

blick auf noch zu differenzierende Interpretationen dieser frühen Strukturierungen fürstlicher Sammlungen dienen. Wünschenswert wäre gewesen, die immer wieder zu Tage tretenden transnationalen Strukturen in vergleichenden Untersuchungen von Antikensammlungen in anderen europäischen und auch außereuropäischen Ländern zu unterstreichen. Gleichwohl veranschaulichte die Tagung aus interdisziplinären Blickwinkeln eine genealogische Entwicklung der verschiedenen Präsentationsmodi zur Ausstellung antiker Kunst

von der höfischen Identifikation mit der Antike bis hin zur Entstehung der Institution Museum als Ort der Forschung und des Wissenstransfers.

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Courbet's Politics of Self-Representation

Stephanie Marchal
Gustave Courbet in seinen Selbstdarstellungen. München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2012. 470 S., Abb. ISBN 978-3-77055-265-8. € 59,00

Modern self-portraits are a special kind of picture that allow the painter an intimate look at him/herself in a public format geared to anonymous recipients within an increasingly fractured post-revolutionary symbolic order. Stephanie Marchal's dissertation-turned-book on Courbet's many-faceted self-portrait practice is supremely aware of the difficulties confronted by a realist painter of Courbet's ilk when triangulating self, mirror and canvas. Hers is an impressive tome, in both its meticulous research as well as its persuasive argumentation. The main point is well-worth emphasizing: by creating scenographic and situated paintings of himself, Courbet is the first modern

painter in the history of art to understand the full public potential of self-portraiture. He was willing and able to squeeze his own body into the many variants of Salon realism, thus managing to have a (visual, pictorial) say in his own public image-creation that included photography and caricature as well. His inventive role-play in painting, filled with extravagant poses and aggressive stances that shout for notice, adapted the self-portrait towards the demands of the modern art market and its manifold representatives. Marchal therefore offers new readings of the two key concepts within Courbet's practice more broadly construed: his understanding of realism („Realismusverständnis," 213) und his understanding of reality („Verständnis von Realität," 191).

Throughout the book, Marchal insists, rightly, that Courbet's self-portrait practice evinced a „precarious freedom" („prekäre Freiheit," a quotation taken from Alexis Joachimides, *Verwandlungskünstler. Der Beginn künstlerischer Selbststilisierung in den Metropolen Paris und London im 18. Jh.*, München/Berlin 2008, 12) typical of the modern age, oscillating productively between personal and public forms of art. For the first time

in the history of painting, his self-portraits walked a fine and sensitive line, she argues boldly, between what she terms „öffentlichkeitsstauglich“ (162) – roughly translatable as „acceptable in (or fit for) the public sphere“ – and the necessary shocks and innovations on which avant-gardism is premised, the „outrageously daring step“ („unerhört vermessener Schritt,“ 226). To arrive at a historically appropriate description of these enabling artistic dilemmas and opportunities, Marchal proposes (here her interpretation of Courbet’s self-portraits is perhaps at its most illuminating) that we need to understand Courbet’s pictorial self-conceptions in relation to the period’s notions of selfhood and individuality, what she terms, referencing Niklas Luhmann, the „Subjektivitätskonzepte“ (18) and the „Individualitätsverständnis“ of the high-bourgeois era. To this reviewer, this proposition is certainly the main pay-off of this study, namely to see one of the most politically engaged painters of the nineteenth century also develop a „politics of public self-representation“ („Politik der öffentlichen Selbstdarstellung,“ 17).

COURBET’S SELF-PORTRAIT PRACTICE

The text unfolds chronologically. After a brief and well-argued introduction, we explore each self-portrait roughly in the order in which Courbet painted it. This approach has the advantage of demonstrating clearly the sometimes subtle, sometimes quite decisive breaks within his self-portrait practice. The first of the two main chapters of the book (Ch. II) covers the first decade of Courbet’s self-portraits from roughly 1839 to 1848, and thus includes studies of such well-known paintings as *Le Sculpteur* or *Le Désespéré* (fig. 1). The second of these chapters (Ch. III) covers the years between 1848 and 1855, the time when, as Marchal argues, Courbet painted his most „programmatically“ self-representations like the large-scale *Atelier du peintre* or *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet*.

This chapter is in many ways the heart of the book, offering – as the author does not neglect to highlight repeatedly – a new interpretation of Courbet’s 1855 *Atelier*, one of the most-studied

paintings of his entire oeuvre. Marchal sees it, quite convincingly, as a large self-portrait within a vast social network of other figures, placing the painter at the epicenter of a politically and – here the new angle – religiously motivated critique of the Second Empire’s morals. The elements the author brings forth to bolster the claim that the painting resonated with the accounts of the passion of Christ (given the crucified studio-doll near center) are too manifold to be repeated here. This reviewer appreciated the effort at wrestling new meanings from a well-studied painting such as this one, even if certain aspects seem a bit over-interpreted (when, for instance, a piece of torn fabric in Courbet’s manifesto painting becomes evocative of the tearing apart of the Temple’s curtain, 242). If anything, though, the new reading underscores, as the author also emphasizes, the true multi-dimensional and layered contents of Courbet’s self-portraits.

These two chapters are followed by what appear to be a bunch of short codas, each often no more than fifteen or twenty pages long. They propose different endings to the history of Courbet’s self-portrait practice. Among these, we find Chapter V that considers Courbet’s shifting self-portrait practice after 1855, moving toward the more poetic self-projections into hunting scenes and still-lives that would mark his later oeuvre. Ch. VI considers his very late self-portraits including the one he made while in prison for his involvement with the Paris Commune. And the final two chapters (Chs. VII and VIII) engage Courbet’s place within the period’s mass image-dissemination, including both photographic (self-)portraiture and caricature. The book ends with a conclusion (Ch. IX) that partly sums up the main thrusts of the argument and also opens even more avenues for consideration, including the relationship between Courbet’s self-portraits and his portraits of period personalities, as well as the issue of gender raised by his self-portrait practice, i.e. to what extent the „subject,“ „self“ or „individual“ in Courbet’s images should be referred to, more appropriately, as a „male“ subject (this crucial question appeared to this reader to have been deferred a bit too long).



Fig. 1 Gustave Courbet, *Le Désespéré*, c. 1844/45. Private Collection (Courbet. Ein Traum von der Moderne, Kat. Frankfurt a. M. 2010, Kat.nr. 7)

CONCEPTS OF MODERN SELFHOOD

Along the „life-line” of chronology, the author weaves a set of various topics related to the period’s context and concepts of self-understanding. These range widely and reach deeply into the contemporary histories of the parallel formation of modern art and modern selfhood: a fractured relationship to the traditions of art, a special emphasis on belonging (to region, profession and social group over family), provincialism versus urbanity, modern artist against bourgeois society, the pitfalls of the increasingly anonymous relationship between artist and consumer, as well as the complex negotiation between personal interest and socio-political expression.

To be sure, media is not unaffected by these issues, and Marchal aptly places Courbet’s self-portraits within the histories of the various media in which they occur, from painting to drawing to book

and magazine illustrations. The one contextual cluster Marchal singles out for special consideration in its own chapter (Ch. IV) is the relationship that Courbet’s self-portraits entertain with the period’s fad for the „Bildungsroman,” the literary genre par excellence about modern angst, emancipation and self-formation (esp. 271). That Marchal points to this genre so overtly as one of Courbet’s central reference-tools when conceiving his paintings is certainly apt given the direct conceptual overlap between novels and self-portraits as she sees them: self-knowledge gained along the scenic routes of narrative, providing the modern order’s desired and imagined shape and depth of the „I.”

READING SELF-PORTRAITURE

That the book is a „catalog” of all Courbet self-portraits is as much opportunity as problem for the reader, as the structure has major implications for

the book's readability. Things get repetitive after a while, especially since each painting's narrative follows a similar script. Moreover, the author seems to have resigned herself to a chronology more out of frustration with a lack of systematicity within Courbet's output than anything else, which does not exactly instill confidence in her readers („Die Erschließung der Konterfeis erfolgt daher in zumeist aufeinander folgenden Einzelanalysen; nur in wenigen Fällen lassen sich sinnvolle, zusammenhängende Selbstbildnisgruppen erkennen," 24). At times, Marchal has taken one feature of Courbet's practice – a „Collagetechnik" of meanings as she calls it (263) – rather too much at face value and made it her own methodology as well.

It is therefore in the structure of the book (which would have benefitted from more of a topical organization like the excellent Bildungsroman-chapter) that its origin as dissertation is most acutely still felt. Throughout the text, an overly academic sense of comprehensiveness reigns. Did every self-portrait really deserve to be discussed at nearly equal length? Were 1768 footnotes genuinely necessary, or a somewhat inflated comprehensive bibliography that lists both full book titles and separate essays from those same books, as under Koselleck's and Nochlin's entries? All this is to say that at times a somewhat excessive sense of formality has taken over a truly special mind, propelling, as in so many dissertations, an original voice muted by academic expectations. Readability has unfortunately suffered here, which does not need to be the case, as for instance Barbara Wittmann's interesting and well-structured book on Manet (frequently referenced in Marchal's study) has demonstrated (*Gesichter geben: Édouard Manet und die Poetik der Gabe*, München 2004).

If only structure and sequence were neutral carriers of argument, but of course they are not. They shape the content markedly, and that is the case with *Gustave Courbet in seinen Selbstdarstellungen* as well. It will be easy for future scholars to look up what Marchal had to say about a specific Courbet self-portrait, but it will be exceedingly hard – given the paucity of section

headings that indicate concrete topics of analysis or the lack of an index that includes more than names – to identify the passages about cultural context. More importantly, as a result of the chronological nature of the study, some of the larger issues get somewhat minimized when placed so exclusively within analyses of single pictures. Here, issues as crucial to this study as a period conception of selfhood get developed as the separate paintings dictate, and thus never achieve the full and conceptually rich historical terms they warrant. This results in interpretations that can veer between the exceedingly particular and exceedingly general, interpretations in which some large and controversial claims about nineteenth-century subjectivity are at times underdeveloped and thus remain uncorroborated.

This is especially noticeable in the fact that the author never really compares Courbet's understanding of selfhood with other period conceptions. The Saint-Simonians (135) and Charles Fourier (272), as well as the psychophysicists (358) and Hippolyte Taine (201), are very briefly mentioned here and there, but their crucial concepts of the modern subject never discussed. Marchal clearly knows the period lexicon of selfhood which Courbet had at hand in order to dramatize himself in the image of period subjectivity – „Comte, Leroux, Michelet, Proudhon, Champfleury u.a." is the list she assembles (245) – but again none of them are asked to speak specifically to the central topic of the book, even though, of course, they had much to say about the modern subject. Proudhon, for instance, is interrogated for his views on the bible, but not for his conceptions of subjectivity (255–57).

TRADITIONS OF SELF-PORTRAITURE

The chronological nature of the study affects other large topics as well, including „history" and „politics," so crucial to Courbet's practice and self-image. It is curious to note, for instance, how disparately certain historical moments figure in the book: while the Paris Commune of 1871 and Courbet's involvement in the toppling of the Vendôme Column are discussed at length, the 1848



Fig. 2 Jacques-Louis David, Self-Portrait, 1794. Paris, Louvre (Jacques-Louis David. 1748–1825, Kat. Paris 1989, Kat.nr. 135)

Revolution – much closer in time to Courbet's major self-portraits – hardly figures at all (see 144 vs. 327–33). What is more, even though many of Courbet's self-portraits are compared to other artists' self-

portraits throughout, this comparative imagery is hardly ever illustrated, making the comparisons somewhat mute and enforcing an overly special status for Courbet's self-portraits. Marchal's

convincing study on Courbet is thus also, at various times, a misreading – even a slight denigration – of other painters’ self-portrait practice, and that did not need to be so.

Even though Marchal admits that she chose deliberately not to write an introductory history of self-portraiture at large (24), there are nonetheless some glaring lost opportunities for comparative analysis. The following three cases alluded to by Marchal seem to this reviewer germane. For one, there is Jacques-Louis David’s 1794 prison self-portrait (*fig. 2*), which is such a careful pictorial study of selfhood, publicness and politics (307, 325). Incidentally, T. J. Clark has devoted a lengthy essay to the portrait, which is not cited by Marchal even though it might perhaps have offered her – in its

detailed mapping of the self-portrait in late eighteenth-century understandings of selfhood – an especially powerful model for her own approach (Gross David with the Swoln Cheek: An Essay on Self-Portraiture, in: *Rediscovering History: Culture, Politics, and the Psyche*, ed. Michael S. Roth, Stanford 1994, 243–307; see also Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David After the Terror*, New Haven/London 1999, 33–47). Secondly, there is Cézanne’s self-portraiture, especially his early „narrative self-portraits” of the 1860s and 1870s such as *A Modern Olympia* (in which Cézanne paints himself into Manet’s *Olympia*; *fig. 3*), a very comparable case of a scenic and narrativized self-image (see Steven Platzman, *Cézanne: The Self-Portraits*,



Fig. 3 Paul Cézanne, *A Modern Olympia*, c. 1873/74. Paris, Musée d’Orsay (Cézanne, Kat. Paris/London 1996, Kat.nr. 28)

Berkeley 2001). Susan Sidlauskas has, furthermore, recently analyzed Cézanne's portraits of Hortense Fiquet through period understandings of the emotion and selfhood, another model approach that might have been of potential use for Marchal (*Cézanne's Other: The Portraits of Hortense*, Berkeley 2009). Instead, Marchal claims, lumping together a whole group of artists, that Cézanne's self-portraits are a „private affair,” a „monolog,” or moments of „psychological self-finding,” which given such pictorial evidence is simply not true (410).

Finally, there is the important case of Henri Fantin-Latour whose self-portraits are nearly contemporaneous with Courbet's and whose interesting and sophisticated accounts of spectatorship and publicity in self-portraiture have long been emphasized by both Jacques Derrida and Michael Fried (*Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*, Chicago/London 1998, esp. 365–75; this book, too, despite its lengthy sections on self-portraiture including Courbet's, does not seem to have been consulted by Marchal). Again, a slightly less Courbet-fixated gaze might have allowed Marchal to find these studies fairly easily and propose a more nuanced exchange between Courbet's self-portraits and other contemporary „visual realist” or „ocular realist” self-portraits as Fried calls them. Without a slightly broader definition and history of self-portraiture, this is to say, one of Marchal's central aims in the introduction, to place Courbet's self-portrait practice within a larger French and European frame, falls somewhat flat (25).

CONCLUSION

To close, let me once again emphasize how formidable a study Marchal's book on Courbet's self-portrait practice is. It will set a new benchmark for the study of the subject (double-meanings intended). I would like just to mention two points that are not extensively discussed, but might well have figured in Marchal's study. Firstly, it is striking how the issue of „biography” figures in the book,

namely not as itself something constructed by Courbet and his interpreters, but merely as translucent envelope of facts. Biographical facts are sometimes rather uncritically mentioned rather than interrogated as myth of a similar kind as the self-portraits themselves: in one sentence, we learn that Courbet had a son in 1847, but this fact is not made meaningful (169); later, he is said to have had, citing Marie-Thérèse de Forges, some „private sorrows” („neben privatem Kummer,” 186). A study such as Aruna D'Souza's book on Cézanne's bathers and biography might have offered a good model for a critical means to tie the myths of biography into the scenic nature of self-portraiture (*Cézanne's Bathers: Biography and the Erotics of Paint*, University Park 2008).

Secondly, for a study so interested in the „performative” and „acted” nature of Courbet's self-portraits, the theater is rather seldomly invoked, even though it might well have furnished a period conception of selfhood and role-playing (through Richard Wagner's essential essays on acting and performing for instance). This is to say that there may have been many other literary sources besides the Bildungsroman for Courbet to mine, when scouring for his public self-imagery and conceptions of selfhood.

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