

Temporality and Identity – Insights in My Painting

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Abstract: The starting point of this essay and meditation is the process through which I planned my exhibition entitled *Temporary Identities*. Time influences the creation of an identity and the identity of creation on different stages – during the process of creation and after that. The identity of a painting is a renewable material, but it all starts with a few elements the painter leaves to viewer's choice and inner eye to reach and relate to. The painter challenges the limits of his imagination, of his self knowledge and of time through his creation.

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The order of the names, of the labels that define ourselves is unnatural sometimes, we are not always seen as the person we want to be, or we are not always the person who we want to appear. I shall attempt to present myself first, taking into consideration my unborn public identity. I am from Constanța and I have been enjoyed to live the city of Cluj-Napoca since 2005. I have graduated from the Sociology and Social Work Faculty of Babeș-Bolyai University. My interest in fine art, and especially in painting and drawing led me to choose as a subject for my dissertation defended in February 2009 *The Role of Visual-Plastic Art-Therapy in Social Work with Children*. I like to assert that I am not able to speak about my art works most of the time, but I am sure they will say something about me. I have always tried to enrich my knowledge about myself; this text will be another step towards this unattainable end; thinking that the things I create are also a part from me, I have stopped and focused on painting. This is an informal research inside my painting, in order to find some of the coordinates of identity and temporality.

Why am I observing the variables *identity* and *temporality*? I organized a fine art exhibition – painting, mixed technique, engraving, and ceramic – in Cluj-Napoca in February 2010 to which I invited artists from Lithuania, Romania, and Slovenia. The exhibits were mainly creations having human beings as a subject (painting, mixed technique, and engraving) and ceramic clocks, therefore I thought about a concept which would relate the two – beings and time; this is how I came to the exhibition's final name and main idea – *Temporary Identities*. The moment of creation makes me identify with the subject of my creation; this (re)localization is however temporary, because for the next work I assume another personage. On the following pages I shall try to explore the ideas encompassed by the concepts of identity and temporality.



Fig. 1 – The Dream (Self-portrait), (2009). Tempera-gouache on canvas. 50 x 70 cm

The *identity* I am going to talk about, is not a psychological one, so do not expect to find information about schizophrenia or any other psychiatric issue here; I shall use the term of *identity* mainly in its philosophical meaning.

A word often used in this writing will be *temporality*. It is the idea of time and of the fact that almost everything exists in it, and not outside of it; it is not *temporarily* which refers to a finite period of time, leading to the meaning of ephemeral, dying; *temporality* may also lead to these meanings, but the accent will be put on *temporality* as *temporal context* or *temporal level*.

I shall mention often the concept of *imagination* because I like to think about it as a mark of my artwork; I encourage my imagination to play with identities and time, to expand beyond daily facts, to embrace the field of the fantastic and psychedelic, to use shapes and colours in a less usual way. Whenever I start feeling really good while working on a painting, I realise the canvas is the physical and spiritual place that truly allows me to be free – I can create anything I want, no matter how weird or unnatural would seem to others. I take this freedom very seriously. “Every man, without any

support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man”.¹ Like many other artists maybe, I like to create in my paintings, gates towards fresher worlds, for myself and for others, with the help of my imagination.

Time is only one of the coordinates with the help of which I can determine an identity; there are many others – the colours, the affections expressed, the symbols used, and the composition of the artwork. Generally, I do not want the time to be found in my paintings, so I avoid its marks – no clothes, no buildings, no rooms (maybe doors...). The only work that could lead to an historical time is “Medusa”. Not finding a reference point in time for the identities of my paintings, might make you believe the future would be the most suitable localization, but I am ready to deny that too – each of them is from my present, the present I lived along with the process of creation; this will turn it into a colourful, living past – a present past. At the temporal level I still have a relation with the identities of my paintings, they still represent what I am and I think that makes them actual. The creation offers me *a reference point in time* and in the history of two identities – the creation’s and mine; this way I can remember when, why and how I chose to create that image.

Almost every identity exists within the limits of temporality; but where is that identity placed, if it is transcendent to temporality? I think one of these non-temporal contexts would be *the imagination*; imagination is one of the sources of an artwork; its creator can make me see it as if it were there forever or as if there were no better (non-)temporal situation that the subject could be placed in. Imagination can be express at many levels – I can invent a subject, or I can approach a more familiar one, using some creative colours, shapes or just a particular kind of brush strokes; I can use strange associations of bodies – a falling shell with wings. Although I like to present a very original and non-temporal identity of my creation, there is still a corner of the painting that will always bring the viewer, or even me, back to earth – the signature and the year beside it. Sometimes I try to hide those two, somewhere in the painting, so that the signature might not let the viewer know the real dimensions and spatiality that he or she is just wondering in for a few moments. Of course, you know you are looking at a painting, a plane surface, but who has not forget oneself for a few seconds, absorbed by an image in its world? I prefer to hide this graphic mark of my identity, in what I think it can be of a greater advantage. I do not want my signature to shorten these moments of wondering. I let the painting itself be my signature.

From my point of view, both the creator and its creation have their identity and their specific temporality. Sometimes I picture myself on a self-portrait as a bird or an insect, an island or something else that represents my identity and my unrests; on other occasions, the painting is about things that my sensibility met, and which are shown through this filter. I find it easier to consider and analyse identities related to a painting, than to analyse time in the same situation. There is the painting’s life and the painter’s life. The two might be almost equal as a matter of actuality, but when the artist starts a new painting he focuses on a new subject; therefore the passage to a new creation will cause a delay between the time of the old creation and the time of its creator; due to the distance, the artwork gains points for its identity – the painting will have its own time,

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest (London: Routledge, 2002), 33, http://books.google.ro/books?id=dUvilqC-weIC&dq=jean+paul+sartre+basic+writings+routledge+2002&source=gbs_navlinks_s

independent from the ever changing present of the artist; the painting will conserve a fragment from the history of its creator's imagination. The act of creation itself requires a certain period of time. The passing of time helps to reveal new paintings but also new identities that develop within the old painting; because of the distance in time an old painting becomes distanced from every present I live in, I feel it becoming even newer.

Sometimes a painting is a picture I took from my life – the painting will let you see a state of mind, something or somebody that interested me at the time, or situations that I would prefer to be in. As in the work entitled “The Dream (Self-portrait)” it is clear that I was interested in exploring my image and the things that characterize me. Being the creator of a painting gives me the opportunity of expressing wishes, ideal situations, and images; I can bring in front of my (and other's...) eyes, images and energies that lived only in my mind. This is for me one of the most powerful pleasures painting can give me. Speaking of the self-portrait, as time passes, I do not only manage to know the identity shaped in the artwork – the style or technique – but also, my identity – I explore my feelings and artistic ways of expressing them, I challenge my creativity.

I think that each of us carries with him a story that, lacking the necessary information, none, not even himself/herself could tell – this incapacity can have its origin also in the incapacity of describing something, until that thing is outside us – the moment when we truly are aware of its existence. Through painting, I think I can at least recognize my place in this story, though I may not have access to the whole story. The act of creating a painting can help me develop *my identity* by knowing it – and by now I have learnt that I like to paint beings in psychedelic contexts; most of all, portraits and fantastic extensions to their heads; I guess I try to picture the exteriorization of one's inner side – which is made possible by the freedom of the canvas. I have realized that I do not like to paint fruits and vases with flowers, although I appreciate a lot of paintings that have these as a subject, not because of the subjects themselves, but for the relations between colours, between lights and shades. I have also learnt that I cannot start a new painting, without finishing the previous one; it is as if my whole brain were focusing on the subject of the first one, and nothing could make me think of a new work. The best part is that for my family, friends, colleges, and teachers, I am the girl who paints. This is a constant part in my life – since the ninth grade – irrespective of the place I am in or my age. So painting is one of the few things that have not changed yet in my life. I think this means a lot for my identity.

The identity of the artwork I create, as far as I know, consists of two parts: one is a part of me, that I lend to the painting, a part that I already know and the other part is something that I long to discover, the exploration of the unknown, the wish to find something new not only for myself, but also for the others. It is not easy to find something that is new for the others, because this requires information on what the others know (or do not know); instead of that, I can think of the most simple prejudices related to the shape and colour of things, the symbols and functions of things, reactions and causal relations – the skin has a certain colour, people have two hands, the umbrella protects you from rain – what if the rain comes only from an umbrella? Many times I try to show (even to myself) that things can also be different from mine or our everyday perspective. I want to do something that is not done at that time anywhere else – this is my way of trying to turn my artwork into something meaningful.

I often – if not always – think that an authentic creation is born only if I dare to look beyond what I already know. I try not to believe that what I see is everything that

could exist, or else I ought to accept there is no reason to be alive. This powerful will to invent something is pushing me forward into the future, and this is what makes me what I can be, but what I would not, if I did not wish and try. The process of creation – thought and action – makes me be and gives me the material for a new identity, other than mine. I think about the next drawing – I see myself drawing it – or painting, I think about tomorrow and I continue to exist. My identity is ever hiding in a future that keeps the same distance from me. This distance is what keeps me alive. I live through and for the future, but I am never there. Painting guides me and sometimes helps me watch (if I look behind) my way towards my future identity, the desire to create new identities; it keeps my eyes open, and refreshes my identity.

On another level, I have found a very clear explanation to the difference between thought and its externalization through a painting, in Jung's chapter on Picasso "The non-realistic art essentially receives its content from 'the inside'. This 'inside' cannot correspond to the consciousness, because it contains images of the generally seen objects, which must necessarily look so as to correspond to the general expectation. [...] Therefore those imagistic elements that do not correspond to any outside must come from "the inside"."¹ (The author's translation.)

What happens with time while I am painting?

I do not know; time probably goes by as usual, but the subjective perception of time is influenced by my action in that moment – during painting. I rarely look at the clock during a painting session; I usually stop if I get bored, if I do not know how to continue on a certain area of the canvas, or if I feel that I ought to apply another idea that I have not yet conceived. So I stop and wait patiently filling the time with any other daily activity until I have new ideas and appetite for painting. This could be the next day, or in two weeks time. *Patience, day, two weeks* – these are all measurements of time that happen and interfere with the creation, influencing it, by influencing me – its creator.

What happens with the identity(ies) while I am painting?

As meaningless as this may seem (but it is not) for the academic context I am writing in, first of all, I put on my headphones and then I try to focus on the painting process, on what visual message it should transmit. In the moment of creation, the focus is on the creation's identity – I pay a lot of attention to building an enjoyable composition for the *outside eye*, because, in my opinion the composition is the next step, after the colour, that will lead the viewer into the world of the painting. There, the onlooker will find a couple of elements – not randomly associated, but in a less ordinary relation anyway – and he will start to conceive a connection between them, being lead by his daily experiences, his cultural knowledge, his sensibility and the disposition to be open to new. So, it will be necessary for the identity of the viewer to interact with the identity of the painting. Every viewer will give birth in his imagination, to new identities for the painting; the onlooker often meets many other outer perceptions, all different from mine – the author's.

¹ Carl Gustav Jung, *Opere complete. Vol. 15. Despre fenomenul spiritului în artă și știință* (Complete works. Vol. 15. On the Phenomenon of Spirit in Art and Science) (Bucharest: Editura Trei, 2007), 143.



Fig. 2 – The Worlds of the Inner Eye, (2008). Mixed technique – pencil, marker, liner, biro and duct tape on paper. 42 x 30 cm

I mentioned earlier “the outside eye”; I think there are two areas for which the painting can become a stimulus. A superficial one, the level of sensorial sight – the colours and the shapes the eyes perceive – and the level of the analytic eye, concerning another type of sensibility, or *the inner eye* as I call it – the eye that can change the order of the elements in a causal chain while explaining something, the eye that can discover symbols and can see meanings. This is why, after finishing a painting I circulate the news among my friends – “*another one is ready for your inner eye*”. From this point of view – of the outside/inside eye – I think sometimes my paintings are not very easy to “read”. I create them for their beauty, but even more, for what hides behind this beauty.

How can the passing of time have an effect on the painting, its identity, and the painter's identity?

The passing of the time can change the painting from two points of view. The easiest to observe is the physical aspect – depending on the material used and on the conditions it has been made and kept in. The other one is the identity of the creation; this one is influenced by the passing of the time if the perspective on it changes (luckily there are always more than one perspectives). This could mean that the approached subject or the used technique is considered more or less valuable than it was in the period of creation. The identity of a painting is often shaped according to different types of comparisons: between the works of the same author or between works of different authors. (This is common also to other creative fields such as literature, drama, music or film.)

In the end, the creation proves (to me) that time has passed, but because I am pleased with the painting, and because I have done something original and I can see, even touch, its result, I feel a positive resignation, because this is not only time that

consumed me, but I consumed time to, and from this burning process the painting has been born.

Sometimes I offer my paintings as a present, sometimes I sell them – there are certain contexts in which I have to let go of them. Because I do not see them anymore, after a while, I forget them; I forget their identities, although I am the one who has created them. It is strange how losing visual contact for a longer period of time can make me forget that I have ever created them, until the moment of the next visual meeting. If I remember the painting, I have in my mind its identity; so not having the creation itself does not deprive me of his identity, and most of all, of the process of creation. The process of creation is, in my opinion, a way of intimately knowing the identity of a creation. If I give away a painting it does not mean the identity of that creation dies, it means just that it escapes my perception, and that it slips out of my memory; now another memory will take care of my creation. The identity of a creation dies along with the last memory that conserves it. And even then, if it hides somewhere in a dark room, and someone finds it, it is reborn. This might change the relation mentioned before – where the identity of a painting was supposed to depend on a human memory.



Fig. 3 – The Turquoise Girl, (2010).
Tempera-gouache on canvas. 70 x 50 cm

Most of my paintings – similar to the theatre – can cross certain barriers, such as language, culture, nationality, socio-economic level. It is true that in a culture black means death and white means joy, while in some others this association might not be the same; however, the image will surely raise questions and wondering; it will always be a connection between an image and its viewer, an intimate one, most of the times, but maybe this will make it even more valuable.

I wonder if and how my painting will be a mark of the time I am living in, at a larger temporal scale. There are painters whose creations have also the function of

marking their historical time – the most stringent I can remember is Picasso's *Guernica*. The masterpiece does not only pierce through time, but I am quite sure many identities have been, are and will be marked by a painting such as that. I do not dare to compare myself with its author, but I try to give an example that is above my power – the connection painting can make between time and identity, and between identities.

Identity and temporality are concepts maybe too big for me to discuss. I hope that they are not too big for my (future) painting. I did not intend to comprise their subject in these few pages, but to start gathering perceptions related to temporality, identity, and my painting. I began by asserting this was just another step towards an unattainable end – self knowledge. Now I know there is much more to write about temporality and identity, than I have thought; I tried the limits of my identity from this point of view. But because painting involves to a certain point being concerned with how an image looks, I hope I did not appear as something what I am not, and that as time goes by I shall be able to be more than I appear to be, to the benefit of painting or drawing, and of its identity.

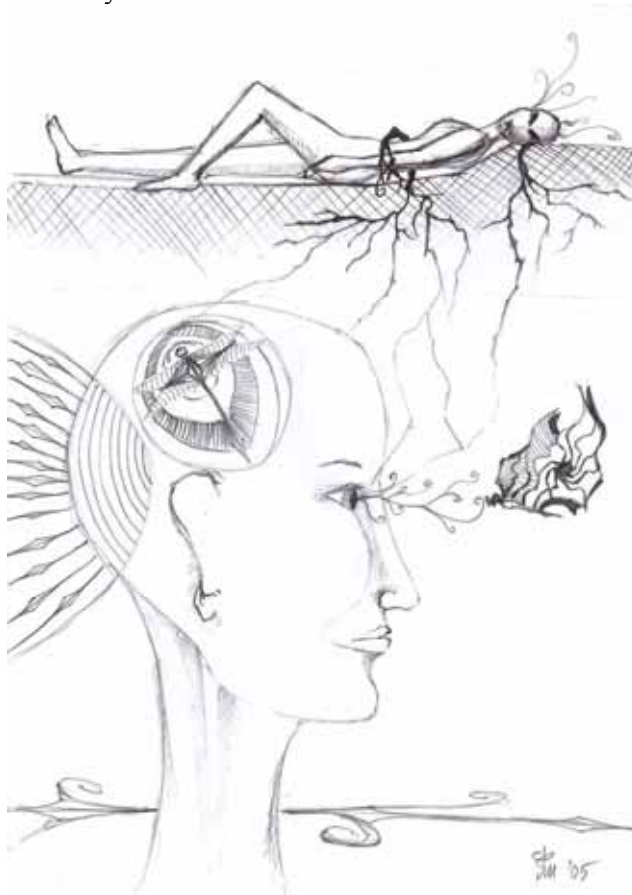


Fig. 4 – Untitled (2005). Pencil on paper. 21 x 29.7 cm