

ART AND ILLNESS.  
THE QUESTION OF DEPRESSION AND MELANCHOLY  
IN THE ART OF LIZA MAY POST

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With this article, I will relate the topic of the seminar, *Art and illness*, to matters of the mind. Through centuries, ‘outsiders’ to the psychiatric discipline (like writers and artists) have shown that they can describe the often ‘indescribable’ feeling of mental illness with raw accuracy, and our contemporary artists are no exception to this rule. Art reflects the society we live in, and artists seem increasingly concerned with the issue of mental illness, as psychiatric disorders have grown to be one of the most common types of disease in today’s society.<sup>1</sup> I will use this opportunity to present some ideas about the link between contemporary art and notions of depression and melancholy» Taking the Dutch contemporary artist Liza May Post as an example

<sup>1</sup> «Mental ill health accounts for almost 20% of the burden of disease in the WHO European Region and mental health problems affect one in four people at some time in life. Six out of the 20 countries with the highest suicide rates in the world are in the European Region». (World Health Organization: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/mental-health> Read: 07.09.15.)

and a point of departure, I will draw on the distinction between depression and melancholy made by the aestheticians Julia Brady and Arto Happala in their article «Melancholy as an aesthetic emotion» from 2003.<sup>1</sup> In the first part I briefly engage with what has been referred to as «the new category of depressive art»,<sup>2</sup> before I contrast this with the concept of melancholy in relation to contemporary art. In closing, I turn to the notion of spectatorship and reception, and the question of what artworks want of us.

### *Depressive Art*

Melancholy has been a topic in art for ages, and Brady and Happala have noted that one feature of melancholy (and what makes it an aesthetic emotion) is its dual nature: Melancholy is always a complex emotion rather than a simple one, and has both pleasurable and displeasurable shades of feeling. Today however, this dual notion of melancholy seems almost completely forgotten.<sup>3</sup> With the turn of the 19th century and the rise of modern psychiatry, melancholy was withdrawn from its broad cultural embeddedness and in many ways absorbed by the category of depression. We see this illustrated with for example Sigmund Freud who identifies melancholy with apathy of depression,<sup>4</sup> and the psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva, who argues that the borders between melancholy and depression are blurred.<sup>5</sup> This shift from what might be seen as a traditional notion of melancholy to depression, led to the loss of the former as a creative state of mind and the simultaneous rise of a new kind of depression: a non-relationship with the world associated with deficiency and a feeling of an impossibility to cope – with the world, with others and with one self. And although the thinkers cited are probably right to note the overlap between

<sup>2</sup> ROSS, 2006, xix.

<sup>3</sup> BRADY, HAPPALA 2003.

<sup>4</sup> FREUD 1957.

<sup>5</sup> KRISTEVA 1989, p.10.

depression and melancholy, by aligning the analysis with the clinical tradition I believe important differences between the two are in danger of being overlooked.

Following the clinical tradition, most contemporary artists who work on matters of the mind have been said to participate in the paradigm of depression,<sup>6</sup> and I also find it quite interesting that the contemporary artistic staging of a depressed subject is often an insufficient *female* self (and the depressive disorder thus depicted as a *feminized* experience).<sup>7</sup> One example of an artistic staging of a depressed female subject, is Cindy Sherman's now classic postmodern work *Untitled Film Stills* produced between 1977-80. The photographs in the series are seemingly all self-portraits: Here Sherman casts herself in a series of cliché roles from 40s and 50s low-budget films, as women who are lonely, fragile, abandoned, or confused. They are not glamorous like Marilyn Monroe, but rather stereotypes of a traditional, depressed femininity. Uncertain, vulnerable, and unable to act, all they can do is wait. Commenting on her self-portraits, Sherman once said that «some of them I'd hope would seem very psychological. While I'm working, I might feel as tormented as the person I'm portraying».<sup>8</sup> In the 1990s, Tracy Emin's *My Bed* from 1998 exercised another example of an artistic staging of a depressed female subject. In some respect this is also a 'self-portrait' as the bed that constitutes the installation is supposed to be a product of a chaotic low point in the artist's life, when a failed romance resulted in a severe depression. With her characteristic so-called 'confessional art',<sup>9</sup> Emin reveals private details

<sup>6</sup> See for example ROSS 2006.

<sup>7</sup> «While melancholy predominantly has been the prerogative of the male genius, depression is one of the most common mental disorders diagnosed among women». (ROSS 2006, 2)

<sup>8</sup> SUSSLER, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> David Galenson has defined confessional art as «a practice in the visual arts, in which painters and sculptors have motifs drawn largely or exclusively from their own lives». (2008, 2) Because the primary subject of Emin's art

to engage her spectators with her own experiences. In her book *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* art historian Christine Ross, who is influenced by Kristeva, attempts to understand a certain trajectory of contemporary art, one that has brought into the forefront of aesthetics what must be called a series of depressive enactments – an acting out of states of depression encompassing boredom, stillness, communicational rupture, loss of pleasure, withdrawal, the withering of one's capacity to remember and project, to dream, desire and fantasize.<sup>10</sup> Ross places Liza May Post's art within what she refers to as «the new category of depressive art»,<sup>11</sup> not only because she sees Post as investigating depressive symptoms, but also because she sees her acting out disengagement «without reinscribing the modernist quest for detached or disinterested autonomy».<sup>12</sup>

Ross is not alone. Others have claimed that «one cannot escape the idea that manifestations of psychological disorder provide a context for [Post's] work»<sup>13</sup>, and that «... illness floats like a spectre in each picture».<sup>14</sup> The title of an article on Post's art in *Frieze Magazine* «Still ill» also confirms to the same reading.<sup>15</sup> Interested in the difference between depression and melancholy, I want to contrast these readings with a reading of Post's art as engaged in the broader cultural paradigm of melancholy. What first triggered me to explore Post's works in relation to melancholy, was the fact she took inspiration from Albrecht Dürer's

appears to be her personal life, her work is most commonly categorized as confessional. See for example, Fanthome, 2006 and 2008.

<sup>10</sup> ROSS 2006, xv.

<sup>11</sup> In her «overview of what could problematically become the new category of 'depressive art', Ross has chosen to read the work of artists Ken Lum, Ugo Rondinone, Vanessa Beecroft, John Pilson, Douglas Gordon, and Rosemarie Trockel, in addition to Post. (ROSS 2006, xix)

<sup>12</sup> Ross finds this to be a common ground among all the artists she places in the category of depressive art.

<sup>13</sup> NIEUWENHUYZEN 2000.

<sup>14</sup> SCHORR 1997.

<sup>15</sup> SCHORR 1997.

*Melancholia*<sup>16</sup> in her preparations for one of her photographs<sup>17</sup> - a point that goes unnoticed in Ross' reading of this work.

*The art of Liza May Post*

Liza May Post is an artist born in 1965 who works in the media of performance, photography and video. Given the brevity of this article, I will concentrate on some of her photographic works which also constitute stills from her movies and performances. It might be difficult to view Post's work as an entity, but I will nevertheless focus on three aspects that I find to be somewhat characteristic of her work. Firstly, the artist herself is present in most of her work. As such, these works can be defined as self-portraits - as they are representations *of* the artist *by* the artist. In most of her works however, the face is removed from the frame, clothed or veiled. This fact, that all her figures, in one way or another, are introverted and turned away from the world, can be seen as another characteristic aspect of Post's work. Not only is the face often veiled, but her figures seldom move a muscle. They seem frozen in strange, twisted positions and hold their forms like mannequins. We can see how her figures have been called 'interim figures'<sup>18</sup>. Not only are they anonymous with no distinctly personal characteristics - something that places them somewhere between characters and generalized types - but they are present yet at the same time absent, moving away from any easy familiarity. The photograph of Post's performance from 1992 is a good example. Here we see

<sup>16</sup> Dürer's engraving *Melancholia I* from 1514 depicts a winged figure (Melancholy herself), surrounded by the instruments of her temperament.

<sup>17</sup> REJINDERS 2005, p. 241. The photography is *Bound* from 1996. Here we see a woman represented in profile sitting in front of a mirror cabinet in an all-white room in a white, padded astronaut-like outfit. The figure seems cut out of the world and becomes almost a part of the furniture. Only her hand and chin have been left uncovered, while her head is framed by blinders like the shutter that frames the mirror.

<sup>18</sup> NIEUWENHUYZEN 2000.

the artist dressed up like a schoolgirl with cotton socks and Mary Jane shoes, having dug her neck, head and arms deep into a table drawer.

At first sight, a work like *Table* might seem to depict depression. As Brady and Happala notice, when we feel depressed we feel unmotivated and unable to complete even the simplest task or to see forward.<sup>19</sup> But is this what is enacted in *Table*? Is there not more to it? I choose the word *enacted* deliberately here. When Ross reads *Table* as a depiction of a depression, she only takes the photography of the performance into account,<sup>20</sup> and not the fact that *Table* is a performance that lasted for two-and-a-half hours. Focusing on the performance, I suggest that this work should not only be read as a depiction of a depressed state of mind but also as an act of severe perseverance. I believe that this duality can also be found in Post's film *Trying* from 1998. Here the artist is dressed up as a young woman in a grey dress, and once again her face is veiled (this time by a wig of the same material as that of the dress). As the film develops, Post vainly attempts to mount an elephant, but no matter how hard she tries to conquer the animal it continues to chew away starrng quietly into open space. The elephant neither resists nor accepts her attempts. Her attempt to climb up will always be an impossible task; not only is the woman on her own, but the stirrups are not fastened. With her back to her spectators, she does not go for help but estimates her changes, calmly explores how it might be possible - and tries again. Over and over.

Thirdly, Post's images do not allow themselves to be approached as narratives, but appear more as nonsensical series of occurrences. The scenarios of Post's work are so self-evident and understated, that no meaning imposes itself. In an interview

<sup>19</sup> BRADY, HAPPALA 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Ross only presents *Table* as one of «Post's *photographs* produced between 1992 and 1996 [my italics] ». And she writes that «it presents a young woman alone in a white room, dressed in white, virginal socks. She sits behind a school desk, her body folded between the chair and the table with the head completely hidden from the viewer and from anyone who would be standing in front of the desk». (ROSS 2006, 108)

Post said that «there aren't specific narratives for each work, although I have stories in my head all the time». These stories however, «may not be obvious to the viewer, who can have created a completely different story».<sup>21</sup> Here, Post's photograph *The Perfume Department* from 1996 can act as an example, where we see Post lying motionless on the floor in the perfume department of a large store. Shoppers move in a blur around her, and none of them seem to take notice of the figure on the floor. What has happened - has she passed out from the smell, or had a fit? Or is she perhaps just creating a stumbling block in order to disrupt the consumers around her? Here we have a picture of a woman who may or may not have lost it in a public arena, and what Post is doing seems once again to be of a dual nature. She merges the posture of protest (in the refusal to move), with invisibility.<sup>22</sup> Like with so many of Post's other figures, the subject seems caught up in some undetermined conflict.

According to Brady and Happala, while depression is «an emotional state of resignation and a pessimistic state that involves pain», in melancholy «we refuse to give into the urge to collapse into a heap and cry». As already mentioned, melancholy has a dual nature – it has both pleasurable and displaceable aspects and the negative and positive alternate unpredictably.<sup>23</sup> Rather than resignation and pain, I find the dual nature of melancholy to be significant of Post's art, as her figures always seem caught up in some kind of duality (presence/ absence, subject/ object, spectated/ spectator). But I also find Post's work melancholic in another way. According to Brady and Happala, one of the most distinctive aspects of melancholy (as an emotion) is that it involves quiet reflection:

When we are melancholic our behavior is pensive, as such mel-

<sup>21</sup> COLES 1997, p. 85.

<sup>22</sup> SCHOOR 1997.

<sup>23</sup> BRADY, HAPPALA 2003.

ancholy is said to «involve the pleasure of reflection and contemplation of things we love and long for, so that the hope of having them adds a touch of sweetness that makes melancholy bearable». This thoughtful aspect is also what makes melancholy «somehow productive».<sup>24</sup>

*What does Post want of us?*

With this article I suggest that melancholy can be used as a conceptual tool even in relation to contemporary art. I have no need to argue against those who claim that Post's work concern issues of mental illness. That said however, I find her work to address much more than just depression, and therefore I do not agree with Ross and others who read Post's work in terms of depressive art. As I see it, the greatest difference between Post's work and depressive art, lies in the way they address their spectators and what they want their art to do. With their expressions of depression, artists working with depressive art (like for example Sherman and Emin) seem to want to stimulate a corresponding feeling in the spectator.

Regarding spectatorship, this can be said to be reminiscent of the tactics used by the expressionists, who sought to express emotional experiences to evoke different moods in their spectators. Post, on the other side, brings another dimension to the notion of spectatorship. In maintaining a distance that results in a denial of collaboration with the spectator's expectations, I suggest that she approaches her spectators conceptually rather than expressively. It is not that Post's artworks do not involve an autobiographical level - not only does she take the feminine condition as her point of departure, but, as we have seen, most of her works are self-portraits.

However, the act of hiding, turns her presentations into some sort of 'non-presentations' - the artist is present but she does not show herself. So rather than draw her spectators into her

<sup>24</sup> BRADY, HAPPALA 2003.



own experiences, she seems to modify narratives about the personal into larger *shared* experiences to reach out beyond herself. Here we, as spectators, are neither expected to feel nor understand (a narrative), but reflect, contemplate and be pensive. (What is it that I see? What is mental illness? Where do we set the borders of normality? etc.) What I see in Post's art is not an aesthetics of depression, but rather an aesthetics of melancholy. As noted by Brady and Happala, the pleasure of reflection and contemplation involved in melancholy are states of mind often associated with the aesthetic response more generally, where «some kind of reflective, contemplative and distanced point of view has been regarded as typical of the aesthetic situation».<sup>25</sup> As such, an aesthetic relationship can be said to be characterized by exactly what is missing in depression: the orientation towards the outside and the building of oneself through the other – whether in perception, dialogue or critique. And if my suggestion that Post's art could be read in melancholic terms is plausible – then this time around, melancholy is also shown to involve a *feminine creativity*.

<sup>25</sup> Especially in the Kantian tradition read: BRADY, HAPPALA 2003.

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