

# Picturing Myself: A Wittgensteinian Conception of the Artist's Self Portrait

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It is the aim of this paper to look at the visual artistic self portrait from the point of view of the late Wittgenstein. Specifically, with his dissolution of the 'inner/outer' dichotomy, the metaphysic language which artists use to talk about their self portraits can be seen as indescribable in contrast to what is actually shown in their paintings. In order to achieve this task, notions of artists on how they talk about their self portraits will be mentioned. Consequently, it will be argued with Wittgenstein's reflections on the 'inner' and the 'outer' that, independently of what the painter claims about her self portrait, it is in the painting that she expresses no more and no less than what is there to show about herself. In correlation to this, the artistic view of the self portrait in connection to the 'introspection' will be seen from a Wittgensteinian perspective.

## 1. Introduction

The question is whether we can actually say from Wittgenstein's point of view that the intention of the self portrait is really to describe anything essential related to the painter who looks at herself. If the artist wants to show her essence, if Frida Kahlo for example wants to illustrate her pain, that is not put in doubt. All artists show something, but the philosophical problem here would be that they refer to an inadequate metaphysical language, when all they need to do is paint to show themselves.

The way we talk about ourselves, or, in the case of the artist, the way she shows herself in a self portrait, is based on what we call 'descriptions'. And we expect these descriptions to be a 'picture' of what goes on *in our minds*. But these notions of descriptions lead to many philosophical misunderstandings. We shall rather think of these descriptions as instruments used in particular instances (ref. PI 291), e.g. how we learn to use language. How do I recognize a sensation *in me*? Not by criteria, but by repeating an expression (by means of training). The word 'describe' in the context of sensations is problematic, for to "describe a state of mind" and to "describe my room" are two different language games (ref. PI 290).

In this sense, first person present tense psychological utterances are not descriptions of inner states or processes. Perhaps Wittgenstein would say of Frida's painful paintings that she is not describing her pain caused by her accident, her abortion, or her love for Diego Rivera. Rather, we would simply say that she is expressing herself in her self portraits. If we could translate the phrase "I am in pain" or "I am Frida" to Frida's variety of self portraits, from a Wittgensteinian interpretation we would have to say that she is not describing any psychological status, but expressing her thoughts and feelings symbolically. A reflection from Wittgenstein's Cambridge lectures on the nature of thoughts runs as follows (CL I, p. 25):

Thought is a symbolic process, and thinking is interpreting a plan. It does not matter where this takes place, whether on paper or on a blackboard. It may involve images and these we think of as being "in the mind". This simile of "inside" or "outside" the mind is pernicious. It is

derived from "in the head" when we think of ourselves as looking out from our heads and of thinking as something going on "in our head".

To judge linguistically whether Frida shows her pain or not, is the same discussion Wittgenstein employs on the grammar of the kind of sentences like 'I am in pain'. What is there to say can be said, and it is expressed on the canvas. A self portrait of Frida, in which she is shown crying and covered with needles could be compared to Wittgenstein's conclusions in so far as that when we say 'I am in pain', we are not trying to show the essence of our pain or of something hidden in our body, but we are just expressing how we feel. And this is what visual artists do in their self portraits.

## 2. The Dissolution of the 'inner/outer' Dichotomy

The rather intuitive and generalised statement of the artist claims that she sees herself in the mirror as something different from the rest of the objects in the world, and that is why in the self portrait she tries to show what she sees as an essence of herself. For example, about his self portrait "The son of Man" Magritte (quoted in Torczyner 1977, p.172) said:

At least it hides the face partly. Well, so you have the apparent face, the apple, hiding the visible but hidden, the face of the person. It's something that happens constantly. Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.

But what does Magritte mean by 'hidden' here? Perhaps it is the claim of the private linguist, who thinks that there is something in him which only he knows and the others will never be able to know. To this dichotomy of the visible and the hidden, Wittgenstein would say something like this (RPP II, 69):

But if we ask, "What is the difference between a visual picture (*Gesichtsbild*) and an image-picture (*Vorstellungsbild*)?" – the answer could be: The same description can represent both what I see and what I imagine. To say that there is a difference between a visual picture and an image-picture means that one imagines things differently from the way they appear.

Wittgenstein claims that only in some specific cases is someone's 'inner' hidden from me, but it is not the idea of being 'inner' what makes it hidden (ref. LW II, p. 33). These particular cases are linked to the way in which we refer to the 'inner'; the cases in which it makes sense to say something about the 'inner', although it does not really refer to something inside me. He does not, for example, deny the fact that my thoughts are shown in a different

way to me and to others, and this seems to be connected to the language games. He claims (LW II, p. 34-35): "My thoughts are not hidden from him, but are just open to him in a different way than they are to me. The language game simply is the way it is." Speech, like art, can be considered in this 'different way' to let others know about my thoughts. The way in which my thoughts are open to me, or in art: the way in which the images are represented in my mind, is the mere fact that *I think them*. However, this does not mean that my thoughts or images are essentially inside of me, or that they are private. As long as they can be shown, i.e. presented on a canvas, they are open.

Although we cannot say that there is something in me that I can hide, there are circumstances when we use expressions such as 'hiding the inner', in which we do understand what is meant by this. In specific language games the idea that we hide our inner does make sense. Situations in which we have feelings that we do not want to show, thoughts that we do not want to express, or the deceit to be in pain. In this sense we can say with Wittgenstein (LW II, p. 36) that: "Evidently there is an aspect of the *language game* which suggests the idea of being private or hidden – and there is also such a thing as hiding of the inner."

Wittgenstein induces us to imagine that there is in fact something going on inside us, i.e. feelings, thoughts, pain, which could be possible to *look at*. If this would be the case, then the mere looking into this 'inner' would change the whole way in which we express ourselves, and therefore the language games regarding our feelings etc. would be completely different (LW II, p. 36): "If one were to see the working of the nerves, utterances would mean little to us and pretending would be different." That is, if this would be possible, the purpose of the artistic expression would be another; the whole language game of uttering our pains, feelings, and thoughts, and the dissimulating of these, would belong to a completely different form of life. Nevertheless, this is not the case. And therefore the real pain and its sincere expression in the painting seem to be the same thing. Or, better said, the way we understand the concept 'pain' is determined by the signs of pain and pain-behaviour which can as well be represented through the look of a human expression in a self portrait, like Rembrandt has shown in numerous cases. When I talk about being in pain, the concept 'pain' is already in the language game of my behaviour (ref. LW II, p. 37). This means that the evidence is not shown in the 'inner'. That is, the possibility of looking into someone does not give any certainty or evidence of her feelings. It could then be said that the evidence relies, if we want to express it like this, in the 'outer', in the behaviour, in the expression of the portrait.

### 3. Introspection

Furthermore, the word introspection is also thought as a process for artists to paint themselves and has in the many senses in which we use it the implicit connotation of the term 'inner'. We use this word when we mean to say that we look into ourselves. But, can we say in a Wittgensteinian way that there is a picture of the 'internal'? Gareth Evans has his own explanation for this (1982, p. 227):

[W]hen the subject wishes to make absolutely sure that his judgement is correct, he gazes again *at the world* (thereby producing, or reproducing, an informational state in himself); he does not in any sense gaze at, or concentrate upon, his internal state. His internal state cannot in any sense become an *object* to him. (He is *in it*.)

And Wittgenstein would react to this arguing against the possibility of any 'inner' or 'outer' notions but would agree with the idea that the internal state of the subject is not an object to her.

But the dichotomy 'inner/outer' is one thing, the possibility of introspection in order to represent something about ourselves quite another. Wittgenstein says (BE 115/93): "The process of introspection means recalling memories, ideas of possible situations, possible feelings etc. Introspection is a process of looking rather than seeing."

If we agree then that there is no distinction of the 'inner' and the 'outer', and that this can be applied to art, we could also talk about how the different styles would also be understood as language games in art. We can distinguish a Renaissance portrait from a cubist or surrealist paintings because in the practice of looking at all these different styles we are able to recognize the different rules of the games, even if we do not play them, i.e. even if we are not painters ourselves. Perhaps we need different criteria to call Rembrandt's or Klee's paintings self portraits. But our reference to them as self portraits can be based on the language game of art, and on the historical interpretation of the viewer.

Moreover, whether some portraits are good or bad, is also an interesting question. To mention it briefly, Wittgenstein would say of a Picasso portrait that it is a bad one, first, because it has the two eyes in the profile: "Think of the depiction of a human face from the front and from the side, just like in some modern paintings by Picasso" (BE 134/87r) and second, because he does not see in it the representation of a man: "I could say of a painting by Picasso that I don't see it as a human being." (BE 137/142a). If we would like to find a similarity between the artist and his self portrait, we could refer to the way in which we notice an aspect. In PI, p. 193 Wittgenstein says: "I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience "noticing an aspect". Do we see aspects in artistic self portraits? That we can see a drawing now as one thing and then as another, can be called interpretation or an indirect description (ref. PI, p. 193). Moreover, seeing different self portraits of different artists is interpreting not only the different artistic currents, but it is also interpreting the artist's interpretation of herself. Our look at the painting is our interpretation of her interpretation of herself.

### 4. Conclusion

When the artist paints a self portrait, she is in a way saying something like 'I am pictured in this canvas'; and this makes sense for Wittgenstein (CL II, p. 62): "'I" only has meaning with reference to a body". There should be a different perception in picturing herself and in painting the rest of the world. But in a Wittgensteinian language it is confusing to say that what the artist paints is the representation of her soul, the essence of her life, or the purity of her pain. Rather, if we would want to express something like that in a Wittgensteinian way, it could be said that in art the artist shows herself completely, that she shows openly what she is, what she feels, and what she has experienced in life. Many examples of Rembrandt's self portraits show aspects of this, as well as the expressionism in Kokoschka's self portraits, and no less in Frida Kahlo's.

### Literature

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