



International Studies in Philosophy

ILLUMINATING THE ETHOS OF AN ARTIST: FRIDA KAHLO AS A RESPONSE TO PICASSO¹

Jennifer Scuro

As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be able to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon.

—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1887), §107

INTRODUCTION

Through the analysis of the work of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), in contrast to the work of Pablo Picasso (1882–1973), I want to critically illustrate the process by which the artist can represent a synthesis of concern for what is ethical (a way of life) as well as aesthetic (represented by the artist's interest in his/her work). My concern is not so much for the products of the artists but rather for their inherently ethical attitude as artists. Why do they produce in the way that they do? What concerns them? Their work will provide here a partial means for examining action as products which have been generated from an attitude and worldview; for the artist is already empowered with "the eyes, hands and good conscience" to exist from their own creation. If we are to take Nietzsche's project seriously and take the artist's attitude toward life as an ethical and perhaps even political grounding (as well as suspending an aesthetic judgment about which work is visually "good" or "bad"), then the position of these two artists towards the world through their work as artists will

XXXVI/2 2004

be the starting point for my analysis of aesthetic phenomena as it relates to an *ethos*.

NIETZSCHE'S ARTIST AS STARTING POINT

There are many ways in which one can read for an ethos in Nietzsche's work. Signs of an existential ethic that moves beyond morality is indicated by certain figures that arise in his work, indicated by a "becoming" or an "affirmation of life." For Nietzsche, the tragic artist is one of these figures and illustrates a particular attitude toward life (and of course, Nietzsche includes himself in this category): "We ... want to become those we are ... who give themselves laws, who create themselves. To that end we must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world: we must become *physicists* in order to be able to be *creators* in this sense—while hitherto all valuations and ideals have been based on *ignorance* of physics or were constructed so as to *contradict* it" (Nietzsche, *GS*, §335). This existential ethic consists of activity that cannot be divorced from its actor by ignorance or by theory. It is in the use of the laws of action, i.e., the "physics" of an activity that the artist can create him/herself while creating and playing upon the rules for action. The aim of life is to practice this immediate engagement with the world as an *ethos*. The activity of constructing art, if it is to be meaningful by this definition, should not participate in a "finished" ideal but should become a necessary part of being human: "to become who we are." In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche's artist does not seek to aesthetically reproduce anything other than the tragedy of existence, to create and to destroy: "The lyric genius is conscious of a world of images and symbols—growing out of his state of mystical self-abnegation and oneness ... a world-genius expresses his primordial pain symbolically in the symbol of the man ... and tragedy shows how far the visionary world of the lyricist may be removed from this phenomenon which, to be sure, is the closest at hand" (Nietzsche, *GS*, 50–51). As a radically new "ethical" imperative,² Nietzsche asserts that the private (existential) interest involved in artistic activity (as opposed to the disinterested presentation of artistry) exemplified by the "lyric genius" has been lost to the historical evaluation of the aesthetic. The Nietzschean attitude toward life is one that can be ethically recreated, not to be as a way for *everyone*,

but to be as a way for *me*. It is this attitude that affirms life—the attitude of reproducing, *for me* as well as the conscious destruction of any faith in morality—that takes on a serious ethical import for Nietzsche.

This theoretical importance in the utility of art, as Nietzsche describes it, sheds light on the evaluation of what is good for life. "We do not always keep our eyes from rounding off something and, as it were, finishing the poem ... then we have a sense of carrying a goddess, and feel proud and childlike as we perform this service" (Nietzsche, *GS*, §107). In the true sense of free experimentation, the artist is empowered by intoxication and play: "[e]xcess revealed itself as truth" (Nietzsche, *BT*, 46). The heroic position of the artist elicits "a courage to become" revealed in the activity that reflects indulgence and instinct, (even if it is "childlike"). For Nietzsche, there is a weakness of will and resentment toward life by those who hide behind a mask of "good" intention in a disinterested manner.

The "play" with which Nietzsche's *ethico-aesthetic* calls for has no sense of responsibility to anything other than what one's "heart desires."³ There can be no "dead mask"⁴ of objectification in the definition of Nietzsche's artist. Objective self-identification represents the blind faith in appearance and the inability to exist tragically. The world as it appears is all that exists. For Nietzsche, the safe distance of objectification (disinterested observation) is the lie of morality. Self-mockery is fostered through appearance and effected by appearance, which is "a dance of the spirits and nothing more" (Nietzsche, *GS*, §54). This working-for-self-mockery in which appearance becomes the catalyst, becomes the artist's cause and source of craft. To be without the goal of self-mockery, or in other words taking oneself too seriously is to be lost to life through the deadness of any one mask.

As a working analogy to Nietzsche's tragic artist, Frida Kahlo's work provides a unique challenge to the meaning of art in relation to the artist. Her personality has been described as "the human and artistic indivisibly combined, a constant consequence between dream and wakefulness, wakefulness and dream" (Tibol, *FKOL*, 123). Her interest as an artist is blatantly *personal* and does not project the artist as another disinterested observer in the art. In her more "surrealistic" work, she intermixes representations of the world as real-*for-her* with the imagined-*by-her*, engaging in the world as it appears to her [Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital* or *The Flying Bed*]. Yet, her works "cannot

be called Surrealist, for in none of them does she entirely free herself from reality" (Kettenmann, *FKPP*, 48).⁵ The subject-matter of Kahlo's surrealist work includes representations involving a variety of concerns, often centered around a direct reference to her personal self. In this way, surrealism provided a style of presentation and symbolism for Kahlo, and yet she did not represent dream for the sake of dream, in order to suspend and escape from the world. Her concern remained specific and personal, not other-worldly, as in more traditional surrealism, but a continued reference to *her* world. The surrealist imagery that she uses in the more complex and highly thematic pieces does not lead her to identify herself as an artist with a particular style of art. The Nietzschean ethos corresponds to Kahlo insofar as her connection with her art shows a freedom to take from this style only what she desires. This can also be read as a lack of faith in surrealism as an ethos for artistic production. The *decision* of the artist in the making of art, in part, includes a choice of style as a conscious employment or *practice*.

Alternatively, it has been said that "Picasso never became a true Surrealist because he was *unable* . . . to approach external reality 'with the eyes closed'" (Golding, *PS*, 49).⁶ Even though Picasso would innovate a new style of making art, cubism as a style would become definitive of his view of the world as an artist. His early self-portraits (1901 and 1907)⁷ indicate some existential courage to be personal in his work, but with his development of cubism, he consistently practiced an impersonal access to the world through a cubist lens. Not only do Kahlo's early and *more surrealist* paintings already contain some reference to the subject of self-portraiture, but also the subject-matter revealed in the *less surrealist* and more straight-forward self-portraiture directly addresses and develops a personal and interested worldview.

The relationship between the artist's identity and the ability or inability to use a style can indicate the attitude of the artist toward life. For Kahlo, her ability to pick up or abandon a style demonstrates a lower priority for formal accuracy and an actively chosen, higher priority toward the subject-matter for representation. Picasso's novel construction of the cubist style of making art, with its particular intentions toward the world, also has historical and ethical repercussions. "Picasso's images of women strive toward an ideal form of Woman, and toward an original symbol of nature . . . [h]is Woman

recalls . . . 'universal female qualities' . . . rendered in every possible perspective, in profile and full-face, polyvalent and polymorphous" (Dorschka, *PRP*, 56).

Luce Irigaray describes this kind of unrelenting perspectivism, practiced in order to destroy and create form, as characteristically masculine and rooted in the Copernican Revolution: "And by centering man outside of himself, it has occasioned above all man's ex-stasis within the transcendental (subject). Rising to a perspective that would dominate the totality, to the vantage point of greatest power, he thus cuts himself off . . . from his empirical relationship with the matrix he claims to survey. To specularize and speculate" (Irigaray, *ATS*, 579). To some degree, Picasso's avant-garde move to cubism was influenced by Nietzsche.⁸ Donald Kuspit describes the character of the avant-garde artist as the mythologized, heroic figure of art inspired by Nietzsche: "There are two kinds of avant-garde constructions . . . of the artist: those that attribute special perceptual power to him and those that regard him as uniquely authentic in an inauthentic society" (Kuspit, *AGA*, 2).⁹ Perceptively, as an artist, Picasso's destructive power was equal to his creative power and every subject matter was treated with the same attitude. The intention to be "deformative" meant to master the trick of "arousing real emotion," "but without the sense of [the object's] real presence" (Kuspit, *AGA*, 30).¹⁰ Picasso's artistry included the ability to destroy collective illusions while entertaining universally, and the reward was his fame, the most obvious example being Picasso's *Guernica*. To quote Picasso, "I'm just a public entertainer who has understood his time" (Kuspit, *AGA*, 100). The fact that Picasso was willing to sacrifice the world and his obligation to it for the sake of his style of making art as *ethos* (demonstrating a decisive practice) in this way also reveals his underlying and masked *pathos* to be a certain kind of artist (manifesting as compulsion).

In order to privilege her practice of art—her *ethos* as an artist—Kahlo's use and then abandonment of surrealism can be read as a reinforcement of the fact that it was an act of *decision* by Kahlo rather than *compulsion* to make art the way that she did. It was not that she sought to be seen as a "surrealist artist," but rather she borrowed from the practices of surrealism in order to re-present something of greater concern. "Pictorially Frida represents her pain in all possible versions . . . but never repeated in the same aspect . . . [t]heir entirety,

ject in relation to a world of objects or "subject matter") nor is it an attempt to formalize this kind of viewpoint stylistically in order to preserve her "stake in the value of representation."

SERIOUSNESS AND THE ATTITUDE OF THE ARTIST

We should be *able* to stand *above* morality—and not only to stand with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling at any moment, but also to *float* above it and *play*. (Nietzsche, *GS*, §107)

What does the artist find to be free for experimentation and play? What does the artist find to be serious and valued? Anxiety accompanies a "seriousness" and "stiffness" toward those things in the world that are to be preserved. The desire for self-preservation (a consistency of self which most theories of personality rest) is considered by Nietzsche to be a weakness of the will to live. The power of the tragic artist, if one is to affirm life through artistic phenomenon, can only remain tentative in attitude and not rest in any one ideal or object. All forms of preservation should be questionable in motive if they are constructed with fear (in "seriousness") rather than constructed with courage (for "play"). This existential ethos requires the individual to be an actor and not a spectator.

"[T]o live dangerously! Build . . . on the slopes of Vesuvius! . . . Live at war with peers and yourselves!" (Nietzsche, *GS*, §283). The idea of war as an ethic: can this be toward everything? Is there any serious responsibility? To be at war with a peer is easy but in that way an irresponsible permission for violence. In this way, the Nietzschean ethic served Picasso's *pathos*: "Everything, the whole of creation, was an enemy, and he was a painter in order to fashion not works of art . . . but weapons: defensive weapons against the spell of the spirit that fills creation, and offensive weapons against everything outside of man . . . 'Obviously,' he said, 'nature has to exist so that we may rape it!'" (Huffington, *PCP*, 8). To be responsible for oneself in relation to others becomes the task of an *ethos*, and yet it is the least available to challenge. Those habits of identity, those comforts of self-identification, are the least likely to become subject-matter for an art, i.e., something to transform. In the usual practice, the artist's power to transform is aimed toward what is external and distant to oneself: abstract notions of nature, politics and the world. To be at war first

as possibly no other work of art in the whole world, praises the human condition of being oneself and yet always different, identical and changing" (Tibol, *FKOP*, 80), [Kahlo, *Self-Portrait "very ugly"*]. Kahlo's utilization of art in this way demonstrates an interest that does not contain the same motives of objectification and destruction characterized by the cubist style.

"Picasso was the great destroyer of pictorial standards, and yet at the same time he was a Classicist. He was also the destroyer of the face, and the architect of new physiognomy of his own invention." (Doshka, *FRP*, 56). It is important to note that Kahlo's lack of concern in style was not out of ignorance. She did not express a fascination with the cubist style of Picasso, while her husband did.¹¹ Through her work, she does not attempt to imagine (make an image of) her perceived world by way of a trick of the perspicuous eye: "I paint myself because I am so often alone and because I am the subject I know best" (Kettenmann, *FKPP*, 27).¹² Those things to which she makes reference in her self-portrait paintings are done pictorially with direct referents, turning her innovation not toward style, or toward what she sees in "the world" but toward herself and her relation to *her world*, as it appears to her and as she experiences it.

Meanwhile the excess in this universal fascination is that "she" also turns upon herself, that she knows how to re-turn (upon herself) but not how to seek outside for identity with the other. As things now go, man moves away in order to preserve his stake in the value of representation, while woman counterbalances with the permanence of a (self)recollection . . . in the recurrence of this re-turn upon the self . . . [the recurrence] can continue to support the illusion that the object is inert. (Irigaray, *ATS*, 579)¹³

Self-portraiture as a life-long project seems to represent a kind of persistence or identity of Kahlo's object (the self as subject-matter)—a kind of *ethos* of self re-collection. In fact, it is the repetition of this subject-matter that demonstrates a particular evaluation of the function of representation. "Women are traditionally denied access to venues for presenting their own sense of self . . . [Kahlo's] construction of self is at once complex and astonishingly straightforward" (Lowe, *PK*, 38). Here is a re-turn to a subject-matter that is seemingly *inert* but in fact implies an attempt to neither perform the traditional (and masculine) act of the artist to "seek outside for identity" (a sub-

with oneself—that is the difficulty and perhaps takes real existential courage. “Man” “only asks himself questions that he can already answer” (Irigaray, *ATS*, 582). So that, in the case of Picasso, a Nietzschean transformation of style does not result in a Nietzschean transformation of self.



Figure 1. The Two Fridas. © 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

It is at this point that I want to assert that Kahlo represents a character uncommon to the most innovative of artists. For Kahlo, her use of craft provides a character of consistent disunity; she used her craft to sacrifice the comforts of selfhood (she gave up herself and recol-

lected herself) with courage (in play). It is in this way that the meaning of “war” became instead a directive force primarily and ethically toward herself. Her self-identity (as a “woman,” as an “artist”) was in question (created and destroyed) with every re-turn to self-representation. The artist’s identity is made plural. The dialogue with herself through her art often remained limited to this extension and was made to be *un-comfortable* [see Kahlo’s *The Two Fridas*]. How “can we ask ourselves about *what* matters if we could not ask to *whom* the thing mattered or not? Does not the questioning about what matters or not depend on self-concern, which indeed seems to be constitutive of selfhood?” (Ricoeur, *OA*, 137). Even when her husband appears in the work, he is consistently portrayed visually in a relation to her own image. *She does not represent herself as absent from the play.*

“How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not? And I rather think that in themselves they never are” (Nietzsche, *GS*, §299). As an artist, Kahlo uses the craft she possesses to actualize particularly difficult and personal concerns. She acts based on her position as an artist, but not because of the mere fact that she is in the position to do so (i.e., acting *impersonally*), but rather it is action based on a *radical* confrontation with self. And without the distance of the impersonal, she sets the image of own body in front of herself, face to face.¹⁴ The internal confrontation becomes external in the activity of artistic representation.

Picasso also represented the people of his personal life as objects to portray, but like the artist, in the work Picasso they remain, personally anonymous. Anything which he, “the artist,” perceived with interest could become a subject-matter or theme for his exercises of objectification [Picasso, *Jacqueline with Crossed Hands*]. “To Pablo Picasso the ‘Eternal Female’ was the driving force behind artistic creation” (Doshka 1996).¹⁵ What is presented in Picasso’s work has been placed into “already coded representations” examined through the cubist speculation, expressing a limited interest in the dialogue concerning *form* irrespective of any real-world referent (Irigaray, *ATS*, 584).¹⁶ He distances himself as a reporter (“telling a story”) concerned with presenting what he imagines to be the case for the events at Guernica or for a woman with a dead child [Picasso, *Woman with a Dead Child*]. Even “Woman” as an idea provided a source of *pathos* for artistic *execution*: “. . . he is already faced with another specularization. Whose twisted character is her inability to

say what she represents" (Irigaray, *ATS*, 579). Without question, Picasso used the women in his life as material to generate images of Woman. On the other hand, directly through the artistic representation, Kahlo has to be already personally and experientially involved in those things depicted [see Kahlo's *Frida and the Abortion* or *The Abortion*], abandoning the possibility of losing herself to the anonymity of artistry. She refuses to hide behind the mask of "the artist."

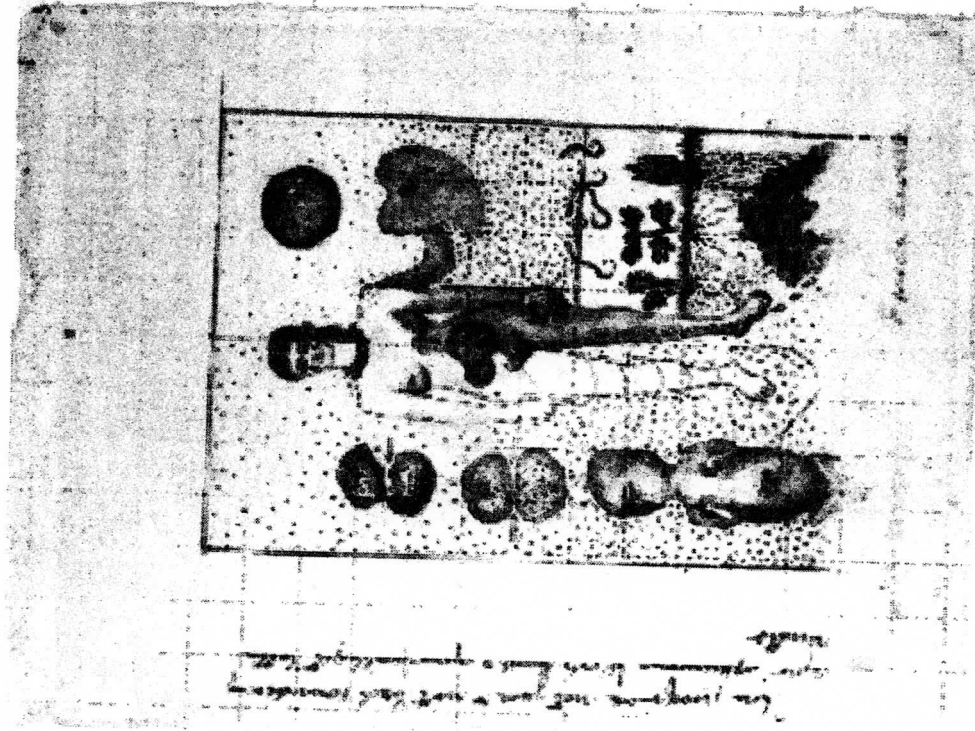


Figure 2. Frida and the Abortion. © 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Picasso used painting to *play* discursively with the "serious" matters of form, meaning and style. To this degree, his work accepts and can be understood as the function of the artist as Nietzsche intended: "And this system [of painting as discourse on the visual] is inaugurated through the loss of an origin that can never be objectified, but only represented" (Krauss, *INP*, 219).¹⁷ Yet, Picasso's concern "as an artist" was made to remain *impersonal* and made *comfortable* in the position of the artist, for he "simply" wanted to "put as much humanity as possible" into his paintings (Picasso, *PASU*, 110).¹⁸

Although Picasso problematizes modernist ideas of art, he carefully disregards much of the "personal" discourse (of self-recollection) in the making of art by projecting himself as an artist with intention outside and away from the existential relation to the subject at hand. He speculates and, through cubism, rises "to a perspective that would dominate the totality, to the vantage point of greatest power" (Irigaray, *ATS*, 579). Each "universalized" interpretation of the subject-matter by the artist remains intentionally anonymous and unlocalized while the production is made a credit to Picasso "the Artist."

Each new appropriation of style, making it into a personal mannerism, testifies to the individuality of the neo-avant-garde artist . . . a given style counts for nothing in itself; . . . only to the extent that it seems to become his private property to do so with as he pleases, functioning as a solipsistic source of identity—is it completely meaningful. . . . From a neo-avant-garde perspective, this is an imperial extension of personality, a kind of self-deification. (Kuspit, *PGA*, 24–25)¹⁹

The craft of the artist implies a superhuman sense of ownership, a power to construct *imperially*. Progress toward novelty in the representation of his subject-matter was personally significant to Picasso's identity as an artist. He feared doing something twice.²⁰ The intention of the craft to be used in a war against "the world" or "nature," and to "take no prisoners" implied that *original* artwork meant the same as art in a *new form*. Therefore the motivation to make art included the fear that (the existential) Picasso would copy himself and appear "inert" as an artist. "Ultimate avant-garde fame comes from being categorized as uncategorizable, that is, as utterly individual" (Kuspit, *AGA*, 36–37). The artist identifies himself as master of the Promethean.

On the other hand, what is played out in Kahlo's self-portraiture is in some ways the obvious and ironic deification of self through art,

putting her vantage as an artist into dialogue (creating and destroying the images and imaginings of herself). She set her self-image among symbols that were religious, although she considered herself an atheist. Any symbolic deification of her image in some of the portraiture is fundamentally set into *play* because it is an image that she will then also reduce to physical decay in other portraits. The unity and fragmentation of her identity shows that these are things desired but *always in question*. "Kahlo's preoccupation with *retablos* and related religious art forms represents a *retournement* of religious images, a detouring from the supernatural order to the natural order" (Cooley, *RAI*, 97).²¹ She placed herself symbolically among contexts of celebration and suffering, birth and death. Her personal conflicts demonstrated by conscious constructions of her self-perception became a primary subject-matter for her art.

Suspending an in-depth and careful analysis, it is important to note the obvious connection of Diego Rivera, Kahlo's husband, with Picasso and Cubism. There is evidence of Rivera holding Picasso in high opinion and of their meeting in the spring of 1914. Rivera's five-year period of cubist work also expressed concerns primarily for the formal and technical rather than for the subject-matter itself. "The results of Rivera's high-minded theoretization and pseudo-scientific experimentation were applied in the most static, abstract, and classicizing works of his Cubist period, such as his *Maternity*, the *Painter in Repose*, the *Poet* . . . and his last Cubist still lifes of 1917" (Favela, *DRCY*, 143). This stylistic change would later influence his "modernist-based Social Realist mural style" (Favela, *DRCY*, 145). To some degree, the critique of the masculine endeavor to "specularize and speculate" extends even to Rivera's fame as a muralist. While subject-matter is abstract and irrelevant to cubism, subject-matter takes on importance with the social and political themes in Rivera's murals. Yet, those political and social works express still the artist's concern for representing the external world, i.e., subject-matter exterior to the artist. The celebration and celebrity of Rivera "the artist" in Mexico overshadowed Kahlo's celebrity as an artist. Minimally, there is an important contrast between Rivera's ends and goals as an artist and Kahlo's use of art, a contrast similar to that illustrated in this study between Kahlo and Picasso. In the case of cubism, the goals and means of this kind of art demonstrated a certain kind of *ethos*. The fact that Rivera is considered "perhaps the greatest of Mexico's fabulous

muralists" is not inconsistent with the connection made here regarding Cubism, insofar as it has been a celebrated style of art precisely because of its novelty and power.

Traditional themes in socio-political art can represent abstract ideas and issues in an impersonal way, but with the on-set of feminist definitions of representation it became possible for the practice of personal "re-turn" also to have a political significance, i.e., *the personal is political*. The "on-going desire to integrate opposites suggests Kahlo's conflict over her own unintegrated self and her desire to resolve this conflict" (Grimberg, *FKSE*, 87). In other words, the significance now given to the interiority of the artist (the personal) is that it can be of concern for *everyone* (as political).

TRANSFORMING THE IDEA OF IDENTITY

With [artists] this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters. (Nietzsche, *GS*, §299)

In those exemplary cases when an artist asserts him/herself, the aesthetic phenomenon is constructed as a work of art. The decisive sense of "self" concretized in the act of making art is directed by the interest in re-presentation. Picasso had once said: "I put all the things like in my pictures. The things—so much the worse for them; they just have to put up with it" (Picasso, *PASU*, 34).

Insofar as Kahlo's work can be considered to be feminist and political, the questions concerning representation and the intention to enact meaning are already inherently valid for her work. "The perspective offered by feminism is in terms of this emphasis on the body, on the woman's body as a particular problem both as a vehicle for childbearing and as an object of beauty" (Mulvey & Wollen, *FKTM*, 148).²² Through her art, Kahlo seeks to investigate the "private" interior of self and the image of self rather than turning her art into an investigation of the external world. This task accomplished in representation illustrated by her work includes an *intention* as well as a *decision* that resonates yet *revises* the Nietzschean *ethos*. "The unproblematic claim to 'be' a woman and 'be' heterosexual would be symptomatic of that metaphysics of gender-substances" (Butler, *GT*, 21). Each self-portrait could be interpreted as a conscious act of "position-

taking" by the artist, and by her very being, even as it appears to her own self, is taken as a concern in the process of "becoming what she is," [Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair*]. In this way, following that the "personal is political," impressed by Kahlo's persistent self-portraiture, the "feminine sphere is stripped of reassurance" (Mulvey & Wollen, *FKTM*, 151-52).²³

It is also in Kahlo's exemplary case that the woman (as artist) is speaking for herself—not only to others who view her art but originally to herself. To quote Kahlo in 1938 regarding her first exhibition in the United States: "I don't know what they see in my work. . . . Why do they want me to have a show?"²⁴ With these multiple self-crafted images of herself, her own conception of identification is in play, intended to appear both desirable and undesirable. This is in striking contrast to traditional themes in which the subject-matter for art has been (and is) an external or imagined object of desire depicted in the abstract and the ideal. For Kahlo the themes depicted as desired and feared are desires and fears in relation to her personal self and in reference to an experiential *reality*. For example, the abstract concept of "motherhood" became a theme for Picasso's work (this is also the case in Rivera's experimentation with cubism). The cubist intention to choose this subject-matter in its *ideality* can be contrasted ethically, in terms of the practices of the artists respectively, with the very personal and lived difficulty of Kahlo's identity as a woman and as a woman who could not bear children. It is a difficulty worked out and addressed in the self-portraits.

As a life-long project of self-representation, Kahlo shows the masculine act of reproduction in its deception: revealed as an anti-progressive, *artificial* distance. By not limiting her dialogue in self-portraiture to a singular act of image-making, but as decisive practice, i.e., an *ethos*, Kahlo consciously lives out the futility of the masculine endeavor to construct the world.²⁵ "[The] system of [the masculine] relationship to self, the closure of his auto-representations. . . . Man's home has indeed become . . . his theoretical elaboration. . . . he becomes a prisoner of effects of symmetry that know no limit. Everywhere he runs into the walls of his palace of mirrors . . ." (Irigaray, *ATS*, 581). What is of ethical importance in Kahlo's work, and why I can contrast it with the work of Picasso, is that she chooses thematically to take on herself "in war," as an alternative to traditional symmetry of "theoretical elaboration" between self and world—as if there

were only "war" between herself (as the clearly identified "artist") and the world, justified by an impersonal or superior perspective (as objects for the artist's work). This "seemingly inert" turn toward herself by self-portraiture is chosen in order to construct a symmetry of representation in its plurality *without* pure *speculative artifice*. In her application for the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1940, Kahlo wrote: "For twelve years, my work consisted of eliminating everything that did not come from the internal lyrical motives that impelled me to paint. Since my subjects have always been my sensations, my states of mind and the profound reactions that life has been producing in me, I have frequently objectified all this in figures of myself which were the most sincere and real thing that I could do in order to express what I felt inside and outside of myself" (Lowe, *FK*, 64). She *re-produces* the illusion of the self—same through art instead of succumbing to the deceptive "fact" of it. Kahlo's repetition of painting self-portrayals does not conflict with but rather reinforces the fact that within each portrayal there is a newly *conceived* asymmetry of her sense of self with imagined self-in-relation-to-the-world.

Kahlo "intended allegory; critics and scholars who interpret her paintings in light of her diaries sometimes tend toward psychological reduction that denies or diminishes her politics" (Cooney, *BI*, 99). In an ordinary sense, one could evaluate that the seventy self-portraits made by Kahlo throughout her life were due to a pathological egocentrism or due to narcissism.²⁶ Implied in this kind of analysis is that subject-matter of self-portraiture is not as socially or politically *relevant* as the portrayal of the tragedy at Guernica by Picasso or the political murals of Rivera. This definition of relevance reduces the ethical value of a work of art to the political value of representing what is of the most "public" (and often of speculative and abstract) concern. This subject matter (an aesthetic-object) is painted for the external, for a space *accessible-for-everyone*, i.e., anyone who is to witness the work of art. Yet, it is the avant-garde/neo-avant-garde artist (who paints for this kind of relevance and who gains this kind of celebrity) that Donald Kuspit defines as narcissistic: "[f]or the neo-avant-garde artist . . . has an inherent right to fame simply by reason of being an artist, which is a transparently narcissistic assumption . . . a misconception ironically created in the first place by avant-garde art" (Kuspit, *AGA*, 27). With the birth of cubism, the practice of the artist became a dialogue aimed for the impersonal, for the abstract form

playing on emotion without reference. Kahlo was an artist in dialogue *for herself*, and only afterward, but not consequentially, her work could or may not be for others.²⁷ Ethically, in her practice of being an artist, she first chose the project of interiority and only subsequently her work could be viewed as being of a greater "relevance" insofar as the "personal is political." "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that *identity* is *performatively constituted* by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, *GT*, 25).²⁸ The activity of consistent self-portraiture under a traditional framework may be viewed as a self-involved, wholly identified project (an image of me, painted by my hand, for the view of myself) and at first glance, in comparison to Picasso, Kahlo's work may be of limited value *aesthetically* to others who identify with artistic representation through politics or experience. Upon closer examination, one can find a different form of *relevance* in the repeated decision of Kahlo to engage in the difficulty of selfhood through artistic reproduction. This artistic tool for interpreting lived personal experience demonstrates a rare and exemplary *ethos* of courage.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The intention of my analysis of Frida Kahlo's art is not to assess the art of self-portraiture as a practice; rather it is to assess the relevance of the position and attitude of a particular artist. Of course, not all artists *should* or *must* represent themselves in their art. Kahlo's work provides an example of an ethos that remains aesthetically grounded. With her life's work as an illustration of choice-making, Kahlo reveals a challenge to both art and ethics.²⁹ This practice of self-sacrifice (first going to "war" with ourselves in order to "become what we are") over and above self-assertion through art ("the system of the masculine . . . the closure of his auto-representations") has been the aim of this paper. The difficulties with which one must engage by choosing self-portraiture has been illustrated by Kahlo's self-imagining taken on in itself as an aesthetic phenomenon.³⁰ It is this aesthetic play or engagement with the perception of her own self-image as subject-matter that demonstrates a uniquely ethical disposition, and this has been opposed to the decision of escape to the easily accessible perception and distortion of external objects and people as material for artistic creation.

To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of naturalistic necessity . . . is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through the appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies. (Butler, *GT*, 33)

This unusual comportment of Kahlo as an artist has manifested an exemplary case of a life-long collection of works of art, and as such, cannot be ethically universalized. The decisions of this artist cannot be repeated, it is only the unique intentions identified in her choices as an artist that I have tried to assess and validate by way of comparison and interpretation.

LIST OF IMAGES AND CREDITS

Images

Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas*, 1939 (Kettenmann, *FKPP*, 53).

Frida Kahlo, *Frida and the Abortion* or *The Abortion*, 1932 (Kettenmann, *FKPP*, 36).

Image Reference List

Frida Kahlo, *Henry Ford Hospital* or *The Flying Bed*, 1932 (Kettenmann, *FKPP*, 37).

Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait "very ugly,"* 1933 (Kettenmann, *FKPP*, 26).

Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937 (Elgar & Maillard, *Picasso*, 128-29).

Pablo Picasso, *Jacqueline with Crossed Hands*, 1954 (Bernadac, *PMP*, 181).

Pablo Picasso, *Woman with Dead Child*, 1937 (Bernadac, *PMP*, 146).

Frida Kahlo, *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940 (Kettenmann, *FKPP*, 54).

NOTES

¹ This paper was presented at the *Philosophy, Interpretation, and Culture* Conference at Binghamton University, April 11, 2003. I would like to thank the other members of my panel, Michael Mirabile and Ed Young for their comments and discussion of my paper. I would also like to thank Christophe Menke, who provided guidance on this paper and originally noted the missing voice of Adorno in this analysis.

2 In Nietzsche's ironical style, which can be easily misread, the philosophical assertions he makes throughout his work become much more radical in light of his posthumous work, *The Will to Power*. The "ethical imperative" cited here can also be understood as another "command" from Nietzsche as a demonstration of a "will to power," especially considering he also strongly advocates, and this can be taken in the extreme sense, that one should experiment with all values. "We new philosophers, . . . not only do we start by describing the actual order of rank and differences in the value of men, we also desire precisely the opposite of an assimilation, an equalization: we teach estrangement in every sense, we open up gulfs such as have never existed before, we desire that man should become more evil than he has ever been before." (W/P, § 988).

3 "A morality of the ruling class . . . is . . . that one may act toward beings of a lower rank, towards all that is foreign, just as seems good to one, or 'as the heart desires' . . ." (Nietzsche, BGE).

4 "What is 'appearance' for me now? . . . Certainly not a dead mask that one could place on an unknown x or remove from it" (Nietzsche, GS, § 54).

5 Quoting Kahlo, "[T]hey thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality" (Kettenmann, FKPP, 48). Even in a painting called *What I Saw in the Water* or *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) Kahlo's image appears as a strangled figure in the lower central part of the painting and a portrait of her parents is to the right. She represents her toes rising out of the water as a reference to herself as author in relation to these highly symbolic images reflected in the water.

6 Golding quoting William Rubin in part [italics added]. Quoting Michel Leiris: "In most of Picasso's painting one can see that the subject is almost always completely down to earth (*terre à terre*) in any case never borrowed from the hazy world of the dream, nor immediately susceptible to being converted into a symbol . . ." (Leiris, AM, 50).

7 Picasso's early self-portraits (1901 and 1907) show direct reference to "his inner turmoil . . . his own suffering on display in a blue self-portrait." Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington also makes reference to one of the final self-portraits. "Picasso faced the terror that consumed him and he drew it. It was his last self-portrait . . . I made a drawing yesterday . . . I think I have touched on something there . . . It is not like anything ever done. . . . It was a face of frozen anguish and primordial horror next to the mask that he had worn for so long and that had fooled so many" (Huffington, PCD, 1988).

8 "Power was the only value set up by Nietzsche to take the place of transcendent values that had lost their meaning for modern man. And Picasso . . . found that Nietzsche's philosophy admirably suited his own needs and dreams of power" (Huffington, PCD, 1988).

9 "In objectifying his expression in the medium, the artist invests it with his primordial sense experience and sense of self, transforming it into a primordial substance . . . The medium . . . becomes the surrogate for—indeed the advocate of—the self" (Kuspit, PGA, 6).

10 Kuspit quoting Picasso: "in my case a picture is a sum of destructions . . . In the end nothing is lost . . . the first 'vision' remains almost intact, in spite of appearances."

11 "Even Kahlo's marginal position [in Surrealism], and the assertion of herself as subject against the utopian allegorical visions of her husband [Diego Rivera, found a voice within the discourse of 'Mexicanness' . . .] [italics mine] (Ades, OSM, 108-9). She also notes, "[a]lthough Kahlo was to reject the affiliation with Surrealism, . . . this does not lessen the value of her work for Surrealism."

12 Kettenmann quoting Kahlo. The self-portraiture was mainly produced during her divorce from Diego Rivera (Kettenmann, FKPP, 27).

13 Included in her description of this "recurrence of the re-turn upon the self," Irigaray states that "its special economy will need to be located" in order to assess this illusion of inertness.

14 "To the extent that the body as my own constitutes one of the components of mineness, the most radical confrontation must place face-to-face two perspectives of the body—the body as mine, and the body as one body among others" (Ricoeur, OA, 132). Here, his concern is about body, but I transfer this argument to the idea of selfhood. Obviously, for Kahlo a large part of her confrontation with self included the confrontation with "body as mine."

15 Doschka quoting Picasso: "I love or I hate. When I love a woman, everything is blown apart, especially my painting." I want to note here that this is a popular interpretation of Picasso within art history. Rosalind Krauss comments on these ideas in which, "The changes in Picasso's art . . . are a direct function of the turns and twists of the master's private life" (Krauss, INP, 210). This interpretation of art "as autobiographical" is one that Krauss criticizes in her article and emphasizes the call for analysis of form in art independent of allegory. Doschka continues, "[n]o other painter thought about the theme of 'painter and model' as much as he."

What is also interesting to note is the fact that although in the painter and model series the actual model he used can be identified (Jacqueline) the painted artist is "only rarely identified as Picasso" (Leiris, AM, 164-5).

16 Although Irigaray is discussing Freud and the implications of his analysis of women, and although his project was a scientific construction, the parallels between this critique and Picasso remain in the sense that the object of representation was something that interested/alluded them. The expression of this interest as a formal concern in each case is still masculine in their intention (employing Irigaray's definitions).

17 For Krauss, Picasso "established the indeterminacy of the referent" (Krauss, JNP, 220). Although this shows a definite reflection of the call for play in Nietzsche's artist, it is a restriction to formal concerns of space as visual play of presence and absence.

18 Picasso has also been called a painter of the "human" (Doschka, FRP, 55).

19 Included in this passage is an assessment of Picasso: "[The neo-avant-garde artist] may generalize a style in the course of applying it . . . the way Picasso, who was both avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, refined the cubism he invented in the course of 'cubifying' various themes" (Kuspit, AGA, 24-25).

20 "The biggest fear held by Picasso . . . was that [he] would copy [himself], in life and art. For that would mean . . . living off the fruits of [his] past" (Kuspit, AGA, 36-37).

21 This is a suggestion made by Emmanuel Pernoud of Kahlo's work, cited by Cooley. The author characterizes Kahlo's use of religious imagery as "parabolic" or, in other words, "operating like a parable." For Cooley, whose analysis is a "philosophical theology," the parabolic uses "religious imagery . . . [to] convey a sensibility attuned to the power of biblical parable to surprise and transvalue through the revelation of the extraordinary found in and through the common . . ." (Cooley, RDI, 4).

22 The analysis of Frida Kahlo presented in this article is in contrast to another artist, photographer Tina Modotti, whose concern is "public" regarding, "social problems" (Mulvey & Wollen, FKTM, 149). "The juxtaposition is designed to raise a series of ideas and arguments that are relevant to questions about women's art and feminist aesthetics" (*ibid.*, 146). One argument against the interpretation of Kahlo here as "obsessed with her own image" is the reduction of Kahlo's life-long project as "obsessive," as if it were without conscious decision. Mulvey and Wol-

len's interpretation of Kahlo and Modotti is often psychoanalytic and therefore reductionist.

23 "The haven of male fantasy is replaced by the experience of pain, including the pain associated with her physical inability to live out a feminine role in motherhood" (Mulvey & Wollen, FKTM, 151-52). Here again the analysis is still somewhat limited to a "psychological" reading of intention. But they do admit: "Frida Kahlo provides an extremely rare voice for [the interior] sphere which, almost by definition, lacks an adequate means of expression or a language" (*ibid.*, 154).

24 Kettenmann adds: ". . . Kahlo had never painted with a public in mind" (Kettenmann, FKPP, 45).

25 "From the term *ethos* (habit, custom) [Aristotle] passes to *hexis*, an acquired disposition, which is the basic anthropological notion upon which his ethics is built inasmuch as virtues are just such acquired dispositions, conforming to the right rule and under the control of the judgment of *phronimos*, of the prudent man [sic.]" (Ricoeur, OA, 121, fn. 6). I am borrowing from Ricoeur's discussion here to point out that my use of *ethos* includes an idea of judgment according to a rule as well as virtue. This is to emphasize the role of decision in Kahlo's on-going production of self-portraiture.

26 "In some respects [Kahlo's] painting was a form of therapy, a way of coping with pain . . . a triumphant reassertion of narcissism . . . she painted originally for herself" (Mulvey & Wollen, PKTM, 155). The contradiction presented here with my thesis is that Kahlo's work is one of decision, not compulsion, to paint for herself.

27 Again using Ricoeur's interpretation of Aristotle: "[i]n Aristotelian ethics, it can only be a question of the good for us. This relativity with respect to us does not prevent the fact that *the good is not contained in any particular thing* . . . The first great lesson we receive from Aristotle is to seek the fundamental basis for the aim of the 'good life' in praxis," (Ricoeur, OA, 172) italics added. Here the emphasis on Aristotle is made in order to contrast the celebration of the artist for particular works of art versus the celebration of the artist for habits practiced.

28 Butler interpreting Nietzsche in relation to her idea of gender.

29 The following does not mean to imply that some of her paintings were not political in intention. Many of her works included anti-Capitalist, Marxist, and specifically Mexican-nationalist themes. It is the repetition of self-portraiture that has been the focus of my thesis.

30 My own experience with self-portraiture proved to be one of the most difficult works to produce during my formal training in fine art. The challenge of representing myself in a portrayal included giving up a controlling control over my self-perception as well as the perception of myself in the eyes of others. Once a self-portrait is made, a double perspective of me as an artist and as a subject-matter has been made available (visually, symbolically) in a disconcerting, unordinary and to a large degree, a world-displacing way. The challenge of setting myself apart from myself through the activity of making art is one more difficult to engage in than engaging stylistically in a still-life, landscape or even portraiture of others. Thus to engage in the activity of self-portraiture regularly, decisively and as an *ethos* is a resolute disposition that few have the constitution to manifest.

REFERENCES

- Ades, Dawn. "Orbits of the Savage Moon: Surrealism and the Representation of the Female Subject in Mexico and Postwar Paris," [OSM] from *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation*. Ed. Whitney Chadwick. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1998.
- Bernadac, Marie-Laure. *Picasso Museum Paris: The Masterpieces*. [PMP] Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1991.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. [GT] New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Cooley, Paula M. *Religious Body and the Imagination: A Feminist Analysis*. [RB] New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Doszka, Roland. *L'eternal feminine: From Renoir to Picasso*. [FRP] Trans. Nicholas Levin. New York: Prestel, 1996.
- Elgar, Frank and Robert Maillard. *Picasso*. New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1972.
- Favela, Ramón. *Diego Rivera: The Cubist Years*. [DRCY] Arizona: Phoenix Art Museum, 1984.
- Golding, William. "Picasso and Surrealism" [PS] from *Picasso in Retrospect*. Eds. Sir Roland Penrose and John Golding. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973.
- Grimberg, Salomon. "Frida Kahlo: The Self as an End" [FKSE] from *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation*. Ed. Whitney Chadwick, Huffington, Arianna Stassinopoulos "Picasso: Creator and Destroyer." [PCD] *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 261, no. 6 (June) [www.tamu.edu/mol/picasso/biog/destroy.html].
- Irigaray, Luce. "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the 'Masculine,'" [ATS] (1985) from *Art and Its Significance*. (3rd Edition) Ed. Stephen David Ross. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994.

- Kettenmann, Andrea. *Frida Kahlo: Pain and Passion*. [FKPP] Köln, Germany: Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH, 1993.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. "That Individual" [TI] from *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (1859). Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1975.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "In the Name of Picasso," [NP] from *Art in Modern Culture*. Eds. Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris. London: Phaidon Press Limited.
- Kuspit, Donald. *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*. [CAGA] New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Leiris, Michel. "The Artist and his Model" [AM] from *Picasso in Retrospect*. Eds. Sir Roland Penrose and John Golding. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973.
- Lowe, Sarah M. *Frida Kahlo*. [FK] New York: Universe Publishing, 1991.
- Mulvey, Laura and Peter Wollen. "Frida Kahlo and Tina Modetti" [FKTM] from *Art in Modern Culture*. Eds. Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1992.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). [BT] From *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: The Modern Library, 1968.
- . *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). [BGE] From *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Trans. Helen Simmer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- . *The Gay Science* (1887). [GS] Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
- . *The Will to Power*. [WP] Ed. And Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1968.
- Picasso, Pablo. *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*. [PASU] Ed. Dore Ashton. New York: The Viking Press, 1972.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. [OA] Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Tibol, Raquel. *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life*. Trans. Elinor Randall. [FKOL] Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983.