

## Show me the colour of the void ...

### Reflections about the work of Johan Lingier

Light is not white. Light is composed of different colours. On the blue side of the rainbow, outside the spectrum of our eyes, there's ultraviolet radiation. On the red side, there is infrared radiation. Together they construct the invisible parts of the arc of the rainbow.

Why this basic lesson in chromatics? Well then, the early work of Johan Lingier describes a centripetal movement around the mystery of light. He's a painter of the invisibility and, simultaneously, of everything going on inside this invisibility. An unsuspecting beholder may be bewildered by the overdose of self-portraying. At first sight, one would indeed suspect a narcissistic mind. But if you look carefully you can discover something else. Johan Lingier is questioning his self-image, his mirror image, his features, his expressions, his physicality, his appearance, his contours, right to the limit. Further even: *beyond* this limit. Because we can ask ourselves: where does the "ego" start and where does it end? At the boundaries of our skin? Well then, let's strip this skin, in the same way that Gerard David inflicted suffering on the iniquitous judge Sisamnes in the "Verdict of Cambyses". Let's perform a dissection of the body, in the same way Rembrandt did in the "Anatomy lesson of Dr. Tulp".

Let's take a look at the works "*Cogito ergo non sum #1*", "*Cogito ergo non sum #2*", and "*Look, the world that I conceived*". In each of those works, you find a reflection of the world in black sunglasses, in the white of a mug of coffee on the table. In Dutch, the word 'mug' ('kop') also means 'head'. The ear of the mug reflects on the mug itself and, simultaneously, we see the contours of a head. The 'other' remains always absent. In the work "*Look, the world that I conceived*" we find the artist sitting on a summer terrace, but in the background we see a church and the crucifix in the cemetery. In the mirror image the world is replicated, but through this image is also brought to death. Death as the ultimate limit in which life reflects itself. Indeed, only at the end of someone's life we are able to see the whole panorama of this life and value its unity.

And how the titles of the works make us think! In the dialectics between image and title, "*a veil is lifted*", as one of the titles insinuates.

Descartes' proverbial saying "*Cogito ergo sum*", interpreted and parodied to exhaustion, catapulted him into the history of modern philosophy. Ever since "*I think, therefore I am*", the onus of proof of our existence was to be found in our subjective thinking. Or, how the world is swallowed up by 'thought'. According to Jacques Lacan, the Cartesian subject appears where doubt recognizes itself as certainty. This certainty however, lasts only as long as that one moment of pronunciation. Therefore, in order to maintain our "ego", this certainty needs to be repeated over and over again each time we speak. In this, Lingier positions himself as a painter-philosopher. Past this ego so highly revered in our Western culture, he hears the voice of a 'Self' beyond this ego. This is what the work of Lingier is all about: what happens within this continuous process of loss of Self? The Ancient Greeks chiselled the words "*Gnothi Sauton*" ("*Know Yourself*") in a stone of the Apollo temple in Delphi. The artistic calling of Lingier echoes this philosophical adagio in an artistic way. This

reminds me of the prominent function of the concept of *repetition* in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. His concept of 'repetition' has nothing to do with the nostalgia of memory, but with the blissful certainty of the moment. Repetition has to make up for a failure of memory: living in such a way that past becomes present, so that time does not fade. Living life continuously as if it lasted just one moment. This is to me the commitment of Lingier's work. By repetitively taking his own head as his focal point, the artist approaches the essence of his own ego. We are witnessing the evolution of this process. In his early works, light functions mostly as reflection in the construction of the image. At a later stage, light doesn't only come from the outside, but it also floods the head as an 'inner light'. At first, very inconspicuously in "*Wherever I look*" and "*I can see only myself*", but in later works such as "*Head of an imaginary company*", "*Main road*", "*Head at interim*" and "*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*" ("*The Ego and its Own*") very prominently. The title of this last work brings comfort. For those who are familiar with philosophy: it is the title of the main treatise of the nineteenth century German philosopher, Max Stirner. Stirner is a pseudonym; his real name was 'Johann Caspar Schmidt'. He had chosen this pseudonym because of his high forehead, in German '*Stirn*', with reference to his *brain*. Stirner begins and ends his philosophical treatise with the famous sentence: "*Ich habe Mein Sache auf Nichts gestellt*" ("*I placed my trust in Nothing*"). The philosopher burns high-browed ideals to ashes, ideals used by the individual as a means of self-deception: we are no "children of God", citizens, husbands, humanists, christians, or whatever. The only thing that counts is "my own business". My own ego, and *only* this ego comes first. And as an extension: my own affairs. But at that point I hear Lingier asking through his works: "*Who/what is that, my ego?*"

Next, we can see how his own self-image dissolves and thins to a lightening flash. Let's take a look at the works from the series "*Atmosphere*". Contours and forms seem to evaporate and finally merging into light. The feature of leaving the head white or veiled in a white cloth we can also see in representations of the prophet in the Islam. In the Koran, we find a verse on light; it begins with thinking about God as Light, and this verse has been a permanent source of inspiration for Islamic mystics. The theme of 'light' however, has its roots in a diverse range of mystical traditions. Direct experiences were visualized with the image of light. The visionary Hildegard von Bingen saw all her visions through a dazzling light. In the images accompanying her writings we see flickering points of light moving like waves. For Augustinus, the aim of contemplation is a spiritual contact with the unchanging light. In the Indian mystical philosophy light is a manifestation of the pure being. For Eskimo sjamanists, clairvoyance is the result of *qaumeneq*, enlightenment. And other similar examples can be given.

In the work of Lingier the ego disappears. It is an aesthetic of fading. This is very clear in the work "*Progress*". The artist empties his head and body. This depletion of bodily materiality makes way for the essence of human desire, a never-ending desire that remains open to unachievable ideals. The artistic act can be understood as an operation, a surgical intervention, in the way Duchamp perceived it: as an anaesthesia of the object. After the *per via di porre* of painting (the application of paint on the emptiness of the canvas), after the *per via di levare* of sculpture (the chipping away of material out of the stone, in which the sculpture was hiding), it is now a *per via di vuotare*, the introduction of a *nothing* where previously was *something*. "*Warum ist da etwas, und nicht vielleicht nichts ?*" ("*Why is there*

*something, and not rather nothing?*"), that is how Heidegger formulated the 'mother' of all metaphysical questions. Through Lingier's work we are witness of a "metaphysical painting" that is taking a fresh breath of air.

This "*nothing*" haunts science, religion and art as an enigmatic object. Anyone who thinks through what his own ego really means, will find no easy answers. The way Lingier presents himself over and over again could be considered as a 'stripping off the ego'. It is a breaking out of himself. It is the stripping of one's own body, of the outside appearance in "*Wondering what's to become of my collection of lives*". There's no self-affirmation any more. There's rather the reference to the wound, the crucification, the trans-substantiation.

In the novel "*Eleven minutes*" of Paulo Coelho, the encounter between the painter and Maria, the leading character, starts with the expression: "*Don't go away. I'm nearly ready with this portrait, and I would like to make a painting of you. (...) You have light. Let me at least make a sketch.*"

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