, providing any epoch with knowledge about itself. Art is therefore understood as being particularly sensible to the changes and contradictions of its day—often more so than non-artistic forms of expression—and as fulfilling an auto-epistemic function for the culture or epoch which produced it. This function, in turn, becomes particularly important in times in which old paradigms start to lose their validity and in which alternatives have to be found to supposedly eternal and unshakable ‘truths’ which are then being dismissed as outmoded *idées reçues*. As a result, during the last three decades or so, and especially fostered by the advent of the eschatologically charged ‘turn of the millennium,’ the topicality of the question of the general *condition humaine* and of the nature of the individual has gained new momentum: “Ob in national-, geschlechter- oder genpolitischer Hinsicht: Die Antworten auf die uralte Frage nach dem Ich waren selten so in Fluß geraten wie heute. Grund genug, sich dazu im Feld der Kunst umzusehen.”⁹ Originally a primarily philosophical concept, ‘identity’ has resultantly long turned into one of the most powerful shibboleths not only of the humanities but also of the arts world. While this, on the one hand, has led to the term’s occasional degeneration into a fashionable catchword for exhibitions, up-to-date magazines, or even Hollywood films, the question of human identity is, on the other hand, also seriously explored by practitioners of all artistic media: Be it in the novels of, say, Jeffrey Eugenides, Salman Rushdie, Peter Ackroyd, and Milan Kundera or in the works of Cindy Sherman, Jürgen Klauke, Gilles Barbier, and Tracey Emin, the most basic of all human questions—‘Who am I?’—has become a chief topic in contemporary art.

⁶ Margaret Drabble, *A Natural Curiosity* [1989]. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990. 212.

⁷ Stéphane Mallarmé in an interview with Jules Huret, “Sur L’Évolution Littéraire (Enquête de Jules Huret)” [1891], eds. Gerhard Goebel, Bettina Rommel. *Stéphane Mallarmé*. II vols. Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1998. Vol. II, 60-73. 60.

⁸ Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta* [1962]. Milano: Valentino Bompiani, ²2004. 151.

⁹ Anselm Wagner, “Identities: editorial,” *frame: the state of the art* 6 (2001): 3.