

Floating Self

6 May – 16 July 2017

Textbook

Floating Self

I stagger under the appalling, exhilarating burden of being responsible for this utterly unique entity known as myself, which will ever only occur once in the whole measureless stretch of cosmic time, and which I and I alone, am charged with bringing to either paradise or perdition.

Terry Eagleton paraphrasing Søren Kierkegaard¹

Floating Self is an exhibition that examines how the production of identity today copes with larger political and media apparatuses, especially those generated through popular and online media. That is, this exhibition asks a few, pertinent questions about how we form a sense of who we are today. We begin this text with the premise that an exhibition is a laboratory and an occasion to consider various configurations of ideas as an encounter with a forest of meaning.

The artworks of Rabih Mroué, Rosa Rendl and Amalia Ulman in this exhibition all preoccupy themselves with notions of selfhood and identity production, in diverging directions. This text briefly broaches this topic alongside a few, somewhat parallel socio-political currencies.

Indeed, the development of this exhibition, from its onset, has arisen out of a desire to respond, in various forms, to the current political crises in Europe and North America. This exhibition is one such response. Part of this desire stems from a bewilderment before current identity politics, especially those now more rampant and discernible. Instead of deliberating on political macrocosms and how they came to be, the focus here is upon subjective microcosms. The reasoning here is that for the formation of every subjective entity that comes to being within an individual, many subjectivities or

¹ Terry Eagleton. *Hope Without Optimism*. (Yale University Press), 2015, p. 75.

versions or possibilities of self-unite to a common purpose. In the case of a proper democratic system (that is, the political macrocosm), we might see this as a *struggle* with common purpose. We imagine politicians debating policy, or an overall functioning society with all its flaws and advantages considered. In the case of the individual, is there not something divergently different? With this in mind, we consider a few problematics around subjectivity and its production, that is, the material that these three artists examine.

Let us commence then with the notion of a “post-truth” era, which has been denoted widely as an emblem of our times (and “Word of the Year 2016,” according to Oxford Dictionary).² Here, notions of self and identity construction have arguably never seen such flux and flurry. One’s identity must here reside on and within a *bendability* of truth; that is, upon irrational forms of belief that wax and wane. We might term this condition as a ping-pong effect of human identity today. Or we might call it blind faith. As Terry Eagleton reminds us, “for Freud, fantasy, misperception, and a repression of the Real are constitutive of the self, not accidental to it. Without such saving oblivion, we would never get by. What, then, if there was indeed a meaning of life, but it was preferable for us not to know it?”³ Notions of self that are actively in construction, whether through bombardments of information, often betray dramatically opposed contradictions existing in parallel? They may also be forms of mental or behavioral paralysis through excessive association with, for example, disinformation⁴ in various popular media, and relatedly the over-production of co-existing identities as idealized online especially. Naturally these bombardments are not simply consumed, but are

² The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 was *post-truth* – an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.

³ Terry Eagleton. *The Meaning of Life*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2007, p. 50.

⁴ The term *disinformation* refers to false information intended to mislead, and includes especially propaganda that is issued by government or corporate organizations to a rival power, the media or citizens themselves.

simultaneously answering to desire and wish fulfillment. This exhibition busies itself with these cases. So, one may ask, what is developing within consciousness and how are identities actually coping to maintain a sense of self, when so much of selfhood must be skirted, avoided or even abandoned to survive and find meaningful rest within the excesses of information production today? Arguably, again, that is human nature, as Freud argues; an inability to confront realities or question representations themselves may form or indeed reveal a kind of psychological imperviousness. But, the likes of political tendencies today have today turned a dark corner. The conditions that led to the 2016 election of Donald Trump especially are an extreme example of this bizarre, troubling tendency for representation and reality to be so far split apart, with dire consequences. The fallout today is an instability of truth and, therefore relatedly, selfhood, which Freud's notions assist us in approaching.

While this is a foreboding and global topic, while ultimately acting at the level of the individual, what is interesting material here are the questions of how individual human identities become so foiled by the universe of symbols and language that engulf them. That is, what is this vulnerable, fleshy kernel of self that must be so untenable as to become unable to see itself as it continually falls into false notions of self and the world, no matter what arises? I am referring, naturally, in one manner but not exclusively, to a disillusioned political selfhood that has been highlighted by this "post-truth" era. However the notion of "post-truth" may be a familiar echo from a previous era.

Theodor Adorno, who when writing about extreme-right wing American politics of the 1940s, relayed that their "propaganda material is little concerned with concrete and tangible political issues." It aims instead to transform its followers into a kind of "rabble" who act mechanically and perform a mass paranoia while yielding to "powerful outside collective agencies." These people are united in an

“artificially created bond ... of a libidinal nature,” and therefore they “surrender themselves so unreservedly to their passions and ... lose the sense of the limits of their individuality.” Their will is surrendered to this distorted form of love, built out of passion for the authority figure.⁵ Negative convictions and simple un-truths are therefore not only believed, they are key building blocks of subjectivity. Adorno was naturally referring to the rise of fascism. Is this not parallel to the “post-truth” scenario today? Despite arguments that the political situation developing in the USA (and in other European regions) does not have the quantitative make up of 1940s fascism,⁶ we discern that it does on this psychological level. Further, what is most troubling are variations of hegemonic “deep state” tendencies⁷, neoconservative deregulation, and the excessive, unequitable globalization of capital, an enhanced military-industrial complex, and the normalisation effect of these socio-economic tendencies world-wide. An overall state of uncertainty ensues, as the product of these very conditions, as well as the advanced, unhinged and vast networks of information, and associative belief, chained to them. This, arguably, all comes down to the problematics of individual subjectivity.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno. “Freudian Theory & the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda”, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. (New York: Continuum), 1982, p. 118 – 125.

⁶ There are many examples, including Gianni Riotta in *The Atlantic Magazine*, January, 2016 as well as John Daniel Davidson in *The Guardian* in January 2017, and most poignantly Sheri Berman in *Vox Magazine*, also in January, 2017.

⁷ See Mike Lofgren’s book, *Deep State*, or related interviews on the subject, easily found online, which sketch some of these tendencies.

Floating Self: Narcissism, Objecthood, Delusion, Fantasy & War

If being complicit is wanting to be a force for good and to make a positive impact, then I'm complicit. ... I hope to make a positive impact. I don't know what it means to be—complicit—but—but, you know, I hope time will prove that I have—done a good job and much more importantly, that my father's administration is the success that I know it will be.

Ivanka Trump, 5 April, 2017, CBC News Interview, United States

This disavowal recently verbalised by Ivanka Trump has an obvious bed-fellow: narcissism.⁸ Theodor Adorno notes the “essential role of narcissism in regard to the identifications ... at play in the formation of fascist groups.”⁹ He goes on to ascribe this with Freud’s theory of *idealization*. Freud writes, “We see that the object is being treated in the same way as our own ego, so that when we are in love, a considerable amount of narcissistic libido overflows on the object. It is even obvious, in many forms of love choice that the object serves as a substitute for some unattained ego ideal of our own.”¹⁰ In order to preserve the ego and unite with the authority figure, a necessary idealization and bond must occur, “as the partial transfer of the narcissistic libido to the object. This pattern of identification through idealization, the caricature of true, conscious solidarity, is however, a collective one.”¹¹ That is, this behaviour exists between individuals as they come together in a group.

But since the self has been volatilised away, they find themselves in the unenviable position of absolute monarchs without a country.

Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*¹²

⁸ We could have a Freudian field day analysing Ivanka Trump’s relationship with her father.

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, p. 125.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, quoted by Adorno, p. 125.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, p. 126.

¹² Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, p. 76.

Beyond the mirrored entrance of this exhibition, Rosa Rendl presents a collection of seven, mounted photographs, which arguably denote an impulse of contemporary group-think. They are simultaneously the fetishized objects upon which their desirer (or owner) may project his or her idealisation, and they also mirror this condition. A sense of the collective idealisation is also clearly demarcated, where within all the photos there is no one represented, but rather merely the delusional sense of individuality that these commodities offer to the consumer. Further, Rosa Rendl's "presence" is suggested in her very absence, in that these are clearly her things, but it could be anyone's presence being suggested, or rather, it is everyone's presence, whereupon anyone may be caught under the same spell of commodity fetishism. The photographs' conscious style and their deliberate mounting as a small forest of near-empty, reductive signifiers that perform a number of aesthetic associations, all play around notions of representation and identity today, as represented in media and especially online. The images are akin to, if not nearly identical to, *Instagram* postings. Here they float before us on poles, melancholically mirroring idealised versions of self. When one looks closer, however, sometimes these images surrender their idealised qualities to reveal blankness within.

Rendl's images on poles contrast with her large composer "portraits" mounted on fabric on the far left wall. These images are of songbook covers, whose music was composed by several different female composers. Rosa Rendl was compelled to produce these works upon hearing about how until now a sonata by Fanny Hensel (born Mendelssohn) had always been identified as being her brother's, Felix, and is only now correctly attributed. She, like the others represented here, including Clara Schumann, was not adequately recognised for her musical work during her time. This social neglect and belated, modern recognition, opens up many questions about femininity, subjectivity and representation, as well as the social creation of history and repertoire.

Directly beside and in stark contrast to this collection of Rendl's images are a series of quirky self-portraits by Amalia Ulman. While, the four composers speak to problematics of femininity as especially regarded within its time, so do these four photographs by Ulman. While Rendl's mounted photographs of objects are artful and make a nod to fashion photography (as well as the rise of higher-quality, amateur photography), these photographs by Ulman appear cheap and expendable. They are like the kind of spontaneous, every day and meaningless Facebook postings by a contemporary narcissist, who reaches out to her online network. These photographs have something of a wink and nod about them. Their protagonist has taken the role of being an exhibitionist to some absurd end point. However, instead of making this a highly sexual exhibitionism, which is not uncommon online, Ulman plays on the excessive emptiness of these representations. Terry Eagleton reminds us that the modern work of art "so often turns around a central absence, some cryptic gap or silence which marks the spot through which sense-making has leaked away." Eagleton also reminds us of the "meaning-shaped hole" at the centre of Samuel Beckett's work, where the absence hints at a former presence, a meaning that has been vanquished or simply faded away.¹³ Like with Beckett's entire oeuvre, there is no limit to what can be done with a lack at the centre of one's artwork. Ulman's video series on the other side of the portraits continue this inanity, often with humorous and even profound results. In the nothingness of these depictions, in their raw, absurdist arrangements and quasi-paradise of what indeed does exist online, is paradoxically an intense human encounter. In one of the video series, we see various permutations of Ulman waiting for something to happen. She films her reflection in an elevator, awaiting her arrival to her floor in an office building. She invents ridiculous rituals or games within the utter vapidness of her fluorescent-lit office space. A meeting with self is paused, delayed, on and on and on. It does not arrive. Eagleton

¹³ Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life*, p. 58 & 63.

writes, “the act of waiting is a kind of nothing, a perpetual deferment of meaning, an anticipation of the future which is also a way of life in the present. This suggests that to live is to defer, to put off a final meaning...”¹⁴ On the one hand, the use of lack, repetition and being in-between is not only indicative of human-ness, it is rich material for artists. On the other hand, as Adorno reminds us, “constant reiteration and scarcity of ideas are indispensable ingredients of the entire technique” of fascist agitators.¹⁵ These images and videos of selfhood floating in an ether of whimsy and marvel at nothingness have a certain charm, while they whittle away at any conviction that we have come any closer to knowing ourselves (or remembering history) in this post-truth world of endless information.

With both Rendl and Ulman, we encounter contemporary skirmishing with notions of object hood, fetishism, melancholic desire, and empty symbolism. We see skittish forms of self-portraiture, both wary of and ironic towards delusional natures. Both artists are cognizant of their references as well as the absurdity of the “fresh meat” of online or fashion content, that which dies within minutes and is forgotten, only to remain as fragments or slivers of misguided memory; all exuding this confused sense of fleeting consciousness.

Artworks by Rabih Mroué in this exhibition include four box-sculptures with embedded images and sound, a series of collages, a bomb poster both inside and outside the Künstlerhaus, and two video projections. Rabih Mroué has long explored the legacy of war, even from his own or his family’s experience, and the impact of this violence upon the psyche. Notions of nationhood, victimization and oppression, and resulting identities all come to bear in this work. His work often explores notions of truth and fiction in representations of war. His films, collages and performances are often generated from material that propagates or is derived from actual war.

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, *ibid*, p. 59.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, p. 136.

Four *Black Boxes*, from his series of fourteen, hang in the exhibition. These works combine collaged images with a short recording. In *Hindenburg (1937)*, for example, we encounter the floating self of early 20th Century modernity, where dreams of a future world are abruptly ended in tragic death. The narrator of the original radio report must end his report with hope, where he says, “her dead would not have died in vain.” This very human urge to continue in the face of adversity is there for modernity’s sake, as well as for preservation of one’s subjectivity before the inanity of horror. However we see this urge to go on in the face of calamity appearing in different forms throughout a number of works by Mroué in the exhibition. The artist not only represents violence, but combines it with a hopeful imagination, and at times with a kind of formal analysis, to create a number of speculations of self under re-construction after it has encountered some unspeakable horror. This putting back together of self from its violent fragmentation and dismemberment give us models for not only producing coping mechanisms and survival of self, it denotes new subjectivities arising from the ashes of violence and, again, nothingness.

In the projection *Duo for Two Missing Persons*, the artist makes a speculative essay video about the destruction and scattering of bodies from bombings. The work is both macabre and humorous, derived from real experience, while bringing ghosts and dance into the mix. A choreographer in Germany is asked to design a dance based on a formula of conjured up by the artist; a formula based on the mathematical sequence of how the bones of two “missing persons” would be mixed up from an explosion. The work’s absurdity is met with a stoic grace and a quiet refusal to succumb to the madness of tragedy and injustice. Notions of self violently blown apart and together in destruction leave us with lingering questions about how one witnessing such atrocity continues onward from such terrible nightmare.

The video projection, *The Pixelated Revolution*, is the final encounter of the exhibition. This work depicts a complete other side of social media in comparison with Amalia Ulman's work, for example. *The Pixelated Revolution* depicts captured online images and videos uploaded by Syrian protestors, which depict terrible atrocities. These images are then analyzed alongside other moving images from the region by Rabih Mroué as one would analyze any formal representations that propagate meaning. Made in 2012 for dOCUMENTA (13), this work immediately reminds us of how little has changed in the region. Like many of the works by Mroué, *The Pixelated Revolution* offers critical mechanisms for the active preservation of self and subjectivity as well as artistic productivity in the face of utter inhumanity and destruction.

Floating Selves

Just as little as people believe in the depth of their hearts that the Jews are the devil, do they completely believe in the leader. They do not really identify themselves with him but act this identification, perform their own enthusiasm, and thus participate in their leader's performance. If they would stop for a second, the whole performance would go to pieces, and they would be left to panic.

Theodor Adorno¹⁶

Given post-Enlightenment modernity and the calamities of the 20th Century, the revolution of the right in the United States and indeed in Europe is therefore arguably, in one sense, the direct result of an overall condition of the collectivity of non-engaged, non-reflective selves trapped in collective fantasy and disavowal. However the rise of the right is not the only demonstration of this condition, but merely

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, p. 136 – 137.

the most obvious one. This exhibition arises, in spirit, as from this desert of meaning.

There are three, distinct regional backdrops for the three artists. Their artworks reflect these differences while also demonstrating a few parallels and kinships. Altogether this exhibition speculates on the construction of self today and thus remarks upon notions of sexuality, realities of war and varying politics of representation, including those of femininity. At root, is the notion of a floating, existentialist self that is not only scattered and dispersed through instruments of consumerism, political narratives, social media and other forms of information, but also generates, accidentally or not, paradoxically, other considerations on contemporary identity and knowledge. That is, there are endless forms of floating self that may be considered in a strategical manner. We consider a sense of self-floating above Adorno's "rabble," or above Mroué's „rubble," avoiding them, observing them, knowing them, distinguishing oneself from them. Might floating self be a buoyant being, able to go in and out of objects, to be cognizant of its varying surroundings, like a ghost? Then notions of a split identity, an online identity, a flexible, changeable chameleon-like person all intermingle and reveal a shape-shifting self that is no longer only self-derived, and not simply self-deceived. The floating self does not reduce itself to the gratifications of collectivity or the burdens of self-pity or narcissism, instead, it continues in flight as a lonely, cold angel. The question here is how to make this into an active form of defiance and not simply an act of voyeurism?

On the other hand, we might just find ourselves literally floating above the burnt wreckage of this world, as set ineptly alight through nuclear holocaust by the Trump administration. Indeed the future appears bleak when the only superpower in the world has apparently declared war on environmental protectionism against climate change. But these realities, which are what they are, are not simply pessimistic

sentiments at this time. They conjure in us a responsibility not to despair and hide within collective thinking. As Terry Eagleton asserts, there can be powerful means of hope without optimism; more informed, politically active and historically-aware subjectivities of an assertive hope.¹⁷ Our human condition is not hopeless, he argues: “According to psychoanalytic theory, we shall never be cured of desire, but this is not to say that we cannot strike a diplomatic pact with it.”¹⁸

Where Eagleton’s paraphrasing of Kierkegaard opened this text with “the burden of being responsible” in producing self-hood, we might see a final, liberatory notion of “floating self” being one that knowingly unburdens itself from these perils, and instead of being caught in a destructive web of post-truths, it observes the wreckage, and more importantly, engages with it.

Text: Séamus Kealy

¹⁷ Dr. Eagleton’s May 17th lecture here at the Salzburger Kunstverein is entitled „The Limits of Identity Politics,“ and will surely take this debate into much richer territory.

¹⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, p. 133.

Biographies

Rabih Mroué (*1967) lives and works between Berlin and Beirut. His complex and diverse practice, spanning different disciplines and formats in between theater, performance, and visual arts, has established Mroué as a key figure in a new generation of artistic voices in Lebanon. Employing both fiction and in-depth analysis as tools for engaging with his immediate reality, Mroué explores the responsibilities of the artist in communicating with an audience in given political and cultural contexts. His works deal with issues that have been swept under the rug in the current political climate of Lebanon, connected to the enduring marks left by the Lebanese Civil War as well as more recent political events.

He has had solo exhibitions at Kunsthalle Mainz (2016), Kunsthalle Mulhouse (2015); Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid (2013); Kunstverein Stuttgart (2011); and BAK, Utrecht (2010). He has participated in major group exhibitions at MMK, Frankfurt (2016), MACBA, Barcelona (2015); SALT, Istanbul (2014); Documenta, Kassel (2012); Performa 09, New York (2009); 11th International Istanbul Biennial (2009); Queens Museum of Art, New York (2009); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2008); and Tate Modern, London (2007). He has had performances and screenings at Kampnagel, Hamburg (2011); MoMA, New York (2015); Ashkal Alwan, Beirut (2000-2015); Hebbel-Theatre, Berlin (2004); and most recently his performance *Ode to Joy* at Kammerspiele, Munich (2016) and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2016), which is part of his current North American tour.

Amalia Ulman (*1989) is an airport based artist with an office in Downtown LA. Born in Argentina but raised in Spain, she studied Fine Arts at Central Saint Martins in London. In a multidisciplinary manner, she charts a soft-toned exploration of the relationships between consumerism and identity, class imitation and social deception. She uses aesthetic languages as a mechanism to explore the intersection of class and aesthetics at its most salient point: taste.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Labour Dance* at Arcadia Missa, London and *Dignity* at James Fuentes, New York. She has produced a public sculpture for Köln Sculpture park, exhibited at Mama Rotterdam, Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Tate Modern and Whitechapel Gallery amongst many others.

Rosa Rendl (*1983, Baden) studied fashion design at the University of Art and Design Linz and the Fashion Institute Vienna and photography at the University of the Arts London. Informed by fashion photography, her artwork plays with themes such as constructions of identity, representations of the body, interpersonal relations, and the sense of self. Her works represents commodities, personal belongings, private space, and a suggested human presence within. Rosa Rendl's practice includes music, which often thematically overlaps into her photographic work. Since 2010 she has been performing music together with Daphne Ahlers as the duo *Lonely Boys*.

Her artworks were included in exhibitions at *21er Haus* (Vienna), *Bodega* (New York), *Lucas Hirsch* (Düsseldorf) and *Oracle* (Berlin), among others. *Lonely Boys* performances were held at *Kunsthalle Lüneburg* and *Sandy Brown* (Berlin), among others.

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Hours Café Cult: Mon–Fri 9 am – 11 pm