

# THE HUMAN IMAGE IN MODERN ART



René van Tol

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‘Die kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar’.

Paul Klee

‘If I correctly understand the sense of this succinct observations,  
our poet suggests here that human life is but a series of footnotes to  
a vast obscure unfinished masterpiece.’

Vladimir Nabokov ‘Pale fire’

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## Introduction

In the visual arts of today artists express their vision on the human condition not only by depicting the human body and its actions, but also in their concepts about what human creativity is in its essence. On the one hand, there are artists who try to represent the movements of human beings in a 'realistic' manner, true to nature so to speak, while on the other hand there are artist who focus on their autonomous self in the most radical way. The second group is primarily interested in investigating creativity and self expression. The tension between these two approaches, one dealing with the outer world and the other with the inner world, determined, as I have experienced as an artist, in many ways the course of modern art and made our thoughts about the human image in art problematic. In this presentation I will go back to the source of this problem and explore possibilities to connect these two opposite visions. The first part of this presentation is about the visual aspects of the human image. The second part is about the inner life and in the third part I explore possibilities to connect these two sides of the human image.



Fig 1a)



(Fig 1b)

*Through the development of science in Western Europe the possibility of projecting a three dimensional world on a flat surface was investigated. This resulted in the invention of the camera.*

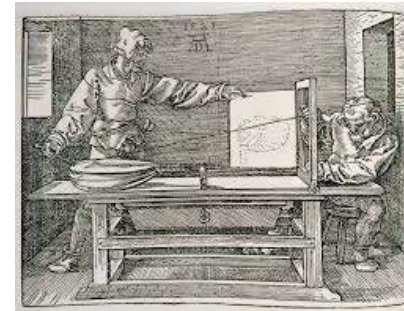
*Fig 1a shows a drawing of a person using a camera obscura, the forerunner of the camera. This drawing is made by Christiaan Andriessen(1775-1846) in 1806.*

*Fig 1b shows a camera from the 19th century. This invention has been extremely successful. The images created by the camera have until recently seldom been questioned.*

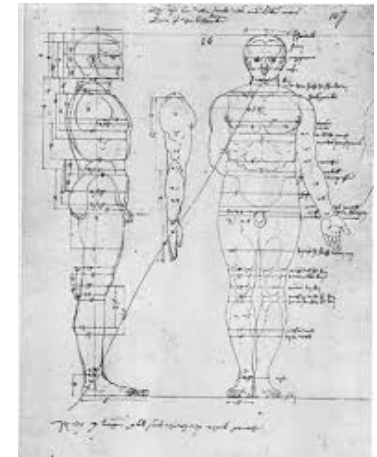
## (1) Settling the science

In 1747 the French philosopher Julien Offray de Lamettrie wrote a remarkable book called 'L'homme machine'. He stated that 'man' is a machine', and that 'the whole universe is but a single substance in different shapes'. This book was very influential and marked the beginning of what we call the materialistic worldview in which the universe is seen as a closed self-containing system ruled by laws. This worldview is sometimes called naturalistic, mechanical or deterministic. Man is a machine, so according to this worldview man's 'vision' is also a mechanical process. Therefore it is not surprising that a machine was invented to do the 'seeing' for men. We call that machine the camera. With this machine the three dimensional world is mechanical brought back to a two dimensional world. You could also say the human image is depicted in a mechanical way.

(Fig 1 a b )



(Fig 2a)



(Fig 2b)

*Fig a-b shows two examples of how Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) devised a method of projecting project objects and the human body on a flat surface according to mathematical principles. This interest in mathematics in Western Europe in the 19th century resulted in a naturalistic worldview and in art in a uniformly accepted representation of reality.*

*Artists had already been struggling with a similar problem for centuries, namely the problem of projecting nature, especially the human body, on a flat plane in a true and genuine manner. Artists measured the body, constructed a projection and studied classical statues to find the correct proportions. We see here a tendency in art toward naturalism long before naturalism became a mainstream approach to depicting reality.*

*(Fig 2a-b)*



*(Fig 3a)*



*(Fig 3b)*

*In the 19th century art education imitated the universities. A universal method was introduced in art. The main occupation was studying the human body in real life (Fig 3a) and through Greek sculpture (Fig 3b).*

In the 19th century art and photography became allies. Also part of this alliance was the development of a new art school. This included the creation of a new teaching program where different traditions of representing the human image were consolidated into a solid and strict method internationally promoted and with a uniform curriculum taught by noted professors.

(Fig 3 a-b)



(Fig 4a)



(Fig 4b)

*Fig 4 a-b show two drawings within the academic tradition. The academic method was internationally established. Fig 4a is an anonymous French drawing produced in the 19th century. Fig 4 b is a drawing made in the 21th century by John Kim, a student of the Florence Academy of Art.*

*What is obvious here is the consistency of the applied method within the academic tradition. This uniformity can not only be observed across space, but also across time.*

This system we call 'academism'. Academism, an expression of naturalistic thinking, was extremely successful in art. The outcome of this system was uniformity, and it was successfully supported by photography and film. This method was and still is broadly applied and seldom questioned by the general public.

(Fig 4 a-b-c)



(Fig 4c)

*Fig 4c on the left shows a detail of a large painting by Gustave Courbet called 'L'Atelier du peintre' (1855) and on the right a photograph he used in preparation of painting this picture. Courbet was the father of realism.*

*Although 19th century realism quarreled with academism about subject matter, both accepted the accuracy of photography. Both assumed that photography was a neutral and uniform starting point for expressing their art. A famous quote of Courbet was: "I have never seen either angels or goddesses, so I am not interested in painting them". By advocating pure materialism Courbet pulled nature as a blanket over his head. And because materialism meant determinism, free expression was at risk.*



## (2) Inner-life

You would almost think that the question of how to depict the human image was settled. This was not so. In art 'academism' became a 'nickname', naturalism a road to avoid. One of the the first artists who revolted against 'academism' was Paul Gauguin. In a letter he wrote: 'I may not have given the younger generation teaching, so to speak, but I have given them freedom: through my boldnesses everyone nowadays dares to turn their back on nature and they all reap the profits, ...'<sup>1</sup> In an other letter he wrote that his art 'is actually the fruit of deep meditation, of deductive logic derived from within myself and not from any materialistic theories'. About teaching he said the following: "Thus I can say: no one taught me anything. On the other hand, it is true that I know so little! But I prefer that little, which is of my own creation".<sup>2</sup>

Gauguin created a blueprint of how art in the 20th century would evolve. Human freedom and nature become opposites, even enemies. Personal freedom was played out against collective knowledge. Art became one's 'own creation, a fruit of deep meditation derived from within oneself'. Because of the fact that the representation of the human body is appears to be established, the inner life is on the run it seems: resulting in an endless 'becoming' out of fear to be pinned down and to lose one's personality. The artists in the 20th century explored areas which naturalism couldn't reach. They created a safe-space for the self. They aimed to create a world which couldn't be depicted according to a system or by photographic pictures.

Many features of Modern Art can be explained by the urge of the modern artist to escape reductionistic tendencies advocated by science. They surged areas where science couldn't reach to safe the human image. Some of these areas include: the unspoiled paradise, the innocence of childhood, the dream, primitive culture. inner spiritual life, secret language, the world of mentally disturbed, or in Post-Modernism: playing a game; hiding your identity by putting up a mask. We will look at them now.

<sup>1</sup> Belinda Thomson, Gauguin by Himself (Boston: A Bulfinch Press Book, 1993) 274

<sup>2</sup> Belinda Thomson, Gauguin by Himself (Boston: A Bulfinch Press Book, 1993) 283

## Unspoiled paradise



Paul Gauguin 'Te aa no areois'. 1892

*Paul Gauguin linked his artistic endeavours with an urge to seek the unspoiled lands inhabited by the 'noble savage'. Gauguin saw the western civilization of his age as a destructive force which was spreading allover the world by contaminating everything that was pure and innocent. He was hoping to regain spontaneous creativity by submerging in the mythical world of the Pacific.*

*He criticised the art of his time, as the quote below shows.*

*"... Napoleon I, who is supposed to have reconstituted everything, reconstituted art as well in the form of a code. There were no more painters, only, professors."<sup>3</sup>*

*Artuona (Marquesas Islands), September 1902*

<sup>3</sup> Belinda Thomson, Gauguin by Himself (Boston: A Bulfinch Press Book, 1993) 275



## The innocence of childhood



Karel Appel (1921-2006) 'personages' 1950

*It is impossible to make a photographic picture of your child memories. Looking through the eyes of a child is something different than looking through a lens of a camera. Exploring the unconscious world of the child in modern art is an effort to escape the pressure of a strict method.*

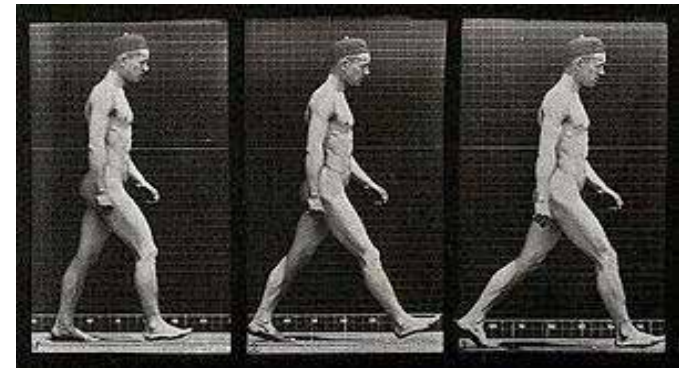
*A famous quote of Pablo Picasso illustrates this mood:*

*"It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child."*

*In my academic years this way of thinking was common. Learning became un-learning. In stead of gaining knowledge the purpose of the art school was getting rid of knowledge and be innocent.*

*This drawing shows Karel Appel imitating a drawing of a child.*

## The Flow of Time



'Walking man' Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904)

*A weak point of the naturalistic enterprise of academism is how they dealt with the phenomenon of time. In essence a photograph is a snapshot and this limitation asked for a new understanding of motion. A solution came from the photographer Eadweard Muybridge who constructed a method to picture a body in motion as shown in Fig ( ). This solution was the forerunner of the film. Not everybody was satisfied. Paul Gsell described this manner as follows: ' They never seem to advance. Generally, they seem to rest motionless on one leg or hop on one foot'. 'And Rodin agreed, pointing out that the striding St John has both feet on the ground, inconsistent with photographic truthfulness but, as art, more successfully conveys the idea of a progressive development of movement.'*<sup>1</sup>

*The French philosopher Henri Bergson also wrestled with the problem how to understand time. In his book 'Time and Free Will he writes: "*

*"But while our consciousness thus introduces succession into external things, inversely these things themselves externalize the successive moments of our inner duration in relation to one another.*

*The simultaneity of physical phenomena, absolutely distinct in the sense that the one has ceased to be when the other takes place, cut up into portions, which are also distinct and external to one another, an inner life in which succession implies interpenetration, just as the pendulum of a clock cuts up into distinct fragments and spreads out, so to speak, lengthwise, the dynamic and undivided tension of the spring.<sup>1</sup>*



'L'Homme Marché' Auguste Rodin (1840-1917)

*There is a connection between the text Bergson wrote and the conflict between Muybridge and Rodin. The reduction of movement represented in the images of Muybridge to a serie of in-depended points takes over our experience of time in the inner life and destroys the interpenetration of the successive moments in our experience, as Bergson describes. We see here again a separation of an external and an inner-life which is common in modern thinking. What is left over though, is the question of the role of the observer. What is that what observes external and inner-life and where is it located..*

<sup>1</sup> Translation F L Pogson Oxford 1910 Annotated edition

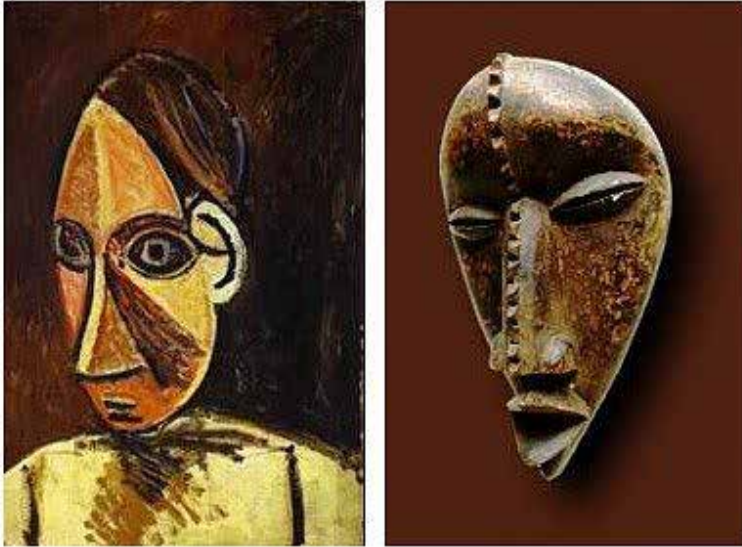
## The dream



Salvador Dali (1904-1984) 'Venus of Milo with Drawers' (1936)

*In our subconscious and in our dreams an in-depended and mysteries world can be explored. An opportunity for the artist to escape the system of academism. One effect often used was the simultaneous representation of objects which has no connections in real life. In this art-piece Salvador Dali mocks one of the icons of 19th century art the 'Venus of Milo', a masterpiece of classical art and symbol of rationality that functioned as a model for good art.*

## Primitive culture



Pablo Picasso (1882-1972) Tete de Femme 1907  
Anonymous African sculpture

*In the beginning of the modern era African art was romanticized as a free and spontaneous adventure. Nothing was less true. African art is rooted in solid traditions and more a product of a collective enterprise than of an individual expression. Still, this didn't withhold the modern artist to worship this art and to provoke with it the bourgeois culture which was dominant at that time.*

## Inner spiritual life Secret language



Robert Motherwell (1915-1991) Elegy to the Spanish republic (1987)

*What better way to preserve your independence by creating a secret language. In modern art many artist tried to get rid of the burden to represent nature recognizable for the general public They start aiming at creating a spiritual base for art expressed in a personal idiom. Abstract art was the result. A great inspiration for them was the visual art of East Azia with its calligraphic tradition. This trend in modern art is well described in the book 'Zen in the fifties' by Helen Westgeest.*



## The mentally disturbed



Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) Grand Maitre of the Outsider (1947)

*In modern art there was a great interest in how inner life was expressed in body language. This interest was not completely new in art but was revived by new scientific experiments of among others the psychologist Sigmund Freud. The uncontrolled tension expressed, not in language but in gesture and facial expression was for the artist a new field to explore. Pathological behavior suggests irrational motivations of the innerlife which undermined the ideal of the rational and scientific human being in control, that was pursued in 19th century naturalism.*

## Playing a game: hiding your identity by putting on a mask.



'Gelatin' Poo-sculptures 2018

*Post-modernism adds a new aspect to protect the self from being reduced to an object namely game-playing. The post-modern artist protects himself by constant being on the run, playing a game of 'catch me if you can'. What matters here is the theatrical effect by wearing a mask of creating a smokescreen to prevent him from being caught and to save the uniqueness of the self. The art of 'Gelatine', an art-collective, is a good example of post-modern art. In their Poo-sculptures exhibited in 2018 they aimed for a grand theatrical effect by destroying the decorum of a public space in a big provocative gesture. This art is of course originated in the work of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) especially in his 'Fountain'. The difference with Duchamp and the work of 'Gelatine' is that the work of the latter is completely institutionalized. If we look at the texts accompanying the exhibition we see the whole rhetoric of modern art repeated in a mild form, manageable for the general public. We read words which are familiar: 'freethinking', 'liberating', 'the perspective of young children'.*

Here are two examples:

*'Gelatin demand free thinking. They are exciting, deeply challenging and always make us feel uncomfortable. And yet their work — the emotion from their work — this remains with you far beyond its physical existence' Sjarel Ex, director of the museum said on the exhibition's website.*

*Euronews, Alice Tidey*

*"In the sculpture exhibition Vorm-Fellows-Attitude, Gelatin explores the human condition in an overtly playful manner. Their point of departure is the value of taboo-breaking confrontation and the liberated, light-hearted perspective that we have as young children. Gelatin invites visitors to step into this inhibited world, to leave behind their adult identity and to feel like children again."*  
*Website Museum Boymans van Beuningen, Rotterdam. August 12, 2018.*

*The theologian David Bentley Hart summarized post-modernism as follows:*

*'In its more extreme, apocalyptic, and assured moments (especially in its simplified American academic variant), the postmodern proclaims itself as a repudiation of all the metaphysical vices: hierarchy, taxonomy, the whole apparatus of theory, law government, and social convention, all that serves to localize, confine, and essentialize the different; idealism, priestcraft, inquisition, humanism, and grand unified theories; colonialism, tribalism, nationalism, and empire; authority, exclusivity, dogma, closure, and "Truth'.*

*'Hence a robust postmodernism must surely be a discourse of liberation, setting free the energy of the many, becoming, and the "different'.*

*'The realm of difference is a region of freedom, chance, peril, escape, play, desire, absence, and innumerable paths of departure; it is the open horizon of becoming in its innocence, the homeland and the exile of the sign where an infinite array of signifiers –forever opaque to one another- excite and provoke one another into endless gaming; it is the land of unlikeness, liberated at last from an ancient empire and rejoicing in itself.'<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The beauty and the Infinite* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2009) 52-53

## To a new academism?

In 1896 Paul Gauguin wrote:

‘Since the advent of the snapshot, said one horse lover, painters have been able to understand horses, and Meissonnier, one of the glories of France, has been able to depict that noble animal from all angles. As for myself, my art goes way back, further back than the horses of the Parthenon – all the way to the dear old wooden horsy of my childhood.’<sup>1</sup>

As this quote shows, Gauguin started, isolated in Tahiti, as a voice crying in the wilderness, an attack on academic art and scientific investigation through photography and classical sculptures, the pillars of 19th century naturalism. As replacement of all this he turned to the magical world of his childhood. This act had great consequences for the development of modern art. And as we can see in the accompanying texts of the exposition of ‘Gelatin’, the spirit of Gauguin has become completely established in the official artworld of our time. The concept of creativity as a spontaneous free act not frustrated by tradition, knowledge, and method is accepted not only in the world of the museums and galleries, but also in art schools and the mind of the general public. The question arises: is modern art in an academic stage? Is modern art established? Are we stuck with two forms of academism: one of the 19th century and one of the 20th century? I think we do. I think that modern and postmodern art have become academic. And the challenge arises of investigating the question how to go on from here.

In my introduction I stated that academism and modern art were interconnected through their opinion on the human image, which was not similar but complementary to each other. The external life and inner-life stood against each other. In the last chapter I shall try to reshape this vision of the human image. I will show its error. I will do this by going further back in history. I will also use some theological thinking. I know this will scare off some enlightened readers of this text; people who have outgrow such thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Belinda Thomson, Gauguin by Himself (Boston: A Bulfinch Press Book, 1993) 257

Yet, I ask these readers to continue reading. Imagine that I am not doing something completely different than ‘Gelatin’. My starting point here too is “ the value of taboo-breaking confrontation and the liberated, light-hearted perspective that we have as young children”.

## A third option

Gauguin formulated the idea that nature and our personal freedom are opposites. However, he doesn't explain what he means with the word nature. He probably understands nature as a set of laws that determine our behavior and creativity. The opposite of this determinism is freedom, and freedom is individual and personal. This personal autonomous and free entity is hidden deep in the soul of men and defended as a last bastion of freedom.

This concept of nature and the self is problematic and difficult to sustain in two ways. First, naturalism is logically impossible. 19th century naturalism sees nature as a closed self-containing system without an outside entity to sustain it. That's why Courbet didn't need angels. But if we say: 'Nature is a closed self-containing system', we already exclude the observer who made this remark. Just stating that you are a naturalist instantly denies naturalism. The same can be said of the 'autonomous self'. If you say: "I found myself" - a very common expression nowadays - we exclude that aspect of the self that is searching and finding. Both concepts are self-contradicting on the same grounds. Looking at nature and the self are in essence the same act. We need an observer and something that is observed. The relation between those two, the observer and what is observed is incommensurable. This means that the act of observing is impossible to be observed from within. What we need in order to save nature and the self is an external observer who is independent of nature and the self. You could possibly say that by looking at the self, the self can become a part of nature. If we define the self as the entity that performs the act of observing than the self is unreachable. But this is a question for philosophers. For art we can say that the conflict between academism and modernism, made concrete in the conflict between the external life and the inner-life is false in terms of observation and representation.

It can be concluded that nature and personal freedom as Gauguin understood them aren't opposites but rather complement each other. If there is only nature, than nature is looking at nature. If there is personal freedom, then the act of observing is free. But one

fact remains: The part that is observing is impossible to observe. So the human image has two sides and these are two sides of the same coin. There is something that observes and something that can be observed.

This conclusion liberates us from the tension between external and inner life that dominates the art of our time. The question of course remains: what is a person? The Greek theologian Johanni Zizioulas has some interesting things to say about being a person. He writes: 'Nowadays, most of us mean, when we speak about a person, an individual'. 'A thinking individual is the highest concept in anthropology.' However there are other options. The Greek thinkers of the early Christian period, the so-called Cappadocian Fathers, formulated the concept of "the person" in a different way.' Being a true person is being born out of love and out of community." The person is not autonomous but arises through a relation with 'the Other' (defined as "a being or beings outside of the self"). The person is shaped by the borders defined by the Other. If there is no relation then there is no person.

This option is reasonable. If we equate the person with free expression we observe that the behavior of the person is ecstatic. Free expression is ecstatic. Moving outwards, reaching to the other. Our knowledge of nature in contrast formulates things as they are. So knowledge is static. Here we are confronted with two completely different states for the human image. The 4th century theologian Gregory of Nysa formulated this as follows: 'For this is the highest paradox of all: how motion and rest can be the same thing'.<sup>1</sup> We have seen through the work of Rodin and Muybridge that in the foundation of modern art concepts of motion and rest became problematic. The problem is as follows. In a picture we freeze the human image, depriving it of one of its elementary features: movement. We conceptualize reality and by doing this we destroy the flow of time. A paradox is born. We could say that looking at personal creativity, not external and inner-life are in conflict but motion and rest. The opposites are here on one hand the urge to create an essence and on the other hand the ever changing world. So at the dawn of modern art the question arose: how can we incorporate time in our concept of the human image without losing the ability to

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius press, 2003) 142



define what the person is. This question has to be solved.

Gregory of Nysa was one of the Cappadocian fathers, a group of Greek theologians in late antiquity. The Cappadocian fathers tried to solve the problem of time by applying a trinitarian concept to the human image inspired by the concept of the Holy Trinity. <sup>1</sup>

How can we define this trinitarian concept of the human image? And how is this concept useful in connection to the phenomenon of rest and motion?

I will try to answer this question from my experience as an artist. We have seen that in modern art, rest and motion are essential in the perception of the human image. But there is an other aspect to consider. Both naturalism and modern art have overlooked a third aspect in defining the human image. They have overlooked that what precedes their concepts. They have overlooked being itself. Rest and motion are grounded in being itself. Being itself is the third element we have to consider in our understanding of the human image.

We have seen that applying a binary structure is a common attitude in our thinking. We have seen the antithesis external life and inner life, rest and motion, nature and freedom used in modern thinking. More can be added but one thing remains and that is that all are grounded in being itself. This addition of a third element, namely being itself or in other words the fact that things are, gives us the opportunity to replace a binary structure with a trinitarian structure in analyzing the human image.

The question remains: how can we apply a trinitarian structure to art? I will examine this question from a personal perspective; the practice of making a picture of a person; the making of a human image.

We will look at three aspects of this enterprise: the first impression of a person, the construction of the human image and the encounter with a person on a personal level.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the scheme they used: First we have the Father, then the Son then the Holy Spirit. Philosophically speaking this is: The Monarchia (the source) the Logos (the word) and the Tropos (the mode). On a human level this is: First we know that something is, than what something is and than how something is.

## The construction of the human image

Before I focus on the practice of creating a human image I want to emphasize that our observations of a person unfold in time. We have to follow a certain track before we can understand how the process of creativity works.

Now, let's look at what happens if we meet a person for the first time with the purpose to make an image of that person. Well, this is very difficult to describe. The difficulty lies in the fact that during this first meeting someone completely strange enters our domain. This puts us in a pre-reflective state; a no man's land where the distance required to observe and to control disappears. This pre-reflective state is impossible to describe. It is a mystery. In the first encounter we are submitted to the object, in our case a person. We are overruled and consequentially experience objectivity. To experience objectivity is to experience that something is.' We could say that first there is an Is.<sup>1</sup>

The objects around us are the source of our knowledge. They are the first movers to invite us to create an image. The word impression can be useful here to understand this encounter. At first when we meet a person we have an impression of that person. The image of this person is pressed upon us. An impression is like a seal printed in wax. Something solid is pressed upon us and during this impression we are subjected to what we see. We are constantly under unknown impressions. We are moved by objects which claim our attention. If we are strongly impressed we often say that we are speechless, but in a sense we are always speechless when we are impressed. This is because during our first impression things are more real than we can handle. That's why we experience that something is, but we don't know what that something is. An impression is the source of our knowledge of the human image. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G K Chesterton, Saint Thomas Aquinas (New York: Double Day, 1956) 138

<sup>2</sup> In our theological tradition this source is called the first mover, the Father.

G. K. Chesterton called this first impression the primary fact. He says:

‘Much of our modern difficulty, in religion and other things, arises merely from this: that we confuse the word “indefinable” with the word “vague”. If someone speaks of spiritual fact as “indefinable” we promptly picture something misty, a cloud with indeterminate edges. But this is an error even in commonplace logic. The thing that cannot be defined is the first thing; the primary fact. It is our arms and legs, our pots and pans, that are indefinable. The indefinable is indisputable. The man next door is indefinable, because he is too actual to be defined. And there are some to whom spiritual things have the same fierce and practical proximity; some to whom God is too actual to be defined.’<sup>1</sup>

Second, we start to construct an image of the person we met through our art.<sup>2</sup> Language makes things visible, knowable. By language I mean words, concepts, methods, tools and ideas. In the visual arts our language can be: our materials, our tactual abilities, our concepts of space, our knowledge of the anatomy of the human body, etc. The richer our language, the richer our consciousness of the world and the more knowledge is possible. Language wants to be collective and wants to transcend the individual boundaries. You could say that an individual language is an impossibility.

With their language - their tools - artists collectively create a human image. Their knowledge is grounded in the body, that is in nature. Nature is constant change so the human image is always in progress.

This ever changing behavior of nature leads us to a paradox that is inherent to our endeavor to build a human image. The effect of our first impression of the person we meet is of wholeness. You could say that in our urge to create a resemblance, we strive for wholeness or unity. But the paradox lies in the fact that our language forces us to open this unity. Our language is spread out over time and seems to destroy unity. The paradox of constructing a human image is that our construction is at the same time a deconstruction. This is a difficult problem but less difficult when we understand the unity of the human image as a Gestalt. We can understand what a Gestalt is when

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1 G K Chesterton, Charles Dickens (Ware: Wordsworth Edition limited, 2007) 3

2 In tradition this is the Son, the Logos and the Word.

we compare the human image with a word in a sentence.

The human image can be understood as a word. They are both Gestalts. A Gestalt is a form where the whole is more than the sum of the parts, in the case of the word: the letters. The meaning of the word is more than the sum of the letters of that word. Likewise the Gestalt of the person who enters can be saved in our construction of the human image when we remember that the unity of the image must be more than the sum of the building blocks we use in our construction. The person as a whole remains a mystery because the whole can only be described from the standpoint of the individual parts.<sup>1</sup>

Now we enter the third phase. It seems that the person who enters is passively waiting to be visualized or realized by the artist. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the third phase the encounter becomes personal.<sup>2</sup>

We have seen that in the first encounter with a person the actual presence of that person submits us with its being and prevents us from making any statements whatsoever with words or otherwise. This mysterious first beginning invites the artist to wonder what he is actually seeing. The artist is well equipped for the job. He has his materials, his knowledge passed down by tradition and experiences with earlier attempts at creating an image. He knows he has to make a unity, were the parts are submitted to a whole, so that the work is comprehensible. In other words, he has to make a Gestalt.

As I have shown above, our language is shared and so is the language of the artist. Without this common ground there is no communication. But during the third phase, which the artist is entering now, he enters a world of unique experiences. He becomes ecstatic and his common concepts are baptized in the flow of time. They are tested. In this process something strange might happen. There is a possibility that he will meet resistance. The appearance of the person in front of him could refuse to submit to his language. He reaches the limits of his concepts, his method. Concepts and methods which are collectively used seem insufficient now. This needs to be explored.

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1 This idea is expressed in tradition by the idea of the double nature of the Word. This means that the human image as Gestalt, in other words the human image as a whole, accompanied our endeavors to increase our knowledge of the human image which will never covers the whole but only partial components.

2 We enter the world of personal relations; the world of the Spirit.

The artist is accustomed, during the encounter with that which is in front of him, to force the human image to show itself through his collective concepts. He submits reality through his language, so to speak. On a personal level in a free exchange of information this process can be frustrated. Only on a personal level a free interaction can emerge because only on this level one can escape uniformity.

This resistance of the human image to our concepts, that an artist can experience, is nothing more than a free gift of nature. It is a personal gift.<sup>1</sup>

Our language has to be silenced to accept this gift. A painful process. Our language is something collective, as we have seen. This collective language can be deconstructed when it is transferred to a personal level. The personal level here should be understood as a unique, one-off and irreversible experience. Here the possibility exists that nature shows itself in a personal and in a unique way. This is a moment of truth. This free and personal way is incommensurable in relation with our common language, which is not free because it is common. In this unique experience our common language is observed from the perspective of freedom, in other words, from the perspective of the gift of the other. It is not determined by any law or method. Through this particular and unique moment of freedom the common human image can be reshaped and renewed.

This experience is well described by the artist Alberto Giacometti:

‘The true revelation, the true shock which made my entire conception of space topple over and which definitely put me on the path I am now on, I received during the same period, in 1945, in a cinema. I was watching the news. Suddenly, instead of seeing figures, men who were moving in three-dimensional space, I saw spots on a flat cloth. I no longer believed it. I looked at my neighbor. It was fantastic. By contrast, he took on an enormous depth. All of a sudden I was conscious of the dept into which we are all plunged, and upon which we do not remark because we are so used to it. I went outside.

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<sup>1</sup> In tradition this gift is called an act of grace. The American writer Flannery O’Connor said about grace: ‘All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.’

I went outside. I discovered an unknown Boulevard Montparnasse, dreamlike. Everything was different. The dept transformed people, trees, objects.’<sup>1</sup>

Contemplating a trinitarian structure of the human image can help us to find the flaws in nineteenth-century academism and in modern art at the same time. nineteenth-century academism in its uniformity blocks a personal encounter with the human image and destroys innovation. Modern art, in its rejection of nineteenth-century academism, destroys the common language nineteenth-century academism provides, which despite its limitations has something very interesting to say about the human image. We could say that during the last two centuries a great conflict concerning the human image has dominated the art-world. A struggle between an inner and an external domain. Both nineteenth-century academism and modern art in a sense share the same defects: they forget the unity of the human image and that this unity is rooted in being itself. By contrast, the conflict is rooted in our language. It is the richness of our language that makes the deviation. The creative challenge in constructing the human image lies in our ability to unite our language in such a way that the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

On a personal level the artist has a special role. Because only by moving outward in the physical world on a personal and unique level, reaching out to the ‘other’ so to speak, and only when we are able to meet resistance in the other, our human image can be revived and developed. Within a free encounter, a moment of renewal is always unique and particular. When the human image is renewed, not only our knowledge of the human image, but also our knowledge of nature itself is reshaped. They are reshaped and not destroyed because our knowledge of nature is always grounded in the human body.

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<sup>1</sup> The remark is related by Jean Clay, in “Alberto Giacometti.....” *Réalités* no 215, December 1963. p 143

## Conclusion

According to the human image there are three options.

-Academism and photography. The representation of the human image is submitted to a strict and uniform method.

-The human image is shown through the expression of an isolated and autonomous self. Creativity means eliminating every imposed limit which is unwelcome to the self.

-A trinitairian construction of the human image in which, through the ecstatic movement of the person and the borders which are defined by the Other, the human image is reshaped.

## Epilogue

In art of the last two centuries the representation of the human image has to say the least, been problematic. Established in an academic tradition a settled image has manifested itself very strongly, in photography and academician art, all the way up to our present day. Still, in spite of its success, it has left us with an uneasy feeling, as if the human image is pinned down like a butterfly in a showcase. As we have seen, a constant revolt against academism was the result. This conflict has grown so much that it now has even entered the political realm, dividing art in a left and a right. This is an exhausting battle that consumes, in my opinion, our creative energy. A remarkable by-product of this commotion is the fact that in modern art,- the art that opposed naturalism -the human image seems to disappearing all together. This is what I have been experiencing throughout decades visiting museums of modern art. This can be explained by the urge of the artist to sustain the difference and to flee from being conceptualized. Focusing on personal freedom, the human image seems to be a stumbling block. The human image seems less and less represented and more and more marginalized in modern art. So in the end we are stuck with a frozen image on one side and a vanishing image on the other.

The mistake that underlies this problem can be explained by the fact that both parties embrace an inconsistent idea about nature and the self. Or, in other words, in our creativity we are uncertain how to relate nature and the self; sometimes the self is determined by nature, sometimes the self is independent of nature. In art this means that the human image is on the one hand a product of solid system with an unavoidable outcome, on the other hand a projection of an imaginary self.

What both parties forget though is that a third actor takes part in the enterprise of creating a human image. That is the person we meet and represent; the source of our image. This person is alive and the whole game starts with this person. Its starts with a person presenting himself. Every experience of a person starts with this

presence. Only then follows our representation.

The only way our longing for the human image can be expressed is through a reconstruction of this moment of presence that has entered our world and attracted our attention. This reconstruction is retrospective. That's why art is always retroactive.

In that first moment that passes we get the whole package at once. The whole person is there. The problem is that in all our efforts to describe, to analyze, to paint, to sculpt, to sing, to dream this moment we are unwillingly breaking up this unity. Through our limited perspective, the unity of the object is broken. We transfuse this strange external fact to a common language because through this language we are able to communicate and to recognize reality. We try to confirm truth in a common language because if something is true it is true for all.

What remains is our personal freedom, as Gauguin stated. How does this fit in? Well, our personal perspective is unique. Our personal position in space and time is unique and irreversible. While we describe how things are, unchangeable in our common language, on a personal level we enter the flow of time. Our personal experiences become part of an ever changing world, never permanent, never stable, never constant, and never steady. This is the place for new possibilities; this is the nursery of innovation.

So what happened with Gauguin's personal freedom? When Gauguin entered his unspoiled paradise searching for his personal freedom, his encounter with this new world was such that his method of working was insufficient to express what he experienced. He therefore refused to submit to this method. This method was what was handed over by tradition and culture, in his case academism. He could only conclude, that this method was insufficient, however because he had embraced this method in the first place. So personal freedom is only possible in relation to a common language. Only a strict method or a stable concept makes personal freedom possible.

Gauguin didn't invent a personal language, though he claimed he did. On the contrary. He focused on the human image as was conventional in the 19th century. He tried to communicate this new and wonderful experience of the inhabitants of this new world in an adequate manner. So he added something new to the human image. But he didn't know how. His method was not clear. He didn't know exactly what he was doing. He was working in the dark. That is the

destiny of a pioneer. Later on, his pupils like Serusier conceptualized his vision as Serusier's painting 'Le Talisman' shows. The pupils took care that this new vision could be incorporated in the human image.

Pioneers never have a strict method. On the internet you can learn how to paint an impressionistic painting according a strict method. The great impressionist Monet wasn't so sure. He was hardly aware that he was an impressionist. For him, the concept wasn't clear yet. That is why he could be innovative. Purism seldom leads to innovation.

The human image in art must grow because it is never complete. A frozen concept how a human image should look like is a dead end in art. On the other hand, there is an other danger looming at the horizon. In modern art there is the habit to link the concept of personal freedom with the idea of an individual autonomous self as a closed system. Creativity is here synonymous with self expression. This is a mistake. What is personal is relational. As we have seen in the case of Gauguin that personal freedom means moving away from common language. This common concept is a necessary precondition for becoming personal. With self-expression we create an illusion of a private language, which is useless. This has consequences for the human image.

The human image is based on the presence of 'the other'. This 'other' presents itself as a whole or Gestalt that never can be grasped. We never get the whole picture, neither the naturalist nor the modernist. Still this Gestalt is present beyond the horizon as a focal point. This opens the door to what Greek thinkers called epiktasis; a possibility of endless growth. When we lose this transcendental focus point we surrender to the flux. In the flow of time nature is ever changing and endlessly omnifarious. Every experience becomes one-off and isolated. We enter the world of endless becoming. In this flux everything dissolves into endless shrinking particulars and all our experiences become disconnected. In the end this leads to the death of everything that is continual. So with the concept of an autonomous self the opposite is achieved. The self fades away.

How can we renew in art the human image ? Now let's look at some paintings of the human image from tradition. We see here images of the human face, all taken from the history of Western European art. We see the same subject over and over. Still every picture is different. The mode in which the faces are represented differs in each painting. We see the same always in a different way. The same is constantly renewed. This is because a free and personal experience is connected with a common language

