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Vulnerability and Self-assertion
Frida Kahlo's Self-portrait "The Broken Column" (1944)
An Allegory of Fundamental Human Disposition

The theme of the famous painting from 1944 in 40 by 30 cm format is the inner and outer vulnerability, defencelessness and at the same time the potential for integrity, self-defence, self-exploration, self-portrayal.

We are looking at an anthropological parable of weakness and dignity, of misery and strength, of suffering and fortitude. Where others may *only* whine and grieve, the figure in the picture *also* demonstrates rigour and countenance. This work of art figuratively displays fragility and vitality of human existence. We are not looking at a medical-anatomical illustration for the purpose of physical treatment. We are looking at an artistically designed allegory that makes an existential testimony of character, a substantiation

- of the personal state of the painter herself, who can easily be recognized in self-portrayal,
- of the female state in particular,
- of the general human condition.

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The picture illustrates the human condition in the form of the feminine condition. This is done with aesthetic tact, with discretion. We witness not Frida Kahlo's self-exposure but a self-dramatization, an art of living in which she excelled.

She is crying. However, the white tears are not a sign of weepiness but fall like precious drops. The picture lacks all sentimentality, pity-seeking, self-torment. Of course, neither is it a flattering, sugar-coated, cosmetic self-display. We see the artist as a torn, oppressed, tortured creature. It is not the look in her eyes that has turned to stone, it is her spinal column that is petrified and cracked.

The picture allows both an exterior and an interior view; it thus discloses the entire existence. The interior and exterior are interlocked in a way that neither pretend a bodiless soul nor present a soulless body.

The picture's composition is clear and simple. In the foreground and in the middle – brought close to and facing the viewer – stands Frida Kahlo in semi-nude. Draped around her lower abdomen is a white cloth she holds with both hands. The three-quarter figure is cut open and raised before a bare, even barren fantasy landscape that passes over on the horizon to a narrow strip of sea. Frida's head juts into the sky of a blue that draws out the black of her eyes, her brows and her hair. Her majestic expression – full of pain, sadness and pride – challenges us to face her situation.

The desert behind her back corresponds to her devastated body. The vertical cut through her torso is repeated in the landscape's horizontal furrows. In the same way the split earth might remind us of earthquake faults, the exposed body makes us imagine the horrors of repeated surgical operations.

p. 3 There is no one to be seen who could deliver her from loneliness and suffering. With the many nails sticking in her body she does in fact seize a traditional motif in Christian art that is firmly established in the Passion of Christ and in the legend of Saint Sebastian. However, she does not portray herself as a religiously inspired martyr. The nails visualise “stabbing pain” and are paralleled in the arrows of the “wounded deer” which the artist portrayed herself as two years later. It is also possible that with the nails she is alluding to the sexual infidelity of her husband Diego Rivera, because in colloquial Spanish “nailed” also means “cheated”.

She does not turn her eyes toward heaven to beg for salvation. Her line of vision is directed straight ahead – beyond the picture, into nothingness... Her flowing hair and well-formed breasts – graphically shaped by the leather orthopaedic corset – as well as her painted fingernails point to a worldly-humanistic self-conception that is succinctly expressed in the title's column.

The broken column is the axis on which the picture's meaning and Frida's identity are centred. What is the significance of this clever aesthetic idea of replacing one's own spine of bone and cartilage, nerve fibres and blood vessels with a broken, grooved stone pillar? At the primary, directly autobiographical level it depicts the ever-present source of pain that draws her tears. Due to a horrible traffic accident she lost her natural mobility and is now turned to stone, transformed to a living fossil of herself. In addition, this petrification is multiply damaged, actually broken.

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Besides the mournful grief over the loss of health, the pillar of course conveys a second level of meaning that raises the picture to a key image of the fundamental human condition. Alongside the elegy is the pathos formula. The pillar reifies Frida Kahlo's human dignity, the pride of being a woman, a human. That is: Under culture-historical consideration, what is a column? A column is a supporting pillar for stately buildings, for temples, villas, treasuries, monuments. A column carries something valuable, not common; here it underpins Frida Kahlo's eccentric personality.

The broken column is a symbol of human dignity in its fragility. The picture departs from the illusion of an idyllic, perfect, invulnerable human existence. It makes the ever insecure, ever endangered, ever failure-prone aspect of our lives visible: that which is referred to in philosophical, abstract terms as contingency experience. There was no guardian angel watching over the traffic accident in Mexico City in 1925 in which not only the eighteen-year-old student Frida Kahlo was seriously injured. She alone succeeded in turning the ensuing injuries into great art. How did the other victims overcome their fate?

The pillar that Frida Kahlo planted in herself is a feature of the ancient Greek classics. The capital under her chin identifies it as an Ionian column. A woman who is proud of her Mexican heritage exposes not a bamboo or palm tree trunk as her spinal column, but an ancient Greek pillar! Hayden Herrera's comment that the column makes a phallic impression is misleading. The pillar is an emphatic acknowledgement of Europeanism and thus of a cosmopolitan attitude. Here the iconic idea culminates in universality.

Frida Kahlo's broken column is held together by an orthopaedic corset of white leather and buckles. It helps and supports, it embodies freedom and imprisonment.

Frida Kahlo's picture "The broken column" is a grandiose self-dramatization. It establishes distance through alienation and thus makes the sight of the intolerable tolerable. The picture is a disturbing cipher of affliction and refuge. As a masterpiece of fantastic realism it exposes fundamentals of our own existence. Even after repeated viewings, one never tires of beholding this worldly icon.