

READINGS IN WORLD LITERATURE II: AUTOBIOGRAPHY/WRITING THE SELF
HUMANITIES 11100 / SECTION 1
WINTER 2019

Museum Assignment – *Smart to the Core: Embodying the Self*

In *Image-Music-Text*, Roland Barthes argues that meaning in images is conveyed and produced on at least three levels. The informational are those features that are most at the surface: “the setting, the costumes, the characters, their relations...this level is that of communication.” The symbolic level (signification, but also, “obvious meaning”) is more interpretive. We might think of this level as the one at which we can ask: what does the image mean? what are its themes? is it narrating any kind of story? does it seem to have a “message”? Etc.

Finally, Barthes posits a third level, which he terms the “obtuse meaning.” This is the hardest level to decipher, and it consists of those features that can’t easily be put into words. These might be aspects of the image that seem to sit at odds with the “obvious meaning” or that we have trouble reconciling with what we take that meaning to be.

As you explore this exhibit, keep Barthes’s argument in mind as you consider the various elements that compose these pieces, what we might say about their meaning, and any questions that arise for you as you work to interpret them.

Group Assignment

In your groups, spend some time perusing the exhibit and choose a piece that you’d like to consider more closely. Here are some questions to ask as you discuss and take notes:

1. What are the most striking elements of the piece (i.e., color, light, medium, subject matter, etc.)? And why are those elements particularly striking?
2. What do you find to be the most challenging elements of the piece to understand and/or interpret? Is there any information about the context or the artist that you would like to know more about in order to analyze the piece?
3. Who is the “self” that is present in this work? What are her/his/their characteristics?
4. Would you call this piece “autobiographical”? If so, why? If not, how might we understand how it relates to the theme of embodying the self?
5. Does the piece evoke any of the specific texts we’ve read this quarter? If so, how? Conversely, does the piece raise any themes that haven’t come up in our texts that give you another way of approaching the question of what it means to create autobiography or to narrate the self?

Spend about 30 minutes exploring the exhibit, choosing a piece, and answering these questions. In the final portion of class, we’ll have a discussion about the pieces you examined and your analyses of them.