

# Fiction Re-constructed

Marina Gržinić Mauhler

»E xperience may also be reconstructed, re-remembered, re-articulated. One powerful means of doing so is the reading and re-reading of fiction in such a way as to create the effect of having access to another's life and consciousness, whether that other is an individual or a collective person within the lifetime called history.«<sup>1</sup>

As Fredric Jameson suggests, »the truth of experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place, but is spreadeagled across the world's spaces;(...) a situation arises in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive mode of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience.«<sup>2</sup>

Since January 1993 on the ground floor of Apartment No. 12 in the eastern part of New York's Soho the exhibition Salon de Fleurus has been open for viewing.<sup>3</sup> Salon de Fleurus is a staged and repeated presentation of one of the most significant collections of modern art from the turn of this century which was created by the American authoress and literary critic Gertrude Stein, a Jewess of German descent, with the help of her brother Leo Stein in their Paris apartment at 27 Rue de Fleurus.

We can only relate and describe the actual appearance of the New York Salon because the artist or artists who wish to remain anonymous do not permit photographs to be taken upon the premises<sup>4</sup>. Salon de Fleurus is to be found in a private apartment in New York with two rooms connected by an oval atrium. The apartment is furnished with antique furniture and paintings. Carpets cover

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<sup>1</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, Free Association Books, London 1991, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, »Cognitive mapping«, in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg), Urbana III, 1988, p. 349.

<sup>3</sup> Salon de Fleurus is exhibited at 41, Spring street, Apt. 1 AR, 10012 New York.

<sup>4</sup> As (exclusive) information we are publishing reproductions of the pictures which are exhibited in the Salon and some extracts of the conversation with the anonymous artists.

the floors and old, decorative curtains hang on the windows. The paintings are discreetly lit by table-lamps and candles. The music that pervades the dwelling is French popular music from the twenties and thirties played on an old radio, also of the period.

All the paintings exhibited in the Salon are made on a wooden base with ochre hues and emphasized stylistically with extraordinarily controversial frames. Thematically they refer to paintings from the collection of Leo and Gertrude Stein, chiefly from the period 1905-13, and to the collection itself as a complex artefact and integrally pulsating system. That is why the paintings in the Salon, as emphasized by the artists, can be placed in two categories: painting reproductions from the collection (Picasso, Matisse, Cézanne, etc.) and paintings depicting the collection originating from black and white photographs.

We are witness here to an exact painted facsimile of a particular era which has a lot to do with life, history, fiction and art. We also see the exaggerated iconic duality which borders on »kitsch«, while the cubist paintings are transposed to our present time in the manner of Russian icons. Their painting technique is clearly amateur with the emphasized disharmony of the »Rococo« frames. But rather than label this (as an) attempt to copy original paintings as producing »fakes« using photographic records of the period and reproductions of the originals, we can talk here about the attempt to rearrange and reinterpret the system of art from the turn of this century – a system which influenced the modernist world as such. Certainly, Picassos, Cézannes and Matisses are exhibited before us, but rather than being concerned with an individual item we are concerned here about a system, not in the sense of a specific reconstruction of space or an installation, but a reconstruction of a system of thinking – one which exactly eighty to ninety years ago elaborated the institution of modern art as we know it today. Therefore, in the New York Salon we can not only purchase paintings, but also furniture or even all the items in both rooms. »Every painting sold is substituted with a copy of the same one or with another from the same period. Thus the Salon continuously regenerates and transforms itself at the same time.«

The paintings in the Salon can be compared to pre-Renaissance icons which instead of mythologizing the antique or Christian – Jewish world now do so with a crucial pre-modern period. Kim Levine discussed Salon de Fleurus in an article – »When systems collapse, freak events such as these rise up through the cracks« and as she states, »this is more than purely a simulation – it involves a magical realism«. <sup>5</sup> Spaces of very different worlds seem to collapse

<sup>5</sup> Kim Levin, review of the Salon de Fleurus, *Village Voice*, January 19, 1993.

here upon each other, much as the world's commodities are assembled in the supermarket and all manner of sub-cultures get juxtaposed in the contemporary city.

We can interpret the project in two ways. Firstly, making reference to the concept of David Harvey's time-space compression<sup>6</sup>, a term used to signal processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves. We have been experiencing, these two last decades, an intense phase of time-space compression that has had a disorienting and



»From the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*« 27 Rue de Fleurus, Paris (1907)  
(From the collection of David C. Anderson)

<sup>6</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, Ma 1989, p. 240.

disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life.<sup>7</sup>

The time-space compression is the exact term to compress the time-space condition of the today »virtual« Gertrude Stein, taken to traverse space and time of approximately 90 years.

The greater the ephemerality, the deeper the questions of meaning and interpretation that arise. Photographs, particular objects (a clock, a chair), and events (the playing of a piece of music) become the focus of contemplative memory, and hence a generator of a sense of self that lies outside the sensory overload of consumerist culture and fashion. »The apartment is furnished with antique furniture and paintings. Carpets cover the floors and old, decorative curtains hang on the windows. The paintings are discreetly lit by table-lamps and candles. The music that inundates the dwelling is French pop from the twenties and thirties broadcast from an old radio, also from that period.«

And there is also the question of the exhibition in a private apartment. Whereas modernism looked upon the spaces as 'an epiphenomenon of social functions', postmodernism 'tends to disengage urban space from its dependence on functions, and to see it as an autonomous formal system' incorporating 'rhetorical and artistic strategies, which are independent of any simple historical determinism'.<sup>8</sup> It is appropriate that the postmodernist developer should be indebted to, at least on the outside, »more in the spirit of fiction than of function.«<sup>9</sup> For his part Jameson views the »spatial peculiarities of post-modernism as symptoms and expressions of a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capitalism itself.«<sup>10</sup> As Harvey has pointed out: »Home becomes a private museum to guard against the ravages of time-space compression. From this standpoint we have to accept the argument that postmodern fiction is mimetic of something, much as that the emphasis upon ephemerality, collage, fragmentation, and dispersal in philosophical and social thought mimics the conditions of flexible accumulation. But it is exactly at this point that we encounter the opposite reaction that can best be summed up as the search for personal or collective identity. Place-identity that implodes in upon us, because everyone occupies a space of individuation (a body, a room, a home).«<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, op. cit., p. 284.

<sup>8</sup> A. Colquhoun, 'On modern and post-modern space', cit. in: Harvey, op. cit., p. 304.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey, op. cit., p. 286.

<sup>10</sup> Jameson, »Cognitive mapping«, p. 351.

<sup>11</sup> Harvey, op. cit., p. 302.

The fact that paintings are made from photographs and not vice versa (at the time when computer processing makes it possible to produce even more perfect photographic simulations) corresponds to Stein's maxim: »Painting is still worth something; photography isn't.« The paintings in the Salon present themselves as a successful mimicry of a certain state of mind; an imitation that is even more controversial here because until recently the birth of modern art had so explicitly referred to scientific analysis whilst here it was completely mythologized. At least we can ask ourselves what was that period like or who was Gertrude Stein? Nevertheless, there is no sense in recapitulating the biography of Gertrude Stein given the fact that in the world till now there have been numerous more or less salacious details of Gertrude's life story already published. One fact of even more significance (as confirmed by the Salon de Fleurus) is that Stein did not only create one of the best collections of modern art and materially and spiritually directly supported the whole pleiad of avant-garde artists, but she established a format for the specific reading and comprehension of the history of modern art. She actually presented this history as a legend with her as heroine and legend at the same time.<sup>12</sup> The book by

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<sup>12</sup> Images of her with her hair cut short, her thunderous laughter, her collection of paintings and Ford's automobiles (precisely in that order) have built up the legend of Gertrude Stein. She had such a strong personality that, for example, in 1937, while the reputation of her picture collecting was only a memory of the golden days (although her popularity as a writer was becoming increasingly strong) she sat on the commission/jury of one of the global exhibitions of modern art. The legend about her collecting lived on even when her collection was split in two, and also when she had to sell it (»eat Cézanne«, as she wrote in one of her many autobiographies and pieces of prose) in order to survive the Second World War, i.e. sell it so she could buy food together with her female friend and life-long companion Alice Toklas. But despite the many myths about her life, certain facts hold true: in 1903 after her arrival in France from the USA, she moved to her brother's apartment in Paris at 27 Rue de Fleurus (where despite travelling around Europe and America she remained until her death). Her move to Paris preceded her intensive friendship with her brother Leo and a lesbian experience with May Bookstaver in the USA. Subsequently, in 1907, she met Alice B. Toklas who became her lifelong companion, first working as a typist, then everything else: cook, gardener, etc. Above all Alice was someone who made Gertrude's life comfortable – as she herself stated to journalists upon her triumphant arrival in the USA in the middle of the thirties on the question of who is Alice B. Toklas.

As distinct from her position as a notable modernist writer who was only in her development phase in the twenties, her reputation as a collector of works of art was established, although it was entirely based on purchases which were made during the period 1905-13. As a designer of the Museum of Modern Art in a private apartment and one of the last adherents of Cubism in the twenties Gertrude Stein was indeed a patron of the arts and a pioneering, visionary woman. In 1905 she acquired the painting *Femme au Chapeau* by Henri Matisse which essentially defined Fauvism. As can be determined from the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the decision to purchase this item which was made by Leo, was in fact made by Gertrude. She didn't only acquire, but also posed for the key Cubist portrait, made by Pablo Picasso in 1906.

Gertrude Stein entitled *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* published in 1933 definitively established Gertrude Stein as a literary star, and is paradigmatic for her work and life as well as for the paintings from the Salon de Fleurus. (After all, isn't the initial slogan in the title of each painting »From the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas«?). In that book which she began to write with the encouragement of a publisher in the autumn of 1932, Stein presents her life together with Alice Toklas with whom she lived for almost 25 years, or vice versa; primarily she reveals the history of modern art through deliberation, conversation and sometimes infantile observations of Alice B. Toklas. The *Autobiography* describes the heroic times of cubism, the life of the lost



»From the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas« 27 Rue de Fleurus, Paris (1913)

generation (Hemingway and the rest) as Gertrude Stein termed them, and the beginning of modern art through anecdotes and aphorisms with an abundance of details that transposed history to a mythological narrative. By imitating the style of Alice B. Toklas, Stein builds a mythological presentation of her own self and a narrative style worthy of the pulp fiction of the 1890s. Stein discussed the history of modern art in terms as these, as she remarks towards the end of her *Autobiography* in the same way Defoe wrote the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. This literary game which Stein reveals to the reader in the last paragraph of the book could be the consequence of Stein's love for detective novels and also for superb, subtle mimicry. Incidentally, the responses to *Autobiography* were quite predictable; Hemingway »thanked« her for her recollections with the following verse: »A Bitch is a Bitch is a Bitch is a Bitch«.

At the very moment in which postmodernism proclaims the 'death of the author' and the rise of anti-auratic art in the public realm, the art market becomes ever more conscious of the monopoly power of the artist's signature and of the questions of authenticity and forgery.<sup>13</sup>

What do we obtain by abolishing differences between the past and the future, when everything suddenly becomes the present and time attempts to halt itself within a closed narrative form? The »constant present« which according to Gertrude Stein is the result of the process of copying and at the same time the *raison d'être* of the entire Salon exhibition, is a method of keeping an object or standpoint outside of time in order to discover its reality.

Here we can develop a second approach that goes in two directions, one concerning reality/factuality/virtuality and the second past/present/future. But aren't they interconnected?

In the face of the type of representational dilemma the Salon de Fleurus embodies, the philosophical questions of plausibility and implausibility override those concerning the true and the false. The shift of interest from the thing to its image, and especially from space to time, leads to a shift from the old black-and-white, real-figurative dichotomy to the more relative actual-virtual.<sup>14</sup> »In two hundred years the philosophical and scientific debate itself has

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<sup>13</sup> According to Rosalind Krauss, »the copy« poses a challenge to history. Instead of extraordinarity, uniformity, or the entity of one, »the copy« offers a spectrum of multiplicity, threatening to undermine uniformity itself. In post-structuralist terminology repetition replaces that 'always already present' moment of wish production, but only if that wish reproduces somebody else's wish. Cf. Rosalind Krauss, »Originality as Repetition: Introduction«, *October*, No. 37, 1986, pp. 35-41.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, London, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1994, p. 70.

thus shifted from the question of the objectivity of mental images to the question of their reality. The problem, therefore, no longer has much to do with the mental images of consciousness alone. It is now essentially concerned with the instrumental virtual images of science and their paradoxical facticity.«<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, this is one of the most crucial aspects of the development of the new technologies of digital imagery and of synthetic vision offered by electron optics: the relative fusion/confusion of the factual (or operational, if you prefer) and the virtual;<sup>16</sup>

The age of the formal logic of the image was the age of painting, engraving, etching and architecture; it ended with the eighteenth century. The age of dialectical logic is the age of photography and film or, if you like, the frame of the nineteenth century and of the actuality of the dialectical logic governing photographic and cinematic representation.<sup>17</sup> The age of paradoxical logic begins with the invention of video recording, holography and computer graphics ... as though, at the close of the twentieth century, the end of modernity were itself marked by the end of a logic of public representation.<sup>18</sup> With paradoxical logic, what gets decisively resolved is the reality of the object's real-time presence. In the previous age of dialectical logic, it was only the delayed-time presence, the presence of the past, that lastingly impressed plate and film. The paradoxical image thus acquires a status something akin to surprise, or more precisely, of an »accidental transfer«.<sup>19</sup>

We are discussing the Salon here and now, thanks to several, projects in the eighties which took place in Ljubljana known to the public only from exhibition titles and supposedly autographed by famous, but already deceased painters:«The International Exhibition of Modern Art – Armory Show«, »The Last Futurist Exhibition«. The lecture purportedly given by Walter Benjamin in 1986 entitled »Mondrian '63 – '96«.<sup>20</sup> These projects elaborated the so-called tactical position of the artist who conceals his own identity and the strategies not only of post-modern art but of the post-socialist condition of art. With Virilio we can say that »paradoxical logic emerges when the real-time image dominates the thing represented, real time subsequently prevailing over

<sup>15</sup> Virilio, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-mouvement*, Minuit, Paris 1983, and Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-temps*, Minuit, Paris 1985.

<sup>18</sup> Virilio, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>19</sup> Virilio, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> The lecture was in Cankarjev dom in Ljubljana. It was a lecture by a German philosopher, dead for almost a half of century, whereas Piet Mondrian, a Dutch painter and innovator of abstract art, had died four years after Benjamin in 1944. Cf. Aleš Erjavec, Marina Gržinić, *Ljubljana, Ljubljana*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana 1991, pp. 130 – 131.

real space, virtuality dominating actuality and turning the very concept of reality on its head.«<sup>21</sup>

The »Last Futurist Exhibition«, for example, publicly presented in Ljubljana in March 1986, signed by Kasimir Malevich himself, was a reconstruction of the exhibition of the same name, originally put together by the great Russian Suprematist in St. Petersburg in the winter 1915-16. In a letter published in September 1986 in *Art in America*, the same Malevich (with the postscript Belgrade, Yugoslavia) stated: »...I could not even dream that the photograph of that installation would become so famous. I have the feeling that the photograph of the »Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10 (zero-ten)« in St. Petersburg



»From the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas« 27 Rue de Fleurus, Paris (1905)

<sup>21</sup> Virilio, op. cit., p. 63.

in 1915-16 has become even more important than my Suprematist paintings. Therefore for years I have cherished the idea of remaking the exhibition!«. The project elaborates the so-called tactical position of the artist who conceals his own identity, putting into question some fundamental arguments concerning modernism. With the virtualities of the paradoxical logic which appertain to the videogram, hologram or digital imagery, these art projects are in fact questioning the comfortableness with the reality of the formal logic of traditional pictorial representation.<sup>22</sup>

The time which we are attempting to clarify at the Salon de Fleurus is circular, not linear, i.e. with a beginning, middle and end. It is similar to cubism which interpreted time as being synchronized and combined the past and future in the present. By abolishing the differences between the past and future everything becomes the present; the myth is therefore not transferred from generation to generation. Gone, more importantly, is any sustained sense of the autonomy, in space and time, of gross and visible individual human actions. And if »actions« are now invisible, then our fates are likewise beyond our grasp. We no longer feel that we penetrate the future; futures penetrate us.<sup>23</sup> By constantly returning to the beginning we halt the possibility of reaching the end. Salon de Fleurus is not a part of the world where we have become what we are. It probably proclaims or represents a part of another world which may not be seen as yet, but which the Salon lets us feel. We are witness to »the decisive end of the present period of art, when an old system (which could be a new one under altered circumstances) is returning to art. (...) The three tenses of decisive action, past, present and future, have been surreptitiously replaced by two tenses, real time and delayed time, the future having meanwhile disappeared via computer programming, and on the other hand, in the corruption of this so-called 'real' time which simultaneously contains both a part of the present and a part of the immediate future«. <sup>24</sup>

Within the metaphors and fictions of postmodern discourse, much is at stake, as electronic technology seems to rise, unbidden, to pose a set of crucial ontological questions regarding the status and power of the human being. It has fallen to science fiction to repeatedly narrate a new subject that can somehow directly interface with – and master the cybernetic technologies of the Information Age, an era in which, as Jean Baudrillard observed, the subject has become a »terminal of multiple networks«. <sup>25</sup> Maybe what we have here is

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. John Clute, »Introduction«, *Interzone: The Second Anthology* (ed. John Clute), St. Martin's Press, New York 1987, pp. VII-X.

<sup>24</sup> Virilio, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, »The Ecstasy of Communication«, in: *The Anti-Aesthetic* (ed. Hal Foster), Bay Press, Port Townsend (Washington) 1983, p. 128.

a kind of new subjectivity which we can name »terminal identity«.<sup>26</sup> As Peter Weibel stated: »When Descartes defines us as *res cogitans*, we can show that parts of thinking activity can be performed by machines; it does not mean that these machines are subjects. We are only saying that we have formulated our ideas of the subject wrongly. Mathematics, calculating as a part of thinking, has nothing to do with the foundation of the subject. The subject is found in something else. This is not the disappearance of the subject as we find it in a post-structural theory, it is a disappearance of the historical definition of the subject. So, our historical ideas of how we construct the subject are clearly vanishing by the advent of these new machines and projects as autonomous agents. We have called them autonomous agents because we have to redefine ourselves. (...) So instead of Descartes, who defined the subject as a *res cogitans* that signifies something limited, *my idea of the subject is anything, anywhere, anytime*. This is a basic universal desire. The subject is trying to become a fatal attractor, this is what the subject really wants to bend, to distract the environment, according to his will.«<sup>27</sup>

Finally we can perhaps suggest that the Salon de Fleurus project may be re-read as or pointed out as a daemon, as something that is disturbing the linearity of history, of art, of science. The most known examples are Maxwell's daemon<sup>28</sup>, Gödel's trickster<sup>29</sup>, or Haraway's coyote<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity. The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 1993, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Marina Gržinić, »Multiple zones of individuality and variable zones of visibility«, interview with Peter Weibel, to be published in: *Mars*, Ljubljana, December 1994/January 1995.

<sup>28</sup> »Maxwell was a famous scientist who discovered electromagnetic waves. But only theoretically, he could not prove it. It was proven by Heinrich Hertz 20 years later. But Maxwell put forward a theory saying that in the world there must be something called electromagnetic waves. There is a famous second law of thermodynamics which states that in each system energy must be constant. But Maxwell said: imagine two spaces. Between the two spaces you have a door with a little slit. One space of gas is very hot, and the other is very cold. According to the law of thermodynamics, when such a door is opened both spaces will be of equal temperature. But Maxwell could mathematically prove that the hot space would become hotter and the cold space would become colder. So this was a riddle, a paradox, Maxwell's daemon. (...) But then along came Zurek, a scientist, who wrote an article in 1984, 'Maxwell's daemon, Szilard's engine and Quantum measurement'. He solved the paradox in such a way that it could even obey the second law of thermodynamics. He said: This daemon is doing work. Somebody is doing work. Even when he just counts molecules, this also uses energy, this also uses information. So when something is becoming hotter and something is becoming colder, we can exactly measure this difference of energy, and we can say this is an amount of information, that is energy which the daemon uses for himself. So we could explain it even within the second law of thermodynamics. He calls this daemon 'Quantum Daemon'.« Peter Weibel, »Ways of Contextualisation«, *Place, Position, Presentation, Public*, (ed. Ine Gevers), De Balie, Amsterdam 1991–1992, pp. 232–3.

<sup>29</sup> »Gödel came up with a famous thesis which showed us the incompleteness of arithmetic. He

As Weibel stated, projects such as »Malevich« (»Last Futurist Exhibition« in 1986) or as the Salon de Fleurus are in this very moment in art, science, and history, functioning like a daemon. »People who work on endophysics are people who are inventing a new kind of a daemon. Also I tried to support somebody like Malevich<sup>31</sup> because he is a such a daemon in the art world today. I also try to find scientists and artists who can act as daemons and promoters of parallel worlds and viruses in science and the art world. I think they really exist, therefore I am the camera trying to synchronize my motions with the motions of the daemon. What is really interesting about this topic – following Jeremy Bentham's panopticum – is the idea that everything is transparent, everything is visible. Postmodernist art at its best, which already started with surrealism, shows us that you have variable zones of visibility. In postmodern societies many things are not transparent, the 'social unconscious' of Fredric Jameson shows this clearly. All those transparent glass buildings that try to provide you with the illusion of total transparency, are a panic reaction in relation to the social unconscious, to the fact that we have zones of visibility and zones of invisibility. That means that the panopticum envisaged by Bentham, where all is visible, and everything is transparent, no longer holds true. At the same time that you now have variable zones of visibility you also have variable zones of identity. We have multiple zones of individuality and we have variable zones of visibility.«<sup>32</sup>

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showed us that each arithmetic sentence produced a sentence which cannot be proved, so the sentence is indecisive, you will never know if it is true or not within the system. This was already an attack, a postmodern attack against modernism, because mathematics was the highest modernist project ever, it tried to show that everything real was verifiable and that for every thing a rule can be constructed.« Weibel, op. cit., p. 230.

<sup>30</sup> »Perhaps the world resists being reduced to mere resource because it is – not mother/matter/mutter – but coyote, a figure for the always problematic, always potent tie of meaning and bodies.« Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, p. 201.

<sup>31</sup> Weibel is referring here to the project of reconstruction of the »The Last Futurist Exhibition« which took place in Belgrade and Ljubljana in 1985/1986 and was signed by Kasimir Malevich.

<sup>32</sup> Marina Gržinić, »Multiple zones of individuality and variable zones of visibility«.