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Me, Myself and Everyone: Perspectives on Helene Schjerfbeck's (Self-)Portraits

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Helene Schjerfbeck's self-portraits from the 20th century, especially those from the 1920s onwards, reveal the artist's lack of interest in the idea of physiognomic likeness. In these canvases the individual features of Schjerfbeck's face are reduced to a minimum until they become almost completely effaced in her late works. This disinterest in painting 'likeness' challenges the conventional understanding of the portrait as a genre and, as a consequence, concepts of identity and individuality are being questioned. This quality of Schjerfbeck's works is most present in her final self-portraits.

In my paper, I argue that Schjerfbeck's particular approach to painting her facial features results in a portraiture that seems to focus not so much on what divides the self from others, on what is individual, but rather on what unites the self with others, and the 'other within the self' in the psychoanalytic sense. Especially in her final paintings and drawings, Schjerfbeck seems to transform her face, resulting in an abstract style that bears similarities to the works of artists such as Edvard Munch and Käthe Kollwitz – she was familiar with their works – and anticipates Francis Bacon's grotesque faces.

Case studies of *the Self-portrait: An Old Painter* (1945) and *Self-portrait with Red Spot* (1944) reveal a deeper understanding of the themes inherent in her self-portraits. These two paintings belong to the series of about 20 self-portraits that Schjerfbeck made in the last couple of years before her death in 1946.

At first glance both of these paintings appear to be self-portraits *en face*, with universal features such as eyes, nose and mouth recognisable. Yet neither of these portraits conveys the sex of the person depicted, nor is it possible to ascertain how the person 'really' looked. Instead, the faces bear reference to a genderless skull and thus allude to human decay. The lack of any individual physiognomic features or indication of social categories such as gender or class, implies that these images could mirror almost anyone and everyone.

In addition to this figurative vagueness, Schjerfbeck employs visual strategies that evoke an even stronger visual ambiguity: the figurative elements seem to dissolve into abstraction. What seems allegedly familiar, becomes alienated; what first appears to be the mouth is nothing more than a black spot, what appears to be the contour of the face is nothing more than a distorted line, and so forth.

These are precisely the qualities – the oscillation between familiar and alien, as well as the obvious allusion to death – that, according to Sigmund Freud in his book, *Das Unheimliche* (1919), are central elements of the uncanny. In my paper I take a closer look at the notion of the uncanny and question what other visual strategies are being employed in order to visualise different states of the human condition. These themes related to fear and death are examined against the background of concepts of vitality and creativity that are also inherent in Schjerfbeck's final self-portraits.