

*„einmal von außen, dann von innen“
„once from the outside, then from the inside”*

The establishment of the Self in Maria Lassnig’s self-portraits, her pictorial transformation of emotions and sensations and the question whether the literary term of ‘inner monologue’ can be applied to self-portraits.

by Silke Andrea Schümmer, M.A. from Aachen (Tel. 030-60690230)

The artistic occupation with the inner self, especially in self-portraits, ongoing for decades has repeatedly been defined as ‘inner monologue’. This literary term points to a technique by which feelings and thoughts are expressed in a seemingly direct act of communication. The concept behind it is that the self-portrait represents a forum for the artist to enter into a discussion with him-/herself and to get to know the inner self pictorially in an introspective act of self-awareness. This implies, however, the assumption that a self-portrait is an authentic representation.

Using numerous self-portraits of the Austrian painter Maria Lassnig (*1919), her display of inner processes is being analysed and her concept of body-awareness explored. To this end, the paintings were catalogued and interpreted, as up to now this area has not been researched. For the iconographic classification, Gustav René Hockes’ theses with regard to Mannerism as an epoch-transcending phenomenon are being applied to Lassnig’s work. A survey of self-portraits as a genre attempts a classification of Maria Lassnig.

Lassnig’s main theme, the representation of bodily sensations, is based on a central discourse of the 20th century. In Lassnig’s oeuvre this discourse merges with the insight that the identity constitutes itself via the body, through biological and social factors, history and susceptibility. In order to make the theoretical background apparent, the body is being analysed as a manifestation or cause for the individual identity. A chronological part dealing with the connection of body and soul is followed by a synopsis of the main aspects of the body discourse: the merger of the individual and technology, the feminist approaches to the body discourse and the fear of bodily dismemberment. The frequent assertion of the disappearance of the body in modern art is being refuted.

Since Maria Lassnig has repeatedly stated that she portrays mere bodily sensations but not emotions, one chapter is based on the emotion theory to discover how these factors are linked and pervade each other.

The body island theory by Hermann Schmitz and Wilhelm Reich’s body segment theory offer additional insights into the connection between psyche and physique. The perception of these physical and/or psychic conditions requires introspection which is a procedure that has a long medical tradition dating back to antiquity. Already at an early stage, it was used as an artistic self-provocation, for example by Jacopo da Pontormo. An excursus about the representation of inwardness in the history of art dealing particularly with Kandinsky’s notion of ‘inner sound’ and a summary of physiognomic theories explores the results of this occupation with the inner self.

Self-portraits always deal with the self-representation of an artist, the element, however, that creates art is only one feature, the other facets are missing in self-portraits like in all other mises en scène.

On the one hand, it is impossible to display all sides of a character and yet the aesthetic act of representation, on the other hand, is so dominant in the composition of a painting that it may prevail over a possible process of self-discovery. Moreover, a painting displays one moment only, whereas the formation of a personality is a continuous process which changes all the time. That is why the often invoked ‘soul’ of an artist can only be regarded as a starting point for an artwork, as a motive or stimulus - but both the soul and self-portrait cannot be put on the same level, nor can they be regarded as a reflection of each other, as then these categories would otherwise intermingle.

The question remains whether the mise en scène of a self portrait can tangibly be described using the term ‘inner monologue’, which is also a mise en scène, albeit for literature.

This brings us back to the central question of this dissertation, i.e. the consideration whether the literary term of inner monologue can be analogized with the phenomenon of artistic self-analysis which occurs in self-portraits throughout art history.

An analogue application is backed by the fact that rhetoric theory has generated the categories of artistic styles and many terms in art history, e.g. 'style' was derived from the traditional terminology of rhetoric and literary theory.

The analysis of the term 'analogy' concludes: if in any art field there is no term for a phenomenon - yet a term exists in another field describing a similar phenomenon - it would hence be admissible to use it as an analogy. Since phenomena from two art fields never correspond completely there is no univocation. That is why the correspondingly found term would have to be newly defined when it is used relating to another art field.

The main difference between the 'inner monologue' in literature and in art is as follows: the literary term defines a monologue by a figure created by the author with the self-perspective giving no proof as to its authenticity. The 'inner monologue' as it has so far been used in texts of art history and art theory, however, defines the creative process between artist and object or between artist and idea resulting in the actual painting. In literature, the person depicted delivers the monologue whilst in art it is the artist that monologizes. It is this discourse between artist and material that Kandinsky also refers to. The 'inner monologue' in literature and in art takes place on different levels, in different categories. There is, of course, also a creative process in literature when writing a text - but this is not referred to as 'inner monologue', since this term already applies to something else in literary science.

If the term - irrespective of the preceding contemplations would be translated directly into art, a figure inside the pictorial reality would have to monologize. Since a monologue always has narrative elements, this process could only be displayed in a sequence of images like a cartoon. On several occasions, Lassnig has left no doubt that she is opposed to narration in her work. Lassnig's paintings as such display just a current state of affairs, no action.

Her 'inner monologue' in the sense of a continuing analysis of a subject becomes apparent in new paintings relating to that theme. Strictly speaking, those works should actually not be intended for public display, since a central element of the monologue in literature is to wholly dispense with listeners or viewers respectively, as is the case in a secret sketchbook for example.

The findings of this dissertation can be summarized in the following theses:

In principle, it is possible to transfer a descriptive term from one sphere of art to another. The analogue term, however, must be newly and unambiguously defined for the application in a field other than the original in order to highlight common and differing features with regard to the original term.

Relating to Maria Lassnig, the term 'inner monologue' is, on the one hand, being used in the available source material in the sense of 'introspection' and also in the sense of 'creative process' on the other hand. Both usages are completely different from the literary term 'inner monologue' with regard to category as well as content. Common features are relatively few.

As a result, this dissertation suggests the use of the term 'introspectively creative monologue' as it is less ambiguous when dealing with the inner self in the artistic work process.