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Stylistic Travesties: Philip Akkerman's Obsessive Self-Portraiture

In 1981 Dutch artist Philip Akkerman started to paint self-portraits. Soon he decided not to make anything else any more. By 1991 he had made 495 self-portraits, and now in 2003 the number of self-portraits must be more than a thousand.
Each painting has a year attached to it but not a day or month. Although the self-portraits form a series, they do not follow each other on the basis of time. The self-portraits do not represent the working of time on the face of the artist. Over the years one sees that Akkerman has grown older, but he is not documenting time in order to fix or control it. That is why the comparison between Akkerman and On Kawara, a comparison critics have made several times, is out of place. Rather, the progressions within the series run along the lines of painterly style. For instance, Akkerman makes a number of self-portraits in the style of Van Gogh or of the Sixteenth century painters Van Scorel or Lucas van Leyden. When he has exhausted such a style, he will begin to paint in the style of, for example, Otto Dix or Raoul Hynkes, or of a pointillist like Seurat or Signac. In recent years he has especially painted in the style of painters of the North-European Renaissance. The variations within his series of self-portraits consist, one could say, of "style exercises", comparable to the literary "*exercices de style",* of the French surrealist writer Raymond Queneau.
Akkerman's portraits are emphatically self-portraits. Although he changes hairstyles, and adds different attributes like hats, the pose is aways that of the artist who looks obliquely in the mirror while he is painting. This split concentration results in a very particular gaze. In the words of Akkerman himself:

That angry look in the eyes, that slightly criminal streak, has everything to do with the self-portrait. If you hang a hundred portraits next to each other, you can pick out the self-portraits just like that. Even a three-year-old can do this. Here the painter is also the model, and so he is not relaxed, not at rest. The model himself is working: the portrayed subject is part of the creative energy. This is why the eyes look straight out from the canvas, and they're always completely round; whereas when someone else's eyes look out to the left or right form the canvas, they're always small ovals. (1)

In whatever position the head is represented – frontally, slightly turned to the right or slightly turned to the left – the eyes always confront the viewer (the artist himself, that is) in the most penetrating way. This identifies these portraits as self-portraits. Akkerman never depicts attributes like the paintbrush, the palette, or the easel, which have been used conventionally by artists to indicate that the portrait concerns an artist's self-portrait. It is only the mode of looking that distinguishes these self-portraits from other portraits.
According to the conventional view, the (self) portrait is a kind of mirror which functions as a place where the subjectivity of the sitter is explored. It is, one could say, a form of self-analysis. The portraitist does not represent the outward appearance of someone; he should reveal what is within or behind that which can be seen. A (self) portrait represents the essence of the personality of a person. The artistic (self) portrait has a special function to fulfill in this respect. Although there is a "belief" in or suspicion of the individual's inner

essence, it still has to be proven visually or materially. The portrayer proves her or his originality and artistic power by *consolidating* the self of the portrayed. Although the portrait refers to an original self already present, this self needs its portrayal in order to secure its own being. The portrayer has enriched the interiority of the portrayed's self by bestowing exterior form on it. For without outer form, the uniqueness and "depth" of the subject's essence could be doubted. The artistic portrayer proves her or his own uniqueness by providing this proof.

Faced with Akkerman's self-portraits, this conventional view of the (self) portrait seems to be utterly powerless. It is especially the excessive number of his self-portraits that exhausts the idea of depth-analysis or self-analysis. Nothing is disclosed or revealed by these self-portraits. And over het years, the paintings do not document an inner growth or development of a unique being.

Not only is the unique interiority of the portrayed Akkerman of no relevance in these paintings, but Akkerman the portrayer is also bereft of his uniqueness. Two elements of these self-portraits undermine not the portrayed, but the portrayer's self. First of all the date and signature. These *parergon* or *"hors-d'oeuvres*" are important signs for the connoisseur on the basis of which the authenticity of the painting in terms of its maker can be assessed. For a signature is as unique as a fingerprint. But in Akkerman's case, the initials with which he signs his works are each time painted in a different way. A different hand seems to have marked these paintings by means of the two letters P.A. (Philip Akkerman).

The second aspect that undermines the belief in the uniqueness of the portrayer, consists of the different painterly styles which Akkerman uses for his self-portraits. Style is another way by means of which the authenticity of a work can be assessed. One assumes that the hand of the portrayer can be recognized in the style of painting. It is on the basis of this belief that one speaks of a so-called "signature style". The artist signs her work not only by means of a signature, but also by means of her style. It is only in repetition that a signature style can be recognized. It is impossible to assess the style of an artist on the basis of a single work. The first one does not count. The style of a first single painting is the after-effect of all the others in their repetition.

Akkerman's repetition of self-portraits does the opposite of creating a signature style. He keeps changing the style in which he paints. Again and again he adopts different styles. These styles are more or less identifiable. He is not searching for his own unique style, but he mimics painterly styles already present in the history of art.

Although we recognize the same portrayed person in Akkerman's self-portraits, the image we get of the portrayer keeps changing. For this reason, I propose to define his practice of painting in terms of *travesty*. Travesty also takes place within the paintings. Like Rembrandt in his self-portraits, Akkerman keeps changing hats and hairstyles. But it is even more pertinent to consider his painting practice as itself a form of travesty. What kind of conception of art do his travesties mobilize?

Painting and Travesty

In her *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*, Marjorie Garber takes the fairy-tale of Little-Red-Riding-Hood as emblematic for the attraction – and uncanniness – of travesty. Children are fascinated by the wolf in bed, because by dressing up in Grandmother's clothes, the formerly masculine wolf has acquired a gender identity that is unclear. It is this troubled identity that generates fascination as well as anxiety. In the fairy-tale, much emphasis is put on the difference between how the female goat and the male wolf look and

sound. When the wolf shows a white paw (covered by flour), it must belong to the grandmother goat. When the black wolf wears the grandmother's white nightgown and cap, "he" must be she. When his hoarse voice has changed into a sweet, lovely voice after he has eaten some chalk, there is no mistake possible any more. Or is there?
The fact that a male black wolf can look like a female white goat, that the differences between them can be made invisible, turns this story into a representation of something that, according to Garber, can be seen as a kind of *primal scene*. This primal scene is the reverse of the primal scene in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, in which the term stands for children witnessing their parents making love. Without any understanding of sex, children read this scene as an act of violence done by one parent to the other. The primal scene of travesty enacted in Little-Red-Riding-Hood confronts children with an eroticism that blurs or cancels the differences between father and mother, man and woman. It concerns an eroticism that presents these differences as utterly exchangeable and constructible. Gender, travesty seems to suggest, concerns distinctions that can be fumbled at, changed, deconstructed. This is a fascinating and frightening insight for little children who are at an age when thy have just learned the bodily difference between father and mother, between brother and sister, boy and girl.
Travesty implies a conception of gender identity as unfixed and as changeable. In Akkerman's case it is, however, not gender that is the issue, but the identity of the artist in relation to his work. In his case the self-portraits are not examples of self-analysis (like in the conventional view of self-portraiture), but of self-reflection in the functional sense. The self-portrait is no longer autobiographical, but self-referential: it refers to the maker of the work of art, to a subject position, but not to a unique subject. Akkerman seems to define this relation between the artist and his work, or the painter and his painting, in terms of travesty. What does this imply?
In order to understand the ramifications of Akkerman's "art as travesty", I will contrast his work to that of an artist who has introduced similar ideas into aesthetic thinking. This artist is, of course, Marcel Duchamp. His work is also proferred as a form of travesty. During his career Duchamp presented himself regularly under the name or image of an alter ego. That alter ego consisted consequently of female characters: Sarah Bernhardt, a photographic portrait of a woman by the American painter Ben Shahn, and, of course, Rrose Sélavy. Duchamp's alter egos should not be seen as promoting feminism in the art world. Although he is radical in many respects, in terms of gender issues Duchamp is a rather conventional macho. By presenting himself as a woman, he introduces the distinction between man and woman in our thinking about the relation between the artist and his or her work. He seems to imply that within the notion of art he is fighting against, the artist is inherently male. In which sense is this the case?
In 1942 in New York, Duchamp curated a show of surrealist art. Between the walls he stretched threads through which it became almost impossible to look at the paintings. There was an exhibition catalogue, titled *Papers of Surrealism*. The name of curator Duchamp was printed on the cover. His identity as artist and curator was, however, provocatively undermined in the catalogue. Duchamp had wanted the catalogue to contain so-called "compensation-portraits" of himself and of the artists represented in the show. Each artist had to be represented by a photograph of someone else. For himself Duchamp chose a portrait of an anonymous woman photographed by Ben Shahn. It is remarkable that Duchamp looks like the woman. There is something strange or even uncanny about the identities of artist/curator and represented person. This "compensation-portrait" is a clear

case of travesty, because we don't get the impression that the show has been curated by a woman, but that it concerns here a male artist and curator who presents himself for this occasion as a woman. But one wonders what is compensated for in this portrait.
Long before Duchamp published his "compensation portrait", he had Man Ray photograph him as Rrose Sélavy (1920). The name of this female character is a pun, meaning, "Eros, c'est la vie", or "Eros, that is Life". Man Ray photographed Rrose in different outfits and poses, but each time according to the codes of the days, according to which a woman presents herself as attractive and seductive as possible. Clothing, make-up, jewelry, glance and soft focus technique, everything contributes to the image of Duchamp as a seductive, but objectified, woman.
It is important to understand Rrose as an act of travesty, not as a pseudonym. This difference becomes pertinent when in later years Duchamp starts signing his works with her name. She is the author, the artist, because we see her signature, but Duchamp has created her. In the case of a pseudonym, one is not supposed to know who is behind it. A pseudonym is supposed to hide the real identity of the person behind the pseudonym. In the case of travesty, however, it is of essential importance that one is aware of both identities, of the one that is performed, and the one that does the performing. A transvestite of whom one is not aware that he is performing a travesty act, is not a good transvestite. He tips the scales from playing someone else to being someone else. The attraction of travesty is exactly this in-between space in which someone is neither one nor the other, or both at the same time. Travesty is a playground where one is not stuck to a specific identity. It is a place outside the symbolic order, a place where categories and distinctions are not fixed. Travesty is not a transgression from one identity to another, but rather a suspension of definitions and identities (2). It is thus that new identities can come about. From this perspective, travesty is a form of cultural critique. But in the case of Duchamp it is not so obvious what he is critiquing when he performs his travesties.
At a roundtable discussion in 1949 at the San Francisco Museum of Art, Duchamp remarked that the artist is only the mother of the artwork. He seems to take distance from the idea according to which the relation between artist and work can be seen as a relation between a father and his children. In that view, artworks are like semina, seeds, disseminated by the artist. The artworks are like the artist, they are similar to him (and to each other) because they spring from the same father. But as Amalia Jones has pointed out in her study *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, Duchamp resists such a notion of the artist again and again. For him it is not the maker who determines the meaning of the work of art, but the viewer:

I *do* believe in the mediumistic role of the artist. What's written about him gives him a way of learning about himself. The artist's accomplishment is never the same as the viewer's interpretation. When they explain all those documents in the *Green Box*, they are right to decide what they want to do with it. A work of art is dependent on the explosion made by the onlooker (3).

The phrase "the explosion made by the onlooker" seems to refer to the "ejaculation" of the viewer, which starts the dissemination of meaning. It is no longer the artist who initiates this dissemination. The artist is only a medium. After having functioned as a medium, he is a viewer among viewers.

When Duchamp claims that the artist is *only* the mother of the work, he tries to undermine the artist's exclusive authority over the meaning of his work. According to this notion the father-artist re-produces himself in his work. The essence of an artwork is also present in the artist who made it, as if the essence is a kind of DNA which is shared by father and offspring. Mother-artists like Duchamp do not have to claim such an identity between themselves and their work. They know that they have made the work, which is why they don't have to emphasis the identity or similarity between themselves and their products.
These two different notions of meaning production reflect themselves in two different expressions for producing offspring: reproduction and procreation. Whereas the notion of reproduction represents the offspring, the work, as a repetition of that which already existed, the expression procreation represents it without this claim of identity between producer and product. There has been continuity (pro-) between them, that's all. With Duchamp, we can now say, that the notion of the production of meaning in terms of reproduction expresses the experience of the father, whereas the notion of production of meaning in terms of procreation reflects the experience of the mother.
Duchamp's self-representation as the mother of his work can then be understood in rhetorical terms. When the process of creativity and the production of meaning are seen as reproductive, the emphasis is placed on the identity or similarity between producer and product of representation. The relation between artist and work is seen as metaphorical. But Duchamp saw himself as mother of his work and the artist's work as a form of procreation. Creativity and meaning production as procreation imply not similarity or identity, but rather continuity and contiguity between producer and product. According to this conception, the relation between artist and work is metonymic.

The Procreation of the History of Art

Although travesty is an important notion in the work of Duchamp as well as of Akkerman, the ramifications of their travesties are rather different. By means of his travesties, Duchamp redefines the relation between the artist and her work from a metaphorical relation into a metonymic one. Not the artist, but the viewer is the locus where meaning emerges.
Akkerman also resists the metaphoric relation, but not in favor of the metonymic one. At first sight, his self-portraits look like a complete reversal of the metaphoric principle. According to Aristotle, metaphor enables us to recognize similarities in the dissimilar. In Akkerman's case we notice above all the differences in the similar. All the paintings are similar because they all are self-portraits. They all depict Philip Akkerman. But more striking are the differences between that which makes them similar: the different styles in which they are painted.
As argued before, in Akkerman's work style is the opposite of signature style. It is not an index of the portrayer. The relationship between artist and work, or in this case more specifically between portrayer and portrayed, is short-circuited. The alternative for the artist as productive principle is, however, not the reader, but the history of art as a series of styles. Akkerman engages different styles, which we more or less recognize from the history or art. His variations in style make his self-portraits differ.
One could argue that Akkerman's engagement with style is typically postmodern. Since he does not believe in an authentic style for himself, he keeps changing his style and adopts styles that we recognize as the style of others. This kind of postmodernism is usually illustrated with architecture from the eighties, which freely quotes all kinds of historical styles. The AT&T building by another Philip, namely Philip Johnson, in New York is a famous example. I contend, however, that Akkerman's engagement with style has nothing to do with

this form of postmodernism. His deconstruction of the idea of a signature style does not lead to the conclusion that style is rootless, that it can be played or toyed with because style has exhausted itself and has become meaningless. Instead, style is presented as no longer rooted in the artist, but in history (4). This disperses the idea of authenticity radically. The artist's hand has made the work, but that hand is no longer in the service of a unique subject, but of a history that gives body to the artist's depiction of his body. Without this surplus body, the artist's depiction is only outer form.

This position is not a symptom of the ruins of modernism, as Fredrick Jameson would have it. According to academic *doxa,* modernism is an aesthetics of formal mastery. At first, this seems to contradict the other common wisdom about modernism – that modernism consists of a radical subjectivization of literature. However, this subjectivization should not be understood as expressive, as in the case of romanticism. For the modernist, personal vision is not expressed, but rather *embodied in formal mastery*. Jameson formulates this as follows: "The great modernisms were [..] predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body" (5). Modernist authors and artists try to convey their personal vision by developing an individual form of language. This unique style is supposed to embody, to *be*, the subjectivity of the author or artist. The modernist author metaphorically identifies herself or himself with her or his text. So my earlier characterization of father-artists as having a metaphorical relation to their work can now be specified as a specifically modernist notion of art.

Akkerman's stylistic travesties are exquisite examples of formal mastery. But this is not formal mastery as an embodiment of the artist's self or authenticity. It is rather a formal mastery of the legacies of history. This engagement with the legacies of history should not be seen as a naïve belief in the importance of history. We should not forget that ultimately his work is travesty, not transsexualism. Although he suspends the artist as father of the work of art, history has not become the stepfather. His paintings are only dressed up in the clothes of history; and not just his paintings, but the artist himself as well. For his paintings are self-portraits.

Akkerman exposes a contradiction within art-historical thinking. One believes in the uniqueness and authenticity of the artist and her work; yet at the same time, one also believes that art works are historically determined and can only be understood in historical terms. In Akkerman's work the belief in the authenticity of the artist is no longer in contradiction with the other art-historical belief that artists and art works are the products of history. Akkerman presents the artist dressed up in the cloak of history, or history embodied in the artistic self. He needs the genre of self-portraiture to make this point, because it is especially in this genre that artist and work, or portrayer and portrayed, are staged in the same gesture. It is only there that we can see the dispersal of authenticity take place. As with other cases of travesty, this does not lead to a new, confident definition of authenticity. Akkerman's work is not a transgression from one position to another. His self-portraits are playgrounds, which force us to reconsider whatever fixed ideas we have about the artist and his work and about self and history.

Notes

1 ‘The Changing Expression of the Co[u]ntenance: A Dialogue between Johan Polak and Philip Akkerman’, in: *Philip Akkerman: Zelfportretten/Self-Portraits* (Amsterdam, Meulenhoff, 1992) p. 139.
2 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, Simon&Schuster, 1992).
3 Dore Ashton, ‘An Interview with Marcel Duchamp’, in: *Studio International* 171, nummer 878 (June 1966) p. 244-247
4 For Akkerman the history of style is also a subject of his self-portraits. In his text “Nothing but Self-Portraits” he says: “In my series of self-portraits the story of life is presented twice. In the first place in the picture. You see a head growing older. That goes without saying. But there is another story in which this process of growing older can be seen and that is the story of the technique.”(Kunst & Museumjournaal 1, nummer 5, 1990, p. 32-33).
5 Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend WA, Bay Press, 1983) p. 114.