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Helene Schjerfbeck – only an Image?

Gill Crabbe, *FNG Research*

As the Helene Schjerfbeck exhibition opens at the Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki, Gill Crabbe discusses the artist's self-portraiture with contemporary art curator Patrik Nyberg and art historian Marja Lahelma

Patrik, you are a curator at the Finnish National Gallery's Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma and you have just published your doctoral thesis on Helene Schjerfbeck's self-portraits. How did you become interested in Schjerfbeck?

Patrik Nyberg I have always been interested in art that seems to critique or subvert its own representation, be it in a video, or any contemporary art, or painting from the modernist era or earlier, so I wanted to look at Helene Schjerfbeck's self-portraits in this light.

Where would you place Helene Schjerfbeck's self-portraits in the modernist canon?

PN Well, that's a question I'm thinking about in my thesis – what *is* the modernist canon and what kind of painting is defined as modernist painting? I think Schjerfbeck's self-portraits go beyond the parameters of how modernism is defined by its defenders, such as Clive Bell, Roger Fry and the Greenbergian tradition. These works also question the way that, in the postmodern era, we tend to define painting in the modernist era as self-sustained autonomous art and in favour of an autonomous subject. I think Helene Schjerfbeck's self-portraits go beyond that idea and are more contemporary in a way.

Marja, you were the opponent for the public defence of Patrik's doctoral thesis. You have seen the recent Helene Schjerfbeck exhibition at the Royal Academy in London, in which the self-portraits were given a central focus by presenting them chronologically in the room at the heart of the gallery space. What did you make of that kind of presentation – do you think this shows that the self-portraits are the most important of her works?

Marja Lahelma I thought it was quite powerful to walk into that room and as I had already read Patrik's thesis I was aware of the fact that, although these self-portraits were presented as a chronological sequence, they didn't really produce a narrative, which I liked. Apart from the early self-portraits, you couldn't really see a progression that starts from likeness and representation, then going towards abstraction – it doesn't really work that way with her.

So how did it work?

ML They are all such different kinds of works. In his thesis, Patrik discusses the performative aspect of these works and that became very clear to me in that room. It appeared almost as some kind of a game. I had the impression that Schjerfbeck was really conscious of what she was doing, that there was nothing accidental. I was also aware that these works don't really say anything about who she was – for example that they reveal the soul – in fact there was nothing of that kind there, it was all about surface. I really liked that.



Helene Schjerfbeck,
Self-Portrait, En face I,
 1945, oil on canvas,
 39.5cm x 31cm
 Yrjö and Nanny Kaunisto
 Collection, Finnish National
 Gallery / Ateneum Art
 Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery



With the very late self-portraits one is so confronted with mortality...

ML That's how I have felt about them, that they were more about death in the abstract sense.

PN Well, I would say they were more about the death of the subject, the threat of becoming an image, death as a living subject being reduced to an image. Can I go back to this idea of the chronology because, when you look at her works in terms of which paintings were made when, there is no chronology in terms of a progression, say from mimetic to abstract or non-figurative modes – instead they move back and forth, even within the same year. So there is a distinct hesitation and I think it's very much about how to publicly present oneself and yet not kind of freezing into an image, and not giving away oneself.

Can you say more about this idea of not giving too much away in the self-portraits?

PN In my thesis, I discuss Schjerfbeck's self-portraits within the context of the genre. I think self-portraits in general are almost infested by the viewer's imagination. When the viewer knows it's about a real person, they seem to be more interested in the person than the work. That's one reason why people see so many things in Helene Schjerfbeck's portraits that are actually not there – so they find the narrative there about her life story. This is quite different from my approach to Schjerfbeck's works.

ML And that's what I find so refreshing in your approach – it's a huge relief to forget about who she was and focus on what she did, on what the

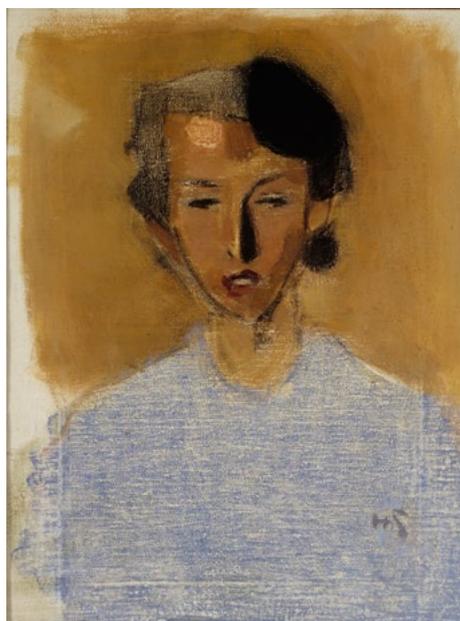
artworks themselves say, on what's in them, and not to think in terms of whether this is an image of an old woman or a young woman. It was quite a revelation when I first read your thesis, Patrik, where you point out that there's nothing, even in the late self-portraits, in the images themselves that says this is a picture of an old person. For example, *Self-Portrait with Black Mouth* was painted in 1939, when Schjerfbeck was 77 years old, yet there are no wrinkles, as some commentators have seen, neither are there any other signs of the person's age. This could just as easily be a woman in her twenties.

PN If you look at, for example, *Self-portrait, en face I*, from 1945, here is an almost Cubist approach, with the angular shapes and flattened planes and, again, not really any signs of old age. If the *Self-portrait, en face I* may be described as moving towards abstraction in a cubistic manner, the way that *Self-portrait, Light and Shadow*, from the very same year, is painted is quite atmospheric. It has more of an illusion of depth, when compared to the flatness of *Self-portrait, en face I*. Moreover, *Self-portrait, Light and Shadow* is also contradictory within itself. There is an expressive melting away in the brushwork, which is in contrast to this atmospheric impression. Using brushwork in this way underlines the materiality of the painting and wipes away the illusionary or, rather, mimetic representation of a real person that the very atmospheric impression, on the other hand, seems to enhance.

ML In *Self-Portrait, Light and Shadow*, I have seen the sense of death and decay but also timelessness in the sense of an image that could just as well have been painted by someone much younger. Having studied Edvard Munch's self-portraits, his skull-like images of himself were painted when he was still quite a young man, so it was the general idea of death that he found fascinating and he turned that idea into images that cannot be considered self-portraits in any traditional sense because they are more about just being human.

Helene Schjerfbeck, *Portrait of a Girl in Blue and Brown (Inez)*, 1944, oil on canvas, 51cm x 38cm
 Yrjö and Nanny Kaunisto Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait with Red Spot*, 1944, oil on canvas, 45cm x 37cm
 Gösta and Bertha Stenman Donation Collection, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



When you consider previous discussions of Schjerfbeck's work that are based on her biographical history, what kind of interpretations have limited this view of her work?

PN One typical interpretation suggests that in her later self-portraits she is turning to an abstract idiom because she wants to hide the physiognomic signs of her ageing. But this contradicts the fact that there is no chronology – they don't progress from mimetic to abstract, and with that the hiding of her age, in the way that some commentators have argued as the reason for such an assumed progression. We have to remember that two-thirds of the self-portraits were made after Schjerfbeck was 70 years old. Another interpretation is that she is distracting us from her age and bodily existence in general by showing herself first and foremost as a creative artist in the modernist manner, rather than as a frail body, but again there is no progression, there is no such chronology, so I would argue that this doesn't hold.

From around 1910 onwards, there seems to be a difference between how Schjerfbeck started to present her portraits and how she approached her self-portraits...

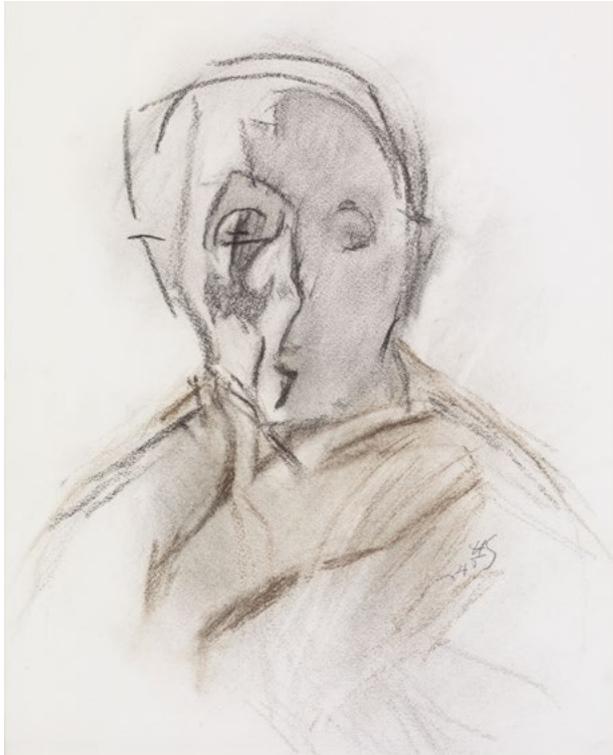
ML Actually, I would say there was a huge difference. Her paintings of other people are not even portraits in any traditional sense. She was not interested in what her sitter was really like – only what she saw in them. Only in the surface, and her own interpretation. In painting her self-portraits there was a whole different process taking place.

PN We can actually see that there is a process with the self-portraits, that the paint was layered and there are hesitations in the brushwork, that she is removing paint and reapplying it, so you can see the dimension of time in them. In some self-portraits there are contradictions revealed within the process – perhaps she has a very calm facial expression but the paint handling shows the wild movements she makes with her hands.

However, in the still-lives or her portraits of other people, she doesn't seem to want to show the process – she seems to want to paint a true modernist painting that has a formal coherence within it. Yet, with her self-portraits she was jumping back and forth between expressionism and Cubism, the two main modernist idioms, as well as switching between mimetic representation and the abstracting of the image. For example, if we look at *Portrait of a Girl in Blue and Brown (Inez)*, from 1944, it has the formal coherence that modernism kept as its ideal, but then look at *Self-Portrait with Red Spot*, also from 1944. It's rather disturbing when you look at the wild way that she handles the paint in many contrasting ways.

Do Schjerfbeck's letters reveal anything about her working processes?

PN Riitta Konttinen's biography of Schjerfbeck, *Oma Tie* (2004), has an interesting comment about the letters: that she shows a different side of herself to different correspondents,



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-portrait, Half-Length with Hands*, 1945, charcoal and wash on paper, 39.5cm x 31.5cm
Private Collection, Sweden

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait with Palette I*, 1937, tempera and oil on canvas, 44.5cm x 33.5cm
Moderna Museet, Statens konstmuseer, Stockholm

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis

depending on who she is writing to – which is very natural. But biographers tend to find just one person in the narrative, and that refers also to the self-portraits. In my thesis I compare two self-portraits in the context of who they were painted for – one went, and was meant as a gift to Schjerfbeck's very close friend Einar Reuter (*Self-portrait*, 1942) – and the other, *Self-Portrait, Black Background*, was made in 1915 for the Finnish Art Society. The former is more personal, more mimetic and it seems like Schjerfbeck had put heavy foundation make-up on her face to show the best of herself. The feeling is tranquil and intimate. In contrast, looking at *Self-Portrait, Black Background*, an important public commission, Schjerfbeck appears distant and proud.

How would you interpret Schjerfbeck's later self-portraits in terms of the material qualities of the work?

PN There is a tension between materiality and an iconic or mimetic representation, as if Schjerfbeck was simultaneously trying to show her physical features but on the other hand actually wiping these away, so as to underline also the painting's indexical relation to her bodily existence. A struggle between presence and non-presence. In my thesis I compare this tension to Constantin Brancusi's *Self-Portrait Hidden by His Hand*, c. 1920, which is a photograph of Brancusi taken by himself but putting his hand up to his face, hiding it just as he is about to reveal it through the act of taking a photograph. This struggle between wanting to show something, then being frozen into an image, is about the death of the subject – what can a still image or a non-moving image say about a person who is in fact multi-layered, mutable, existing in time and space? The way in which Schjerfbeck paints reveals her ambivalent attitude towards publicly showing herself as an image, restricted to her visual appearance. You have one pose, one moment – and you cannot show how multi-layered you are.

Do Schjerfbeck's self-portraits deconstruct representation?

PN If we look at *Self-portrait, Half-Length with Hands*, from 1945, we see that the work is an index of the movement of her hands rather than an image of that movement. She is a subject who is really a subject, in the sense of having an agency – here her hands are tracing the very movements of her hands... She represents her hands, but also the traces they left metonymically show us that the picture is borne out of the movement of her hands. So you have the impression of her doing, rather than of her looking, or of her being seen. She is showing she is someone who acts, not someone who is a frozen image or a sign of something. So she is a subject here, not an object.

Then, if we look at *Self-Portrait with Red Spot* (1944), you can also see the processuality in the work, not just because it has been hand-painted but also because Schjerfbeck has used contradictory ways of adding colour. The painting is almost all monochromatic, so this red spot on the lip is like the full stop that indicates that, 'Okay, this is not a real image, actually'. The painting is just like a dirty black-and-white photo that indicates that the real life is elsewhere – and that real life comes from the *hand* that has planted that red spot on the canvas.

ML That's a really interesting interpretation. Then, if you also think about the composition, this little red dot holds it all together – without the red dot, the whole thing falls apart.

PN Yes, in my thesis I suggest that, not only is there dialogue between the self-portraits, but also dialogue *inside* the self-portraits. For example, in *Self-Portrait with Palette I*, from 1937, you have the same kind of colour contrast as you do with the red spot – almost all of the canvas monochromatic, then four different colour spots of paint. It seems to me that Schjerfbeck wants to emphasise that this self-portrait is only an image. It looks like a painting of a painting but here the hand that paints is not the dead image – the paint is paint, it is real, and it is colour that is real, as well as the bodily hands that added these spots. It's as if she is saying: 'What is real are the real colours of the world – red, yellow, white and blue – and the image is not the real, but I am here, bodily making this image, who is someone else.' The raw materiality of the colours are the zero point of painting, something that precedes representing, precedes an image of something, actually 'is' that something in a more real sense.

Can you say something about post-structuralist ideas concerning the dialogue between the viewer and the artwork in self-portraiture in general?

PN I discuss this too in my thesis and the genre of portraiture is a problem in modernism in terms of the outward-turned gaze which confronts the viewer. This idea within modernism that a painting should not so much interact with the viewer but be its autonomous self. In the genre of self-portraiture, there is the contact between the mirror – unless the self-portrait hides the fact that it refers to what is seen in the mirror – and the maker but also the contact with the viewer and the artist.

This breaks the rules of formalist modernism because the work immediately becomes a dialogue. This dialogue, and an awareness of the presence of the viewer, is built in to art after modernism.

ML I agree, although from my research into Symbolism the idea of involving the viewer in the process is already there in Symbolist art theory. It's as if the seeds of conceptual art are there because in Symbolism the meaning of the artwork only becomes realised when the viewer is actively involved in the process that takes place in an imaginary space. The modernist understanding of art as an autonomous and self-contained field rejects that idea but it comes back again after modernism. In terms of the Greenbergian formalist discourse on modernism Helene Schjerfbeck's self-portraits are the kind of art that question those modernist ideals. They make it clear that certain theorists were creating an ideal of what modern art should be like, but Schjerfbeck doesn't do this in her self-portraits – they don't fit in.

Patrik Nyberg, *Maalatut kasvot: Helene Schjerfbeckin omakuvat, modernismi ja esittäminen* (Painted Faces: the Self-Portraits of Helene Schjerfbeck, Modernism and Representation). PhD thesis, University of Helsinki. Suomen Kansallisgallerian julkaisut 2. (Published in Finnish, with an English summary.) Helsinki: Kansallisgalleria (Finnish National Gallery) 2019, online version at <http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/>.