

"THE ARTIST AS EXEMPLARY SUFFERER"

The artist is showing us his bloody stump. He is not hiding it; he is not covering or protecting it with a bandage; he is not carrying it in a sling. Instead of these defensive actions, he thrusts the stump into the extreme foreground: it rises from below precisely along the vertical middle axis of the picture. It does not, however, occupy the actual center of the painting. That would be the place for the painter's missing hand holding his brush—almost exactly as Kirchner depicted himself in 1913 (see Plate 2). Here, the shock of the severed hand derives instead from the surrounding empty space, the shock of the wound from the very absence of the hand. The mutilation was without question carefully positioned, just as this gesture of the artist as a secular man of sorrows is without question deliberately demonstrative—a transparent emotional formula.

The artist uses this formula to evoke martyrs who exhibit their flayed limbs or the specific stigmata of their suffering like documentary testimony: head, tongue, eyes, or breasts as saintly attributes.¹ Kirchner, according to Robert Hughes, "wanted to be seen as a mutilated saint, a victim symbolically unmanned by the army."² One possible reference can be found in a painting in Lübeck's Marienkirche dating from the late fifteenth century;³ it shows the venerable Adrian of Nicomedia, bearing not his usual attributes—the anvil, the ax, and the sword—but rather the hand that was severed during his martyrdom (Fig. 41). Kirchner, whose route from Berlin to the island of Fehmarn led him through Lübeck, might well have known this painting. Saint Adrian, however, is improbable as a prototype of the motif, as a model or even an inspiration, because, compared to Kirchner's soldier, he looks as innocent as a gentleman carrying his glove.⁴

Another difference must be noted as well: whereas we understand the mar-



Figure 41
Three saints,
with St. Adrian
of Nicomedia at right,
late fifteenth century

tyr's mutilation, it remains unclear just what inflicted the mutilation in Kirchner's work—whether a shell or the man himself. Self-mutilation, after all—which a cynic might see as the lesser evil—guaranteed escape from the horror of the front lines and from sure death in the trenches.⁵

Another legend provides a curious parallel: in the second half of the fifteenth century, Antoniazio Romano painted the so-called *Leo Madonna* for the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (Fig. 42). The Madonna panel has an additional scene below it—separated by a railing and thus “outside the picture,” as it were—showing an angel about to reattach the severed right



Figure 42
Antoniazzo Romano,
Madonna panel with the
miracle of Pope Leo the
Great, late fifteenth century



Figure 43
Gustave Courbet,
The Wounded Man
(Self-Portrait), c. 1854

hand of Pope Leo the Great. This miracle, reported in the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacob de Voragine, refers to a self-mutilation that seems to anticipate the sexual components of the motif. In keeping with the biblical verse "If thy right hand offend thee, so cut it off and cast it from thee," the saint amputated his own hand to extinguish his sensual desires after a woman kissed it.⁶

Of course, (self-)stylization as a saint or martyr is not rare in the art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; often it figures as a variant of the christomorphic self-likeness (for example, Gustave Courbet's self-portrait *The Wounded Man*; Fig. 43).⁷ The emotional tenor of Kirchner's self-portrait was not unusual for the time either; as Donald Gordon observes, "The Expressionist artist tends to see himself as hero or victim, sometimes [both] simultaneously."⁸ Egon Schiele's self-representation as St. Sebastian pierced by arrows—used in 1915 on a poster announcing an exhibition of his works—is but one case in point (Fig. 44).⁹

Schiele, who made a virtual habit of depicting himself as a martyr for art, thought very highly of van Gogh as an artist and considered him a figure worthy of emulation. In describing one of Schiele's "crude martyrdoms," Werner Hofmann seems to have Kirchner's picture in mind as well: "Expressed

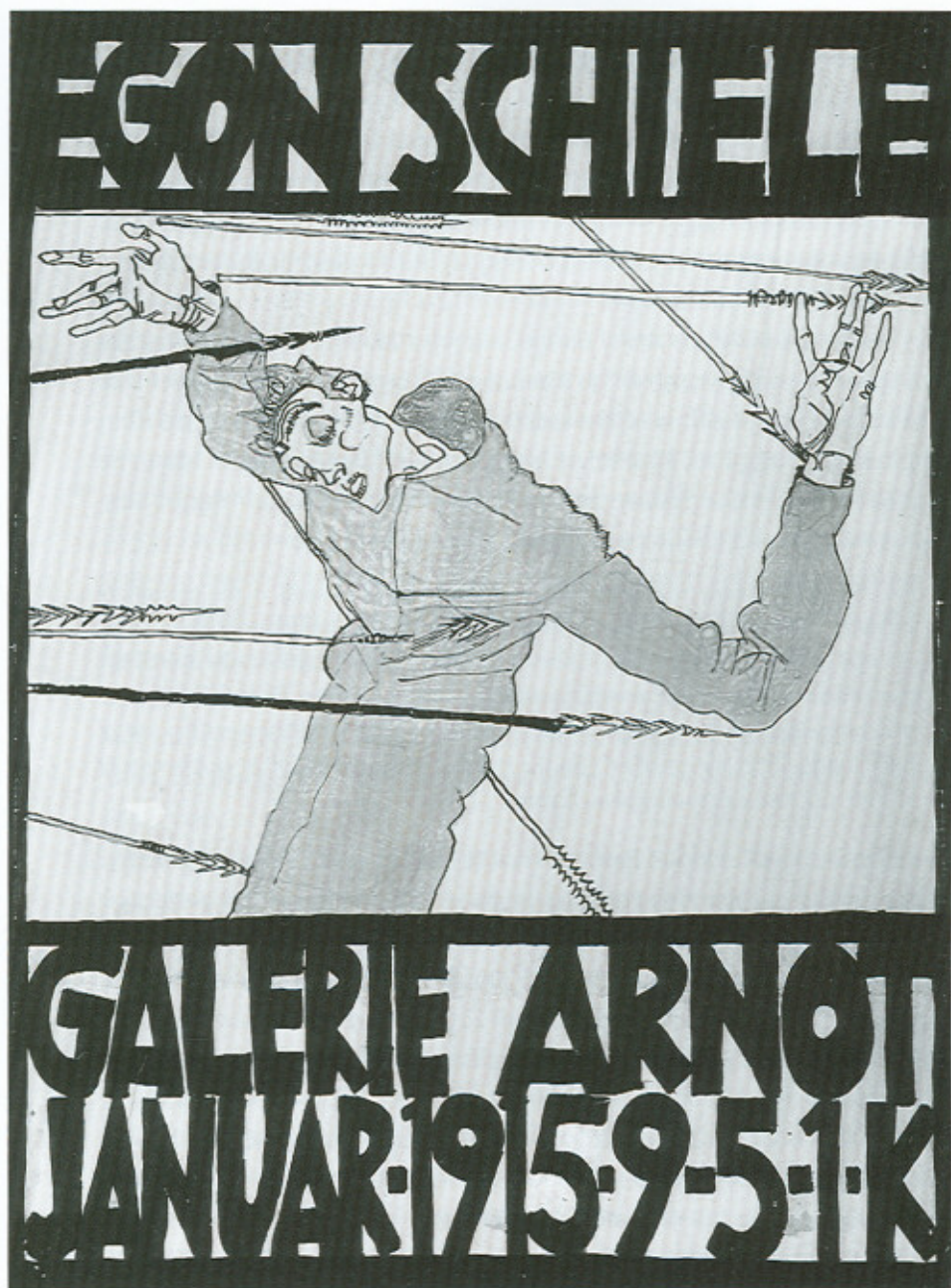


Figure 44

Egon Schiele, *Self-Portrait as
St. Sebastian (Selbstbildnis
als hl. Sebastian)*, 1915

in this self-portrait, this self-disclosure, especially in the way Schiele reduces it almost to one of those pictures aimed at eliciting the Christian's compassion, is a passionate drive for revelation, a challenge to man's ability to empathize. . . . This explains the self-mutilation [that is] so proudly and [at the same time] beseechingly offered 'in effigy.'¹⁰ The line separating fictive "self-mutilation 'in effigy'"—with its implied self-glorification and pathos of suffering—from forms of manifest self-injury is, however, fluid. For this, too, Kirchner serves as an example.

In *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, John M. MacGregor applies the concept of "exemplary tragedy" to Kirchner.¹¹ This concept—which seems to echo Susan Sontag's notion of "the artist as exemplary sufferer"¹²—stems from an entry the young Paul Klee made in his diary in March 1908, in which he applies the expression "exemplary tragicalness" to van Gogh.¹³ Susan Sontag, writing in 1962 about the author Cesare Pavese, states:

For the modern consciousness, the artist (replacing the saint) is the exemplary sufferer. . . . The writer is the exemplary sufferer because he has found both the deepest level of suffering and also a professional means to sublimate (in the literal, not the Freudian, sense of sublimate) his suffering. As a man, he suffers; as a writer, he transforms his suffering into art. The writer is the man who discovers the use of suffering in the economy of art—as the saints discovered the utility and necessity of suffering in the economy of salvation.

The purpose of suffering, in Pavese's view, resides in the creation of literature, and in furthering the isolation that inspires and allows for the perfection of art. "And suicide," notes Sontag, "is the third, ultimate use of suffering—conceived of not as an end to suffering, but as the ultimate way of acting on suffering."¹⁴ In all this, the parallels with Kirchner are quite startling.

Behind Kirchner's existential crisis (he frequently compared himself to a prostitute and had already made graphic cycles with some uncommon erotic themes), and occupying the background of his self-portrait, was the element that in a sense bridged art and suicide: the relationship between the sexes. Sontag again: "The cult of love in the West is an aspect of the cult of suffering."¹⁵ As a recruit, Kirchner, who once described himself as an "absolute outsider" (like the prostitutes he identified with),¹⁶ kept to himself and remained isolated from contact with others. In the *Schlemihl* cycle, he depicts the protagonist as a loner, a man suffering because of love. Pavese: "The only heroic

rule is to be alone, alone, alone."¹⁷ This sentiment certainly applies to Kirchner, and not only in light of his "flight" to Davos and his increasing solitude in his Swiss exile.¹⁸

As a secular martyr the artist appears formulaically, even stereotypically, as the victim, suffering from hostile surroundings and unappreciative, unresponsive contemporaries. This identity finds its extreme form in war. The death, annihilation, destruction, and injury that accompany war, and which are seen as catastrophes of man's own making, have the potential to make everyone a victim—even, paradoxically, the victimizer himself, in whose uniform the artist has represented himself as sufferer. This is "the self as sufferer,"¹⁹ or Sontag's "artist as exemplary sufferer." The mutilated artist thus becomes an existential representative: the "exemplary sufferer" who, representing innumerable victims, simulates the consequences of the military and of war on his own body. With seismographic sensitivity, he seems to anticipate the reality of the war, his possible assignment to the front, a serious injury. And yet, an examination of the source of his motifs will show he is in fact only imitating the true horrors, conjuring them, as it were, into an image. For what he seems to anticipate has already happened to thousands of victims by 1915. In the end, the army of the dead, the wounded, the mutilated, the disfigured—the actual extent of the horrors of war—truly does defy depiction.

Self-mutilation, both as an anticipatory fatal wound and as a means of identification with the martyr-artist who suffers at the hand of society, finds its last resort in suicide. This fact was borne out in the death of Cesare Pavese, who took his own life in 1950, just as in the 1938 suicide of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

In this tradition, as well as in the realm of gruesome physical mutilation (in oils, at any rate), Kirchner had a prominent predecessor (one hesitates to call him a "model"): van Gogh, himself a painter and, moreover, *the* artistic idol of Kirchner's generation. Attempts to explain Kirchner's *Self-Portrait as Soldier* (as well as his *Self-Portrait as a Sick Man* from 1917/1920) consistently refer to this presumed parallel. Gordon, for example, writes: "In sublimated form the subject parallels van Gogh's act of self-mutilation in cutting off his right ear late in 1888; just as the Dutch artist's suicide followed a year and a half later, so, by a similar interval after this painting, are the German painter's

thoughts of suicide first expressed in his letters."²⁰ MacGregor follows Kirchner's alleged identification with van Gogh in even more detail, especially in the years between 1915 and 1917.²¹ For Lothar Grisebach, van Gogh is Kirchner's "fellow sufferer" (*Schicksalsverwandter*).²²

Van Gogh's dramatic self-mutilation, symbolizing the shattering of his dream of an artistic community with Gauguin and the fear of being alone again, was a spectacular gesture of failure. On the surface, the parallels with Kirchner's situation are astounding. Yet if we look carefully at van Gogh's world-famous portraits of himself with a bandaged head (Fig. 45), icons of the modern artist in the role of suffering martyr, we see grave differences. Van Gogh's self-portraits completely lack both that apodictic quality and the pathos of the exemplary sufferer in the act of introducing himself that characterize Kirchner's likeness. More to the point, missing too is the allegorical intensification that renders Kirchner's *Self-Portrait* an existential symbol of the artist per se. For in the end, an ear and a hand are not interchangeable: a severed ear is only tangentially suggestive of the activity of a painter, who works with his hands. The loss of the painting hand, however, an artist's most important tool, means the end of his creative existence. There is no doubt about it: the right hand is Kirchner himself.

Kirchner's symbolic mutilation seems more closely related to certain extreme forms of the work of "actionists" or body artists of the 1960s and 1970s. This Viennese movement, seeking to demonstrate the identity of life and art, shocked its public with simulated and genuine suffering. The main practitioners were Otto Muehl and Hermann Nitsch, who included bloody skits, injuries, and death as metaphors in their "actions," and Günter Brus and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, who, going even further, used their own bodies as material. For them, self-injury was a way of pushing experience to its limits. In the case of Schwarzkogler, this exploration, it seems, led to tragedy when, on July 20, 1969, the twenty-eight-year-old artist died after jumping out a window.

Schwarzkogler revealed his injury-producing props—knives, razor blades, scissors, and hypodermic needles, together with blood-drenched bandages, trash, and plaster—in seven actions. The quasi-clinical presentation, though beautiful in a grisly way, was deliberately shocking, a staging of existential



Figure 45
Vincent van Gogh.
*Self-Portrait with Bandaged
Ear and Pipe*, 1889

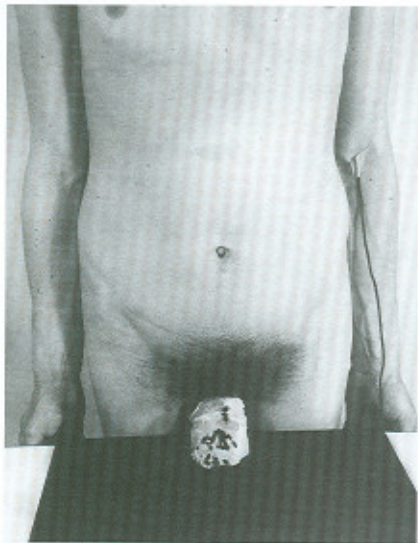
suffering that—when carried to its extreme—seemed to include death itself.

Schwarzkogler's actual death, compounded by the visual horror of the documentary photographs of his actions that were exhibited at the Fifth Documenta in Kassel in 1972 (Figs. 46 and 47), greatly disturbed the viewing public and gave rise to wild speculations. In a *Time* magazine essay of December 1972, Robert Hughes stated—erroneously—that Schwarzkogler had castrated himself in the course of an action and had died as a result: "A martyr to his art . . . [he] was to become the Vincent van Gogh of Body Art." Concluding that the experiential art of the 1960s had given way to a "poetics of impotence," Hughes declared this alleged self-mutilation a telling indicator of the self-destruction of the avant-garde.²³

Schwarzkogler was an extreme "aesthete" among the Viennese actionists, whose alleged self-mutilations were in fact only imagined "acts," intended to push the limits of aesthetics. Günter Brus, too, used his body in his art, proceeding from body painting via self-mutilation to self-inflicted injuries. Contemplating one potential action, he stated: "I'll cut off my left hand . . ." ²⁴ As he put it in a moment of programmatic excess, "Body painting is unendingly savored suicide."²⁵ For both Schwarzkogler and Brus, photographic documentation of their actions was essential: once the actions were over, the only way they could endure was in photos.

In comparison, the actions of the Canadian John Fare—who, inspired by the execution machine in Franz Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony," constructed an amputation machine and, ultimately, decapitated himself in 1968—seemed to have been suicide by installment. According to eyewitnesses, Fare removed one thumb, two fingers, several toes, one eye, his testicles, and sections of his skin, replacing them with ersatz parts, before his final "amputation." Thus Schwarzkogler's latent masochism became bloody reality.

Indeed, these and other implications of self-glorification through suffering can hardly be divorced from latent masochism, from a diffuse desire for punishment akin to the draconian forms exacted for theft or perjury (with reference to the hand used to take an oath) (Fig. 48).²⁶ Similar interpretations apply as well to the frequent use of the motif of the severed hand in popular literature and film—and by no means only in the horror genre (Fig. 49).²⁷



Figures 46–47
Rudolf Schwarzkogler,
documentary photo-
graphs of his actions,
Documenta V, 1972

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Figure 48

Tengler Layenspiegel
(Mainz: Johann Schöffer,
1508), representation of
various punishments



Figure 49

Fantômas, vol. 10 (1911):
"La main coupée," title
illustration