

Pécsi Tudományegyetem Művészeti Kar Doktori Iskola

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THE NARRATED AND THE NARRATIVE SELF

*Examples of self-narration in the contemporary art*

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The identity came into the prominence of social scientific researches in the last few decades. The national, ethnic or gender identity has become a popular issue in common discourse and although everybody knows more or less what they mean even we are not aware of the exact definition of identity. The individual is searching for his/her own place in the constantly accelerating and globalizing world to find something with which one is able to identify themselves. The various theories of subject inspired me to write my dissertation. In this theoretical multiplicity I paid attention on the discourses of the narrative and the narrated 'ego' and also the self-narrations which focus on self-construction and self-destruction in mimetic, symbolical, allegorical and metaphorical ways. One of the main aims of my thesis is to describe those self-narrations in the contemporary art which acted on the global theoretical and art discourse as well as reflect the changes of both identity theories and the way how one thinks about the Self. My analysis relates to different, specific philosophical, socialpsychological, sociological and cultural anthropological aspects of self-narrations and identity theories which are particularly important for contemporary western philosophy. I placed emphasis on those artworks which interpret and reflect this western philosophy but it was also necessary to reveal some different approaches because there are various identity interpretations and self-conceptions all over the world. I analyse the personal identity which is produced in a self-reflected way and how social contexts and roles define it.

### **The narrated Self as the Other**

In this chapter I introduce some contemporary self-narrations in which the artists become another personality, assume another identity or performe another role which is different from their own ones. These artists are engaged in the term of alterity. They try to describe and represent the otherness of somebody who is similar to or different from them in order to reveal their own subject. In almost every work the artists use their own bodies altered by masks and masquerades. Some identity investigations are about personal and gender identity, however, it is not only the de- and reconstruction of their own self that is important but also the appearance and representation of them being an artist. At the same time the exterior self, the person behind the appearance and the assumed self behind the mask are challenged, which is supposed to be much more real and true in everyday life. Martha Wilson also looks herself in the mirror of the Other, her works are based on the pressure of acceptance of social norms. This is the mirror of the Other. Her works confront the viewer with the accurate operating of stable social norms and with the impropriety of hasty

judgements by the appearance. These judgements suppose the permanence of the image presented and the truth of the statement 'I am who I present'. In Wilson's late works her stereotypical female types advance Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity.

Personal destinies and lives are connected to women identity patterns in Agnes Eperjesi's work, *Slices of Self-Portraits*. The subject of the work is not named; it is not an individual narrator but a general subject. It is the subject of stereotypes that does not exist in real but involves the common „female features and desires”. The subject of her images does not reveal itself only in the mirror of the Other but in her own one too. Since it is not about a certain person(ality) but about a general subject so itself becomes a lot of Others.

The identification with various roles and the adoption of different identities appear in the drag works which were in general performances and photographs in the 1970's and 1980's. These works, similarly to Butler's theory, intended to unveil the heterosexual, man-centered matrix through transgression of gender norms and to offer the possibility of another identity. For example, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, Urs Lüthi or Hunter Reynolds, they all created their own „man or woman alterego” by transgressing their own boundaries.

Lynn Hershman Leeson's The Roberta Breitmore Series resulted in serious questions in connection with impersonation of a new persona. She does not only talk about herself through her metaphoric self, Roberta, but also reveals the possibilities of self-losing and self-expansion in the analysis of sameness of author and character. The Roberta Breitmore Series, which lasted several years, is not only an alterego work but also a lifestory in which Hershman Leeson doubles her figure and modulates her own lifestory with a new one, a story of her life that she had as Roberta. The series opened the door to several questions about identity and decades later created a real simulacral self by bringing Roberta to a virtual life again.

The women, impersonated by Cindy Sherman, are also such real simulacras, copies without originals. Her series, *Untitled Film Stills* represents different kinds of female roles and stereotypes. Besides the stereotypical female characters, she reveals artificiality and ambiguity of these roles, as well. She replaces personal identity with social identity by assuming various female roles and patterns. Sherman's series offers various feminist interpretations which can be divided into three groups. The first proposes an interpretation in which Sherman's masquerades mean the evocation of male (erotic) regard; the woman becomes the object of male desires. Others, however, argue that Sherman parodizes the female stereotypes produced by popular movies in the images of *Untitled Film Stills*. The third approach suggests a broader interpretation of reactions of male viewers.

## **The narrated Self as oneself**

The life stories and the diarial biographies were used measurably in the art in the 1990's. Therefore in this chapter I analyse some kinds of representations of narrative identity in contemporary art. First of all, I study Tracey Emin's works which are mainly 'confessing' representations about traumatic events of her life. The object of her art is self-construction of her own ego through her repeatedly narrated life stories. She uses the applique blankets, the memorabilias and the monotypes for constructing her own personal identity. The parts of her life story constitute her oeuvre by the means of a non-linear chronology that is more than an autobiography.

Besides Tracey Emin's self-confessional real stories, autofiction is another form of self-narration. So autofiction is a combination of autobiography and fiction, real and imaginary, true and false. It appeared peculiarly in Christian Boltanski's works because the autofiction provides his self-construction by the means of memorial things and vintage photographs. Using false and imaginary biography and archive documentation is one of the most important processes in his art. The application of deliberately not authentic photographs places his biography into the realm of fiction making the identification of the real and fictive elements more difficult. Boltanski can conceal the untruth of photographic evidence but he leaves the traces unveiling behind himself or he confesses the fake in an enclosed account, which it makes his works admirable. So he creates an imaginary life which is very similar to his own one but it is not even his life.

Besides the self-elimination act, Imre Gábor's work, *Imre Gábor's One Day*, moves on the border of autofiction. The cycle makes an attempt to present a personal but still impersonal, a cognizable but still incognizable individuum. The character is separated from the author. It becomes an empty sign of the author and a metaphor of small fry. So such paradox matter is produced that is true and false at the same time. Gábor really lives this life which is proved by authentic evidences, however, he – as the main character – does not actually imply to his own life. There are not any fictive elements but the work constitutes a fictive life by representing one part, more precisely a day of an entire life.

*My Sky, My Sixties* by László László Révész creates the autofiction through the combination of remembrance, postmemory, fiction and personal details of biography. He interweaves associative recall in dreams and even combines the past and the present in this

work. Thus a non-linear and undescrivable autobiography is produced instead of a traditional life story through the combination of real elements, childish imagination and remembrance.

While Emin constructs her life again and again through her stories, Roman Opalka sacrifices himself for the great work referred to plenitude and unity and he absolutely identifies himself with his spiritual program. His oeuvre is a life story without narration, each piece of it is the collection and imprint of his own lifetime. Time is juice of his oeuvre. Opalka's desire for the representation of time interweaves with the intention of revealing the existence and the presence. The represented time of his life manifests itself through his proper gestures and his physical presence. Nevertheless, it is general because unlike the narrative time of life story no personal particularity belongs to his own lifetime. His own being makes a universal existence visible. He identifies himself with his work and what is more he is equal to it.

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré chose an entirely different way. His encyclopedic oeuvre consists of thousands small postcard-size drawings which he uses to document the world. He reflects to his direct environment and also events of world, represents his dreams and his visions, records the stories of his people. He produces an archive of everyday life, portraying his complex knowledge of the world.

### **The narrated Self as part of a community**

The individualization developed the constructing of personal identity and so the person should not only perform but also make up their own life story for the other people. The self-narration cannot be the only way to represent personal and social identity. The contemporary socialpsychology offers two approaches for the interpretation of social identity: symbolic interactionism and collective identity. The former emphasizes the interiorized social roles as an essential part of the identity. It mentions a kind of role identity, while the later one focuses on the collective identity which refers to family, kinship, nation, race or any group with a common purpose. One part of the identity is the inherited, genetic, bodily substance, this is the „blood” tie which refers to the natural and seems not to be in connection with the social. The identity can be seen as an inherited identity which is the root of the development of the personality.

William Wegman's Family Combinations is about his own identity, bloodline and biological root through the humorous application of semblance and inherited physical characteristics. He points out that a person originally is not only identical with own inherited

genes but becomes oneself through constructing of social relationships. The work says nothing about Wegman's personality and social identity, it only mentions the „blood” under the pretence of scientism.

Gillian Wearing's series of *Self-Portraits as* is similar to Wegman's work in which she performs her parents, her brother, her sister and herself as a teenager and a child. The act of getting into the bodies of her family members obviously refers to the bloodline and this evident connection leads off another interpretation of her work. Wearing literally bears parts of her ancestors in her genes, which underlies the collective identity of the family. The biographical and psychobiographical approaches of personal identity are emphasized in Wearing's oeuvre. She performs the role of the psychiatrist or acts as a mirror in almost each work of hers therefore she is both the narrator and the viewer at the same time.

Unlike the western individualization and nuclear family, the Chinese Zhang Xiaogang offers a very different interpretation of the notion of a family. It is his own and an expanded big „family”, namely the metaphor of the nation in which the uniformised people appear as replica of their own selves. Everyone is similar to each other confirming the western stereotype that Asian people all look the same. The person and the community become one in the idea of collectivism. Everyone is part of that big „family”, even if they are not really relatives they have a common forced or self-imposed view. Everyone is a comrade. The emphasis are placed on the family and the community rather than on the individual. The condition stands in place of the moment, the type stands in place of the individual that is why the collective „life story” generated by the images, is well legible. Zhang Xiaogang's painting suggests a story of individual destiny instead of reconstruction of historical reality. In this reading the objective reality is simply the progress of time. Similarly to Xiaogang's works, the metaphor of „Big Family” also appears in Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds installation. Broadening the category of kinship, we get to other inherited identities that are national or race identities. Although they seem to be based on nature they do not really because all of them are social, cultural and political constructions.

Kara Walker shows the dark side of power, history and human behavior through the representation of stereotypes, meanwhile she reflects to her own roots and dissects the issues of race identity. She combines history with obscene fantasy. Transgressing the border her figures get involved in sexual, dirty and violent acts. The abjection is in that dirt and stain, which is traumatic, however, its subdual liberates the Self. Seeking her own roots leads Walker to the stories of antebellum slavery. It seems that the traumatic experience of slavery, abjection and vulnerability would be buried deeply in the visceral unconscious. It is the

common root, the common destiny and the common basic experience of Afro-Americans, which Walker raises and reinforces through the abject. The slavery underlies their identity and Walker does not want it to be forgotten.

Gerhard Richter's October 18, 1977 cycle, which adapts the story of Baader-Meinhof terrorist group, refers to the social trauma, the collective identity and the relation of a person and a group. The cycle is not only an adaptation of a historical subject but also a personal narration. It reflects to the historical event and shows pregnant episodes of a personal life story. A personal identity reveals in the images whose characters may easily be identified if we have knowledge of context of the act. However, this identification is absolutely neutral because the personal identity of the characters of narration is almost one with their social roles, that is a role of terrorist or „martyr revolutionist” as they concerned themselves. On the other hand, the cycle is about a person who identifies itself with a group and about a person's death who becomes a victim of its own ideology. So in a sense the recognizable, identifiable face, clothes, gesture and location are in vain because the characters become types, signs of dead man. In another reading we can understand it as an example of relationship between the person and the power. It seems that Richter systematically doubts the fact that the traditional view of the self has inner quality, and instead he suggests an identity that is constituted in its relation to the power.

### **The narrated Self as place**

The identity is not only a process in time but it has a direct connection with the space, with the physical surroundings which is constituted and represented by inherited objects. So the self-expression and self-representation way of the space can be considered. The primary form of this representation is the house itself that is not only the symbol and the mirror of the self, nor the resource of place identity but a social institution. The house is a space of remembrance and intimization, a place of stability and security, a kind of shelter, a social form and a supervisory system of the political power.

The increasingly globalizing world and consumer society produced an individualistic and introverted person who does not have any long-run plans but tries to adapt to the permanently changable conditions and constantly eroding values. Bauman uses a metaphor of 'tourist' for the identity of the most adapting person to the modern world, and sets 'pilgrim' against 'tourist' who believed in development and had stable notion of time and space. In this changable world the person lives only in the present and can not plan a long game. The

'tourist' lives in the continuous present and tries to avoid any long-run engagements. The mobility is the most characteristic feature of the 'tourist' whose aim is not to get to somewhere but to be on the move. The isolation becomes the feature of the individual self in globalization and home is only a shelter for them in a certain sense but also a terminal at the same time by which the different transport and computer networks can be accessed. So home gives an availability for physical and virtual travel that really results in a continuous displacedness. This also appears in Korean Do Ho Suh's work, *Seoul Home/L. A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home/L. A. Home*. Do Ho Suh alters the house to be indicative of his continuously moving, nomad lifestyle. Home is no longer a constant, fixed place for him but a space which surrounds him and he moves with it physically and mentally. Home is reduced to an easily portable tent which can be pitched anywhere. This portability alters the notion of home which is always associated with a sense of security and stability. Suh with his work looks like a snail with its home. The continuous movement degrades home to a transit place. However, the form is invariable, the place becomes temporary, the family and cultural roots stay the only certain point in our world. It is a transit place to which we do not attach and is not connected to any identities, any relationships and any stories. Marc Augé terms such places as non-places.

Rachel Whiteread interprets the house in a particular way in her work. She reveals the interior of the house and alters its emptiness to solid. Absence becomes presence, presence becomes absence because she fills in the empty interior of house with concrete and as a consequence home and privacy of the former family disappears. This becomes our general, universal „personal space” as he deprives the space of its all particularities and personalness. She impersonalizes it. She hides the place, the location of former actions and happenings. It becomes a monument because she universalizes the former familiar personalness and uniqueness and she turns it into a type of living space of the family which has an impress of history. Rachel Whiteread makes the interior visible through its materialisation to express the repressed, concealed and hidden emotions and thoughts symbolically. At the same time she suggests the unity of the body and mind since such an exploring of the inside means paradoxically an incarnation of the soul. It is an embodiment without body because the body, the shell disappears and dissolves.

The space is not only a universal and geometrical entity but also the projection of the self. Thanks to among others Freud's works the personal and psychologized space became very important. The comprehensive psychological interpretation of the modern space allowed psychic illnesses, different phobias and neurosis to correlate. The anxiety was identified with



estrangement, the primary symptom of urban life. Simmel connected it to Marx's theory of alienation. It was associated with Freud's term of 'unhomely'. Gregor Schneider's works, for example, *Totes Haus* and *Die Familie Schneider* look like unhomely places. In his works he uses all configurations of 'unhomely' and reflects to the Freudian image of man with the symbolic quantities of the rooms. As if the houses were a store of the repressed psychic quantities, the materialization of unconscious. Both works are Gregor Schneider's *doppelgänger* in a certain sense, projection of his own self, representation of unservicability of the family and the family life and a psychoanalytical reading of the self-identity through identification of the house with the soul.

I finish the dissertation with the presentation of my own works created during my DLA studies.