Curators Talk

On the Artist’s Self as a Primary Tool. Exchanges along the Parcours

Talk between Martin Bethenod, Florian Ebner, and Anna Fricke

FE When we began working on this collaborative project, Martin, you approached the museum with various ideas for the show. After discussing several, we decided on the theme of artists’ self-representation in their work.

MB The subject, namely artistic self-representation, emerged rather indirectly. Do you remember, Florian? Our first conversations, together with Tobia Bezzola, revolved more around the idea of melancholy. While rereading the catalogue by Jean Clair for the exhibition dedicated to this topic—Mélancolie, génie et folie en Occident, first presented in 2005 at the Grand Palais in Paris, then in 2006 at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin—I was impressed by its resonance in contemporary art at large. Such an echo went far beyond the space dedicated to that period in the show. It made me aware of the centrality of works in the Pinault Collection with a saturnine influence. I felt that dealing with the issue of melancholy could be particularly relevant within a German cultural and philosophical framework; I am thinking here of the Romantic period, for example, of Dürer, Schopenhauer … In our discussions, however, we realized very quickly that one of the principal means of expression for artists dealing with melancholy, anxiety, and death was with their own image or their own—real metaphorical—body. Thus, it suddenly appeared to be a richer idea to concentrate on the tool rather than on the theme. This is how the actual project was born.

AF And in many regards it is a very interesting approach. Rather than investigating the current interest in selfies, the show concentrates on the historical axis of self-representation, and thus along the way reflects the preconditions of digital self-portrayal in today’s social media. The show presents many shifts and aspects in viewing oneself and especially the artistic work with the own body, which is made possible by the broad range of the Pinault Collection and punctuated by works from the Museum Folkwang. More than merely presenting a collection, the Pinault Collection’s extensive range has enabled a themed exhibition revolving around this specific topic.

MB During the last ten years, we have always presented the Pinault Collection through articulated projects, such as thematic or monographic shows, or exhibitions where we give a specific artist carte blanche. They are never random shows of the type, let’s say, “Masterpieces of the Pinault Collection,” or “New Works in the Pinault Collection.” Since 2006, we have shown over 2,000 pieces from the collection in Venice, through nineteen exhibitions. We also develop projects in collaboration with museums and institutions in France and in the rest of the world. For each of
them, the general context—such as the exhibition partners or locations—allows a new, richer, different gaze on the collection. The point is always to foster fresh dialogues and synergies with new partners, museum directors, curators, art critics, a new public or, possibly, with another collection … as in the present case, with the Museum Folkwang, for Dancing with Myself.

In that sense, we had the idea to combine a selection of works from the Pinault Collection with pieces from the Museum Folkwang. This is how we set up some individual encounters between artworks from this private collection, which has an international scope and a horizontal perspective of collecting art broadly in the present, with the more vertical dimension of a historically grown museum collection.

When you choose to base a thematic or historical project on a collection, be it private or public, you are necessarily aware from the start that the result can never be exhaustive. This awareness is very stimulating; it forces you to exercise humility and pragmatism. On the other hand, isn’t it so, that the eternal quest for the missing piece is the source of all energies behind the constitution of a collection? Thus, from the very beginning, we knew that we would have neither Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy, nor Rudolf Schwarzkogler, nor Gina Pane, nor Chris Burden, nor Michel Journiac, nor VALIE EXPORT. However, what makes the encounter with the Museum Folkwang collection fascinating is not only that it brings artists into the show who are particularly central to the topic—such as John Coplans, Arnulf Rainer, and Ulrike Rosenbach—which is fantastic, of course, but what also makes this encounter even more exceptional is that it activates dialogues between artworks. It creates mirror effects, like at Claude Cahun’s pictures, both from the Museum Folkwang and the Pinault Collection. It unveils the complementarity within the career of a single artist—for example, between Cindy Sherman’s earlier and more recent pieces belonging to the Pinault Collection, and her iconic film stills belonging to the Folkwang. It also generates a confrontation between works from different approaches and different generations exhibited together for the first time.

As the perspective of the collection provides the context of the show, I would like to know when François Pinault started to collect. This could be interesting because, unlike in a museum where there is continuous collecting across different epochs by different people, there is a definite starting point for private collectors—whereby the initial point and the breeding ground for public collections are very often private initiatives. This is especially the case with the Museum Folkwang, founded by Karl Ernst Osthaus and later saved by a private foundation after his death.

François Pinault started to collect about forty years ago. As mentioned very often, the acquisition of a Mondrian, in the early 1980s, was the starting point to his collecting in a much more ambitious and more radical way. From a chronological point of view, the collection has spread
mainly from the 1960s—with a few works from the 1950s—to the present, with a very strong bias for emerging artists. One could describe its main line as a research for the minimal. Not minimalism, in the usual sense of an artistic movement, determined both historically and culturally, but rather like a gesture. A "minimal impulse" that artists, as different as Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin, Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, and Bruce Nauman, would have in common … or like Sol Lewitt, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni, as the exhibition Accrochage at Punta della Dogana, which was curated by Caroline Bourgeois, clearly demonstrates.

**AF** As a matter of fact, the theme of our exhibition seems to show the counter-movement to abstract, minimal art and a strong focus on painting. By focusing on the ways artists convert their own bodies into images, the show concentrates on the timespan in which the body became a point of culmination: the flesh, the subjective body, the objective body, the body as a sign or symbol, and the convention of its representation become important. And of course it’s an exceedingly political issue, whether the body is seen as a culturally determined entity—which it certainly is, insofar as every self-portrait is about the Self, but also about the Other. Because we define ourselves through the anticipated gaze of the Other, of society. Linked with this issue is the question of whether you really have a personal body or more of a collective one. Many of the works in the show explore the blurred line between the personal body, the artist body, and the collective body.

**MB** During an interview within the framework of Punta della Dogana’s opening, François Pinault stated that his personal taste was clearly oriented towards the minimal, but that he hated to have any limits imposed on him whatsoever, even by his own taste! This determination to challenge one’s own taste is, I believe, very interesting and original for a private collection, since it is, by definition, free from objectivity or constraints of representativeness. This clearly discloses François Pinault’s state of mind. He finds it essential not to rest on one’s convictions and to question everything. In fact, the collection expands simultaneously between two opposite polarities—in a dialectic way, so to speak—spanning, in short, from Ryman to Paul McCarthy! The same dialectic is operating in Dancing with Myself, from Opalka to Mikhailov, from Gilbert & George to González-Torres, through the various modalities of the artist’s presence in his work and the diverse uses he makes of his body, his image, his persona. At this stage, I would like to specify that the collection does not develop along preconceived thematic lines. There are no “sections” in it, no section dedicated to portraits or to any other sujets. Rather, the point is to concentrate on particular individual approaches and to accompany the artists on the long run. As far as the Museum Folkwang is concerned, in your view is there a guideline, an axis that can define the evolution of the collection from its historical section to its more recent pieces?
FE Corresponding to Museum Folkwang’s original mission which follows the adventures of the avant-gardes—and the education of the people through art—the history of the Photography Department is very much inspired by different modernisms: the time between the wars and after the war, from experimentation to photojournalism, insisting on a certain formal quality and a serious attitude towards the visible. This is how Otto Steinert and Ute Eskildsen compiled this collection: emphasizing the photographic image of the human being, the portrait in all its variety, as well as the classical notion of the self-portrait.

AF Another important point in the history of Museum Folkwang was the founding of a video studio in 1969, which enabled artists to shoot and edit their video works using the newest technology. For example, artists such as Ulrike Rosenbach, Michael Buthe, and Barbara Hammann have produced works here. And as we know, video as a technology is closely linked to the examination of the body, among other reasons because performance is an important element of body art. In films such as Ulrike Rosenbach’s Glauben Sie nicht, dass ich eine Amazone bin (1976), which is part of the show, this connection becomes very obvious. Here Rosenbach shoots arrows at a reproduction of a Madonna painting and, via a superimposition, also at herself. It is very important to her that she filmed herself with the intent not to lose control over the way she was viewed.

FE Martin, the categories with which you proposed to conceive the show were decisive for the construction of the project. We start with these questions about melancholy, mortality, and the infinity of art, through the works of Alighiero Boetti, Félix González-Torres, Roman Opalka, Urs Fischer, Rudolf Stingel, and Helmut Newton. You already mentioned Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman, whose works are displayed with Allan Sekula, Urs Lüthi, Roni Horn, and Rodney Graham who, through their metamorphosis in front of the camera, playfully put on and took off various identities. Then, emphasizing the importance of social, geographical, and political decline, and beyond any postmodern irony, we move to the question of political autobiographies, with LaToya Ruby Frazier, Nan Goldin, Kimsooja, Paulo Nazareth, Ulrike Rosenbach, Lili Reynaud-Dewar, Adel Abdessemed, David Hammons, William Pope.L, Jo Spence, and Hito Steyerl. We finish with the ways of using the own body as a tool, as raw material. Be it a sculptural, deconstructed form as with Gilbert & George, Maurizio Cattelan, Charles Ray, Boris Mikhailov, Robert Gober, John Coplans, Alina Szapocznikow, or used in a very simple, playful way with works by Steve McQueen, Arnulf Rainer, Kurt Kranz, Bruce Nauman, and Martin Kippenberger as a physical counterpoint to the very abstract beginning. So it’s a broad spectrum of different generations, different ways of using the self and one’s own body.

AF The Museum Folkwang’s very large exhibition hall—in which removable walls can be placed—has often been used in the past as a completely or partly open space. These four categories derived
from structuring a parcours through the exhibition and creating a choreographed progression. In a certain way, viewers are experiencing their own bodies in different theoretical contexts by walking through the show. This method of experiencing the works is mirrored in the mise en abyme of Steve McQueen’s *Cold Breath* (2000), which pushes the viewer through a corridor and into the unpleasant confrontation—emotionally and physically—with a close-up of a man stimulating and hurting his nipple incessantly. A strong transference between the viewer and the works is one of the results.

**MB** Actually, this sequential order in the exhibition has less to do with a conceptual bias than with a careful approach of the artworks, with an intention to exhibit them in the best possible way. From the very beginning, we have had to take into account the large amount of videos, because they require an isolated space and an accurate monitoring of both sound and light. These works actually imposed a rhythm and structure on the exhibition path. I had not actually noticed that it was so rigid. Well, after all, why shouldn’t it be?

**FE** I must admit that I have come to think that the omnipresent ideal of the freedom of the beholder has become commonplace. Why not propose a certain path? I think these works are strong enough to keep their autonomous meaning and to be part of a historical narrative. Besides, it is provoking and inspiring to have these different points of view clash. In both the show and the catalogue, comparing the 1970s and its irony of the postmodern arena with the generation of today—which we called “political autobiographies” with their more defined social provenance, postcolonial backdrop, and political attitudes—it is much more stimulating having this encounter of perspectives.

**MB** Yes, of course! On top of it, each visitor is free to walk the sequence backwards if he or she wants to, or to walk it in one way and then, the other. I believe that an openly narrative bias can act as a form of mediation for the public, especially for those less familiar with contemporary art. Such mediation should not be too heavy or authorative. It should not be too allusive, either, so that no one should feel excluded. The rhythm is also very important. It is important to keep a proper balance between closed and open spaces, natural light, artificial light, and darkness, and to establish a progression from pathos to irony through a graduation of shades …

**AF** At the beginning of the route—it seems perhaps a bit paradoxical at first glance—the works in the first room revolve around the absence of the body, namely Félix González-Torres'’s graphite drawing on paper *Untitled (7 Days of Bloodworks)* (1991) and his curtain *Untitled (Blood)* (1992) made out of plastic beads, and Opalka’s triptych. The theme of melancholy and gloominess captured here continues in the second room with Rudolf Stingel’s three monumental self-portraits.
that emphasize the mortality of his own body. As the prologue to the exhibition, it portrays the essence of the questions by the fact that your body gives you life, but it also lets you die; this existential instant mediates between body and mind, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty called \textit{corps-propre} or \textit{Leib}, is the basis of most of the works that are represented here.

The third room opens another important chapter: two self-portraits by Claude Cahun mentioned above—one owned by the Pinault Collection, and the other from the Museum Folkwang—demonstrate the variability of the self, also in terms of gender and “the I” as role-play. Along with Marcel Duchamp’s famous self-portrait as Rrose Sélavy, Cahun is considered one of the first artists to explore these subjects photographically.

**FE** This homage to a kind of avantgarde, which is evoked by the works of Claude Cahun from the late 1920s, is echoed elsewhere in the exhibit—for instance, in the important chapter on political autobiographies. Here, we find an encounter between Nan Goldin’s \textit{Nan one month after being battered} (1984), an iconic image of the artist’s chosen bohemian family, and the work of LaToya Ruby Frazier, in which the artist addresses her biological family, as well as the determinant social and political conditions in which she was born. Despite the differences between these two artists, they both feature photographic cultures of emancipation in their work: one is about the permissive and self-determined sexuality in the 1980s under the shadow of Aids; and the other is about a self-experienced and self-told African American history under the shadow of economic decline.

**MB** I am particularly happy that this encounter between our two collections has permitted incorporating Nan Goldin into the exhibition, while initiating a unique dialogue between her and LaToya Ruby Frazier, an artist from another generation and background. Nan Goldin was not included in the first layouts, simply because none of her works relevant to the theme belongs to the Pinault Collection. One could wonder why, considering that American photography from the 1980s and the 1990s is highly represented in the collection. This question once again points out that we are dealing with a private collection, with no special commitment to exhaustiveness, not even to objectivity—a collection with a clear statement of its particularity, subjectivity, and contingency.

**FE** With Lee Friedlander’s laconic and formally virtuous self portraits from the mid-1960s, now classics of the genre, and with Jo Spence’s provocative \textit{Cultural Sniper} (1990), we are creating other generational and mental dialogues (and collisions) between our collections—for instance, when Spence’s British feminism meets Helmut Newton’s melancholy. At the core of the exhibition, there is the radical, irritating, and a bit crazy cabinet with sculptural, photographic, and filmic fragments and parts of the body. There are installations, such as Robert Gober’s leg (1991) and a lamp by Alina Szapocznikow (1970), but also photography, with John Coplan’s’ close-ups of his hand, his buttocks, and his heel and toe as well as two early video pieces by Bruce Nauman.
The starting point for this room is the idea of a body torn to pieces, with all that this entails: suffering, on the one hand, and eroticism, even fetishism, on the other. A deep ambiguity pervades the whole space. Alina Szapocznikow’s Sculpture-lampe IX (1970) plays on the ambiguity between a work of art and an object of design, between the human and the vegetal dimension, between a tortured and a sexualized body. Gober’s work, a masterpiece of “Unheimlichkeit” (uncanniness), is halfway through pain and desire. Steve McQueen’s film, dealing with the same emotions, opens the way to the last section of the exhibition, where the body parts no longer constitute mere objects of suffering or desire, but tools, instruments of inquisition, criticism, and rebellion.

At the end of the exhibition, we find a number of very Dadaist experiments with the Bauhaus student Kurt Kranz and Arnulf Rainer’s famous performances using photo booths, followed by Bruce Nauman’s late masterpiece—the monumental video installation For Beginners (all the combinations of the thumb and fingers) (2010)—which give a fundamental contrast to the beginning of the exhibition, these very intellectual, conceptual questions of bodies fading away and an abstract way of inscribing the artistic biography, for example, in a painting by Opalka (1965).

As an echo to Opalka’s whisper, which is the first sound one hears when entering the show, Nauman’s uttered words lead our way out at the end. Similarly, but from a tactile, more sensual point of view, the very soft and caressing gesture made to move Félix González-Torres’s bead curtain aside and enter the exhibition finds an echo in Hito Steyerl’s (2010) violent movement that practically blocks the way out. In both cases, one enters softly—although this softness is haunted by death—and exits with a violent, absurd, vital action. However, I would like to make a point, very important in my view, concerning the theme of the exhibition. In no way has the issue been to investigate the contemporary aspects of self-representation. The works that we have gathered here together are not works whose subject is the artist as private person. They are works in which the artists, their images and bodies have been used as a tool, a material, a medium to convey a message that might, of course, be autobiographical or existential, but which is, first and foremost, critical, theoretical, conceptual, and ironic.

This reminds me of the title of the exhibition Prima Materia, curated by Caroline Bourgeois and Michael Govan at Punta della Dogana in 2013 … the artists in our exhibition, in a certain way, function as their own raw material. Besides this strange lust of self-destruction in the art of the 1960s and 1970s, the idea still remains that after the loss of all moral evidence and certainty, there is still the truth of your own body, of experiencing your own body, sometimes simple truths beyond all meaning and interpretation. With this young post-postmodern generation, I think there is the
notion of a social and political truth coming back—the idea of being a witness, “I am the only
witness of this political process I am using”—as Paulo Nazareth declares.

**MB** Paulo Nazareth uses his own body as a tool to make a survey of the world (similar to the way Kafka’s main character in *The Castle* is called “the surveyor”). Similarly, Kimsooja uses her body as a pole, a reference point around which the world revolves and structures itself. I wish to stress once again this concept of a critical, political, physical tool, of a gestural valence that led to the choice of the exhibition title. The issue is not “talking about myself” or “dealing with myself”; it is “dancing with myself”. Beyond the reference to Billy Idol’s song—partly post-punk, partly commercial pop, but fully aware of its ambiguous connotations—all we are dealing with, here, is a body moving in search of pleasure, energy, expression, contestation, seduction.

**AF** Gilbert & George also use their bodies as a tool in a very obvious way, when they proclaimed they were “singing sculptures,” “drinking sculptures,” “living sculptures,” and painted themselves so that their bodies became a canvas. By declaring themselves to be living sculptures and proceeding with this attitude until today, they seem to deliver their bodies completely to art and are permanently raising the question: what is art, when we are art? In contrast, we have the works of John Coplans and Steve McQueen (2000) with their extreme close-ups. You might say, the screen and the photographic surface are becoming an artificial skin. For many artists in the show, the question seems to be, when there is no authentic I, what else is there? Today in the light of digital disembodiment, in reaction the body is once again an important focus of artists’ involvement. By showing the multifaceted ways that artists work with their bodies as material, perhaps the show makes clear that the idea of the body as a tool implicitly refers to the phenomenological idea that one always exists “through the body”, and never “beyond the body”.

**FE** I think there is also a very poetic dimension in this show around the recurrent theme of the hands, the playing hands. This is no accident. The exhibition understands the notion of self-representation more as a process; there is a shift from the face to the hand, from the frozen mirrored image to performative action.

**MB** Indeed, the hand also becomes the perfect metaphorical tool to negotiate conceptual, gender, political, and racial questions. To focus on oneself means to focus on one’s primary artistic tool.