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TESTING AND PROJECTING THE SELF: CIRIA'S RORSCHACH PAINTINGS

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I want to stress from the very beginning the paralyzing power of anxiety.

I believe that it is fairly safe to say that anybody and everybody devotes much of his lifetime, a great deal of his energy —talking loosely— and a good part of his effort in dealing with others, to avoiding more anxiety than he already has and, if possible, to getting rid of this anxiety.

Many things which seem to be independent entities, processes, or what not, are seen to be, from the standpoint of the theory of anxiety, various techniques for minimizing or avoiding anxiety in living.

Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (1).

The self-system...is an organization of educative experience called into being by the necessity to avoid or to minimize incidents of anxiety.

Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (2).

The artists of the twentieth century knew decades ahead of the rest of us that it was the fragmented self that needed to be reassembled, that it was an empty, a nonvital self....And so the artist began to work on that, although, unfortunately in many ways, in such an esoteric fashion that it somehow didn't filter through quickly enough to heal the wounds that existed.

Heinz Kohut, "On the Continuity of the Self and Cultural Selfobjects" (3).

The eldest son of an art teacher, [Hermann] Rorschach considered becoming an artist but chose medicine instead. As a secondary school student, he was nicknamed Kleck, meaning "inkblot," because of his interest in sketching. ...In 1917 Rorschach discovered the work of Szymon Hens, who had studied the fantasies of his subjects using inkblot cards. In 1918 he began his own experiments with 15 accidental inkblots, showing the blots to patients and asking them, "What might this be?"...

The Rorschach test is based on the human tendency to project interpretations and feelings onto ambiguous stimuli, in this case, inkblots.

Entry on Hermann Rorschach in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (4).

In 2000, as though to acknowledge the new millennium, José Ciria began a new series of paintings: the first Rorschach Heads, as he came to call them. They were a small group of works, at most a dozen, all appearing in an outburst of spontaneity, as though a sudden discharge from the unconscious. He was in Madrid at the time. In 2005 Ciria moved to New York; the second series of Rorschach Heads soon followed, inspired by a friend's response to Ciria's Post-Suprematist Series, 2006, based on the figures in the late works of Malevich—an unexpected return to the figure by the pioneer of geometrical abstraction. Ciria's friend suggested that he concentrate on the heads of his Post-Suprematist figures. The second series of Rorschach Heads had the same uncanny, quicksilver, abrupt energy as the first series, with the difference that Ciria now seemed to be consciously engaging the key issue of 20th century advanced art: the opposition of abstraction and representation which the contradiction between Malevich's early "progressive" abstraction, with its purely formal, "esoteric" logic, and later "regressive" representation, with its "exoteric" figural imagery, made manifest.

With his usual verve and daring, Ciria attempted to reconcile them. But the result—in the Post-Suprematist figures—was uneasy and unnerving, for however boldly equilibrated the formal and the figural (suggesting that the figure was inherently abstract and that the "secret" of pure forms is that they were abstracted from the figure), they never unequivocally integrate. The result is peculiarly surreal or absurd: a sum of parts (generally amorphous, if sometimes biomorphic) that add up to a bizarre, inconclusive whole—an aggregation of abstract fragments in anxious relationship. Indeed, the Post-Suprematist works seem more like anxious deconstructions of the figure rather than sublime reconstructions of it. The figure seems to be disintegrating into abstract fragments, each with a physical presence and forceful fluidity of its own. The figure emerges from the flux of abstract elements, anxiously holding its own for a magical moment, and then sinks back into the abstract flux. The figure is a phantom, however memorable its appearance—by reason of the vividness of its abstract components. Paradoxically, however animated the abstract field, the abstract figure seems inanimate, insensate—insidiously dead, a petrified emblem of the human, a depressed mannequin.

In the second series of Rorschach Heads the dialectic becomes more urgent, strained, insistent, as though to force its resolution: but there is no resolution, only greater anxiety, which now seems embedded in the head, indeed, its essence. If Ciria's Post-Suprematism series can be called "magical abstraction"—abstraction in which a figure magically appears, like a hallucination, a quasi-realistic representation, spontaneously aborting into a flux of sensations, randomly given and eccentrically dynamic—then his Rorschach series can be called "manic abstraction." Abstraction runs riot in the head, overwhelms it, consumes it, becomes its substance, announcing that it has

been consumed by anxiety —completely maddened by anxiety. The more totally —purely— abstract the head becomes, the more absolutely —incurably— mad it seems.

“The self-affirmation of a being is the stronger the more non-being it can take into itself,” the existential theologian Paul Tillich has written(5), and “anxiety is the experience of the threat of imminent non-being,” the existential psychotherapist Rollo May has written(6). In Ciria’s Rorschach Head paintings the threat is so great that the head seems to lose its hold on being, becoming an abstract expression of anxiety —a catastrophe of consciousness, in which every “sensationally” abstract detail becomes emblematic of the insanity in which anxiety ultimately issues, the terrifying sense of not being that overwhelming anxiety conveys, if left uncontrolled. Sometimes geometry becomes the control, giving the abstract fragments shape, containing the anxiety they express, stabilizing them so that can take their place as features of a face, a face that is like a death mask —the face of non-being. Anxiety has triumphed over humanness and the will to be, reducing the human face to a morbid illusion, just as the human body was reduced to one in the Post-Suprematist series: to an abstract display of sensations that defend against the anxiety aroused by death, and death —non-being— itself, even as their eerie radiance, at once fluorescent and incandescent, conveys death’s putrescent colors, perversely evoking life.

A similar estheticization of anxiety and death —a similar use of the esthetic defense against the threat of non-being and its manifestation in human being— occurs in Monet and Manet, if with impressionistic rather than the expressionistic means Ciria uses. One might say the supposed triumph of aesthetics —self-evident in pure abstraction— over the reality of life and death is a basic feature of modernist-type art. Monet rendered his dead wife’s face in lively colors, as though insisting she was a sleeping beauty rather than dead —all he had to do was to kiss her with his art to awaken her to eternal life. Manet did the same with his father’s aging body, in effect denying that his father would ever die and cause him anxiety. Both painters used art to avoid anxiety —to deny that life was contaminated by death. Art became an instrument of mummification: art denies the reality of death by adorning it as though it was a form and expression of life, thus turning both life and death into unrealistic art. It is to Ciria’s credit that the operation of the reality principle, and with it the death drive, is evident in his art, not only the pleasure principle, as in the libidinous Impressionism of Monet and Manet. However expressionistically vital Ciria’s reds and yellows (primary colors, with their strong presence), they are countered by an equally expressionistic devitalizing black and gray (melancholy non-colors, conveying profound absence): colorfulness and colorlessness work together to express the annihilative anxiety, not to say terror and horror, so evident in his faces. No aesthetic defense for him, however aesthetically provocative his abstraction. Ciria’s faces have a family resemblance to Munch’s famously terrified faces —many also death’s-heads— in *Anxiety* and *The*

Scream, both 1893, and the deadened expressions on the faces in Munch's Street Scene in Christiana, 1895, but they are more unconditionally morbid and perversely abstract. At the same time, there is something defiant in the bold, dynamic way Ciria conveys —fearlessly dramatizes— anxiety, a defiance of death completely absent from Munch's faces, which seem completely drained by anxiety, as though submitting and finally capitulating to death.

In the third series of Rorschach Heads the question is no longer whether they are abstractions in representational disguise or abstractly camouflaged representations —abstraction and representation uncannily mingled— but rather whether art can remain esthetically pure while representing anxiety. It is no longer only the maddening anxiety human beings consciously experience when they think of their own death or non-being: it is the unconscious anxiety aroused by the threat to art's existence implicit in the traumatic split of abstraction into gestural and geometrical camps, exemplified by the difference between Kandinsky and Malevich. The birth of abstraction signaled an identity crisis in art —the loss of “complementarity” between abstract form and realistic representation that traditionally existed in art, as Kandinsky said— and the splitting of abstraction into opposing camps at the moment of its birth was a second identity crisis. Elevating abstraction above representation sold art's possibilities short, and the paring down of abstraction to gestural and geometrical essences that contradicted each other and seemed inherently incommensurate and irreconcilable, and finally the preference for impulsive gesture at the expense of geometrical structure or geometrical structure at the expense of impulsive gesture, left abstraction, and more broadly art, in a dead-end of unresolved conflict.

Ciria brilliantly articulates the conflict in Danae I and II, both 2005 while attempting to overcome it, but the geometrical square and the explosive gesture remain at odds, suggesting a dialectical standoff rather than resolution of opposites. The title attempts to rescue the abstract work for narrative representation, suggesting the square and the gesture have imagistic import, but it is bit of a stretch to connect the love story of the mortal female Danae and the over-sexed immortal Zeus to the work. Although, no doubt, one can read Ciria's paintings metaphorically. The gestural shower imaginatively corresponds to—symbolizes—the shower of gold which was the form Zeus took when he copulated with Danae. It is clearly a symbol of ejaculate, and suggests that she was a prostitute who made love for money. The “passive” Suprematist square is a symbol of Danae's waiting body, the dynamic gestural shower is a symbol of Zeus's sexual activity and excitement as well as passionate discharge. Many of Ciria's works have sexual import; his intense colors are clearly erotic. Bodegón de Musas II and III, and La Danza, both 2004, with the latter based on Matisse's Dance, 1907, but with realistic female bodies —photographs of female nudes— rather than primitivized females, as in Matisse, signals the importance of the erotic for Ciria. He is clearly haunted by

woman, as the small image of one —a muse but also a tempting memory— in one of the Rorschach Head paintings suggests. Ciria transposes the erotic to the abstract, more particularly to his flashing reds and yellows, and perhaps above all invests it in his painterly texture, which is powerfully sensual. Even Ciria's thanatopic grays and blacks have an erotic dimension, for they can be read as the ashes of erotic experience.

Is it overstating the matter to say that Ciria's grid, with a grand gesture in each of its square modules, is covertly sexual in import, however overtly a statement of the opposition of geometrical abstraction and gestural abstraction? I am suggesting that Ciria's juxtaposition of grid and gesture is an abstract enactment of an erotic event. The geometrical module contains the gestural ejaculate, functioning the way the female functions in sexual intercourse. The gestural ejaculate becomes the expressive core of the inexpressive module while remaining irreducible to its Procrustean form. The result is dialectically positive —a strangely successful intercourse. At the same time, the module and gesture are formally at odds, making for a negative dialectical aesthetic. They do not merge, but relate through their opposition, establishing a sort of balance of powers, suggesting that they co-imply each other however fundamentally different. Using the same deceptively simple means, Ciria suggests covert commensurateness while conveying overt incommensurateness.

What complicates this paradoxical dialectic —makes it more paradoxical— is the visual fact that the impulsive gesture, however dynamic —indeed, flamboyantly fluid— seems reified and fixed in place, suggesting that it is a sort of paralyzed impulse: an impulse paralyzed by anxiety, implying that however alive with feeling the gesture is, the feeling is peculiarly “strangled,” to use Freud's term, that is, conveys feeling stopped in its expressive tracks. And indeed Ciria's gesture can be read as a sort of truncated trace feeling, ostensibly explosive but incompletely abreacted —peculiarly futile for all its force, meteoric and short-lived for all its intensity and momentum. It has the firepower of a rocket, a sort of visual sound and fury that ends up signaling nothing— its own death.

Let us recall that the word “anxiety” derives from the Latin *angustus* or “narrow,” which in turn derives from *angere*, which means “to pain by pushing together,” “to choke.” The sense of choking back feeling while being compelled to express it gives the Rorschach Heads their grotesque appearance. They are dynamically constructed of abstract forms, painfully pushed together in the narrow space of the head to convey the stifling feeling of anxiety. Ciria uses abstraction to convey the feeling that one is being destroyed from within —corroded into abstract non-being, disintegrated in an abstract delirium, and finally defeated by the “death inside,” as the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls it, a haunting abstraction that suggests one is only an abstraction. A person in the grip of anxiety feels unreal and abstract—nightmarishly abstract. Ciria's Rorschach Head is a battlefield between the feeling of non-being and of being, a space of reality testing in which it is not

clear what reality is. The brilliance of Ciria's Rorschach Heads, especially the third Laguardia series, is that they use highly expressive abstract means to convey the "suffering or sadness" caused by anxiety, to use his words, resulting in the same uncannily inexpressive, muted effect that we see in the Easter Island Heads that Ciria visited, admired, and identified with, as the photograph of him in front of a row of them strongly suggests.

The elevation of abstraction above representation made art introverted and self-absorbed, even as their conflict indicated that art had become self-conflicted, and the conflict within abstraction between the gesturally dynamic and the geometrically structured shows that it had become self-destructive. The autonomy that abstraction supposedly gave art masks the annihilative anxiety, not to say uncertainty about its existence and right to exist, aroused by these profound, seemingly inherent splits in its identity. The anxiety aroused when art separated itself from the lifeworld it traditionally represented was intensified when gestural abstraction and geometrical abstraction went their separate ways. It was a double breakdown of art—a breakdown of its integrity and dialectic. Divided against itself, abstraction seemed less absolute, and opposed to objectivity—external necessity, as Kandinsky called it—art seemed less humanly necessary, however emotionally compelling it remained, at least as long as non-objectivity continued to convey internal necessity and not become a hollow formalism. Ciria's Rorschach Heads apotheosize this complex anxiety of art—the expression of its death wish, and as such suicidal in import—while showing that it is inseparable from, even an symptomatic expression of a deeper anxiety: the annihilative anxiety innate to being human. It is incurable, but can be successfully defended against by being represented, which is what Ciria does in the Rorschach Heads. The annihilative anxiety of art can be cured by reconnecting it to the lifeworld, however indirectly and metaphorically, as in Ciria's Danae paintings—and directly in his photo-erotic works—and integrating gestural abstraction and geometrical abstraction, whatever the disruptive tension of the dialectical struggle necessary to do so. Ciria convincingly does both in the Rorschach Heads: they are a major modernist achievement and the grand climax of his development. All his previous works—his abstract figures and pure abstractions (his Automatic Deconstructive Abstraction project, 12 years searching for "every possible matter [that] could be found [in] abstraction," as he writes in a letter to me dated July 6, 2010)—lead up to the Rorschach Heads: they are a project in which his dialectical dexterity, not to say synthesizing flair, comes to fruition.

In Ciria's Rorschach Heads the self-system, as Sullivan calls it, is in the process of becoming unsystematic and deformed, even as it also seems to be in the process of formation, if never becoming rigidly systematic. Whichever way one looks at it, it is in perpetual process, and as such can never complete itself, which is why it will always look bizarrely fragmented: always seem to

represent what Kohut calls the fragmented self. But Ciria's self is not "empty" and "nonvital," as Kohut says, for the fragments have their own colorful life, conveying an uncanny fullness. But one cannot deny that the head has become an expressionistic "scream," as Oskar Kokoschka called the self imploding because of its anxiety. Ciria's self-portraits—for that is what the Rorschach Heads implicitly are, however often based on "portraits" of anonymous persons taken from photographs—are a sort of radical *reductio ad absurdum* of Kokoschka's more realistic portraits of prominent people infected by anxiety, with the faces of some of them, including Kokoschka's in some of his self-portraits, almost chaotically disorganized, suggesting the collapse of their self-system. The modernist portrait, which can be said to have begun with Munch's and Kokoschka's portraits of emotionally disturbed people—people destabilized by anxiety, people who seem at a loss however ostensibly self-possessed, people whose mental instability is conveyed by their distorted, peculiarly abstract appearance, confirming their inner absurdity—and to have reached a crescendo of sorts in Bacon's portraits, especially self-portraits, is carried to an abstract expressionistic extreme in Ciria's self-portraits. It is their paradoxicality that makes them extreme: the abstract fragments can be re-assembled in an infinite number of ways, suggesting that there is no right self, and that the self remains an expressive puzzle to itself. It can constantly be reconfigured, suggesting its protean character. For Ciria, there is clearly no one, ideal model for the self. At the same time, the abstract fragments come and hold together in a grotesque whole, a consistently grotesque—monstrous—whole that suggests a consistent sense of self, and suggests that the self realizes its own monstrosity—the monstrosity of its protean character, which is an expression of its innate creativity.

I suggest that Ciria's self-portraits are a compromise formation (like a dream) between his primary creativity, which is invariably unconventional and thus socially outrageous, and his use of abstraction to express it—abstraction that has become conventional. I am using Winnicott's famous distinction between the true creative self, with its "personalized ideas and spontaneous gestures," which seem socially rebellious, unconventional, even absurd and insane; and the false compliant self, the self that has betrayed its creativity by routinely following conventions, that is, ideas and methods that were once bizarrely revolutionary but have become historicized, sanitized clichés. One might say that Ciria is trapped between what Max Weber called the "iron cage" of the System, which is represented by the grid, and his own passionate creativity, represented by his personal gesture—his "signature" painterliness, as Harold Rosenberg called it.

The question for Ciria is how to personalize the conventions of abstraction—re-personalize what has become impersonal and imprisoning, renew what has become old, tired, and standardized since the days of Kandinsky and Malevich, when it was young and revolutionary: how to make abstraction

spontaneous, fresh, and outrageous once again, so that it is no longer just another decadent way of making banal art. As I have suggested, Ciria's convincing answer is by dramatizing the tragic split between the gestural and geometrical in abstraction, and, more broadly, the tragic split of art into representation and abstraction, a split within a split that devastates art. Ciria's art recapitulates these splits, not as steps in art's purification of itself, as art historians have said they are, but as signs of its tragic situation in modernity. His recapitulation of the splits is optimistic to the extent it overcomes the splits, pessimistic to the extent it suggests their inevitability. It is a creative triumph because it is simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic.

No doubt the initial modern differentiation of art into abstraction and representation was driven by inner necessity, and inaugurated a new creative era of art. But the differentiation of abstraction into gestural and geometrical components which occurred soon after the initial differentiation was the ironical beginning of the end of modern art. By definition gestural and geometrical abstraction are self-limiting, and necessarily go their separate ways to maintain their purity and autonomy. The inevitable result is a one-dimensional entropic art: the chaotic gesturalism of Pollock's all-over paintings, the simplistic structures of Minimalist geometry. A creative limit was quickly reached, implying that what seemed to be evolution through differentiation was in fact devolution through splitting. Splitting turned out not to be dialectical differentiation, but a manifestation of art's annihilative and paranoid anxiety. In Ciria's abstraction splitting becomes dialectical, that is, leads towards the synthesis of opposites while respecting their difference. The split is no longer absolute and regressive.

Adorno has said that abstract art reflects the fact that the relationship between human beings is abstract in modern society, suggesting that the derangement of the abstract fragments in Ciria's tragic self-portraits bespeaks society's deranged abstractness. Can one say that Ciria's Suprematist square represents the unavoidable tendency to comply and conform —necessary to survive socially— and his convulsive gesture represents creative independence and nonconformity, however aggressively charged with sexual desire, and as such powerfully instinctive? Ciria's Rorschach Head is deranged because it is self-contradictory: it is charged with the anxiety of self-contradiction. But it also shows that anxiety brings its own creative solution with it, for the head remains self-contained despite its self-contradictory contents.

The point I am making is that Ciria's Rorschach Heads are projections of his self and tests of his creativity —of his ability to solve the basic creative problems of modern art. In his letter to me he wrote that he “took the title of Rorschach Heads from the Rorschach psychological tests. The idea was that the people in front of my paintings could try to find out what they meant to them.” He has in fact incorporated people —strangers— in his Rorschach Heads, as his use of their anonymous

images indicates, but the question is what the Rorschach Heads mean to him. The Rorschach test is “a projective test consisting of ten symmetric ink blots varying in shape and colour. Five are in black and white only, five introduce colour. The respondent examines each one in turn and interprets it by saying what it looks like. The test is designed to yield information about unconscious mental processes.”(7) Ciria has created his own Rorschach test —idiosyncratically asymmetrical and all delirious with color, however many of the colorful “blots” have sober black, white, and gray areas, indicating his creative independence and individuality rather than his compliance with the formal conventions of standard Rorschach blots— and projected himself into it in art historical as well as anonymous disguise. One quickly sees through the disguise, for his Rorschach Heads have an artistic complexity and personal intensity that the impersonal Rorschach ink blot lacks. And Ciria’s Rorschach Heads are much varied and numerous than the Rorschach ink blots.

Ciria notes that his Rorschach Heads have a certain affinity with Leonardo da Vinci’s grotesque heads. Leonardo was the “most famous forerunner” of Rorschach, as Coleman says, and “Leonardo’s paranoiac ancient wall,” as Breton called it(8), was the first projective test —the first art in which an artist tested his imagination and creativity, and experimentally projected the contents of his psyche onto and into an amorphous gestural surface. Ciria’s Rorschach Heads are an ingenious elaboration of Leonardo’s wall, for they bring the mental contents projected back into the head which projected them— the physical space of the head becomes a psychic space. Also, crucially, Ciria shows that these contents are abstract and unconscious, rather than representational and conscious, which indicates that he has a deeper, more modern understanding of them than Leonardo had.

1 Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (New York: Norton, 1953), 11

2 Ibid., 165

3 Heinz Kohut, “On the Continuity of the Self and Cultural Selfobjects,” *Self Psychology and the Humanities* (New York: Norton, 1985), 239

4The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), volume 10, 178

5 Quoted in Rollo May, “Contributions of Existential Psychotherapy,” *Existence*, eds. Rollo May, Ernest Angel, and Henri F. Ellenberger (Northvale, NJ and London: Jason Aronson, 1994), 51

6 Ibid.

7 Andrew M. Coleman, *A Dictionary of Psychology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 645

8 André Breton, "Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism," *Surrealism and Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 74, describes "the lesson taught by... Leonardo da Vinci that one should allow one's attention to be absorbed in the contemplation of streaks of dried spittle or the surface of an old wall until the eye is able to distinguish an alternative world." For Leonardo, the alternative world was not too different from the everyday exterior world; it contained familiar figures and landscapes, however sometimes distorted. For the abstract automatist/expressionist Ciria, it is radically different, for it is an interior world, and as such permanently distorted.