

**Article's Title:** From the Borders to Center Stage: Photographic Self-portraiture  
**Author name and institutional affiliation:** Elisavet Kalpaxi, The University of Northampton

**Abstract:**

This article focuses on photographic self-portraiture and, in particular, it investigates what happens when the genre's proximity to conceptual borders is crossed (between the center and the margins, self and other, normal and deviant behaviour, consciousness and unconsciousness) are challenged. Drawing on psychoanalytic and semiotic theories, and the history of the genre, this article investigates the negativity ascribed to self-portraiture, its association with identity politics and social media, and problems of reference arising in contemporary work.

The objectification of one's body image is inherently linked to narcissism. This idea is useful for understanding the meaning of the photo-album/photo-diary, the therapeutic aspects of self-portraiture, and the rhetoric applied to images produced to bring visibility to marginalized and underrepresented groups, which also serve to challenge the art establishment. However, the prioritization of art as a context for photography, the popularity of the genre, and the changing ideas related to definitions of 'the center', demand a re-definition of representations of selfhoods.

**Contributor notes:** Elisavet Kalpaxi (Ph.D.) is an artist, researcher and lecturer specializing in Photography in Art. She is currently an associate lecturer at the University of Northampton. She has presented her work at numerous exhibitions and conferences internationally. Her Ph.D. thesis was on 'Narcissism and Narrativity in Photographic Self-portraiture' (Goldsmiths, University of London Department of Art, 2012).

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## From the Borders to Center Stage: Photographic Self-portraiture

Elisavet Kalpaxi

The University of Northampton

### Introduction

This article concerns photographic self-portraiture and its main argument is that there is increasing dissociation between what and how photographic self-portraiture communicates in art. This article will explore the genre's referential relationship to psychological, social, and artistic margins.

Self-portraiture has been an enduring means through which individuals and groups seek to assert themselves and gain visibility within and outside art. This is evident not only in artistic works that tackle issues of identity, such as class, gender and race<sup>1</sup>, but also by the genre's frequent presence in participatory photography<sup>2</sup>, in phototherapy<sup>3</sup>, and in social media. Within this vast variety of cultural expressions, photographic self-portraiture has provided a language for individuals or groups to affirm their identity, reflect upon their condition, and position as the center, or even to criticize the center. In art, this is often metaphorically perceived as institutional critique or liberalism, which offers an additional level of interpretation or value to the work.

Of course there are differences between what each strand of practice represents in the context of art as we have different legacies and visual vocabularies, and there is a latent difference between works that were made specifically as art and works that are shown or circulated in art institutions without that original intention or context in mind. But the basis upon which self-portraiture artists operate and exercise their critique of culture and society is the idea of the practice's, and the artists', proximity to the borders between different conceptual areas: center and margins, self and other, normal and deviant, as well as conscious and unconscious medial forms of self-expression. Two key terms that link all these conceptual areas together are: projection and 'narcissism', in both its psychoanalytic and general cultural sense.

This article questions photographic self-portraiture's current effectiveness. Contemporary photographic self-portraits are characterized by self-presentation, without having to justify their referential relationship to narcissism. This article challenges the artist's apparent withdrawal from a) the prohibitions of conscience; b) the dominant language of art through the (until recently) marginalized medium of photography; and c) dominant narrative structures. Photographic self-portraiture's resistance to cultural and social regulative forces does not respond either to the fact that it is a popular and established genre in art, or to the current cultural climate. Contemporary trends call for a redefinition of the genre's role and symbolic value for

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<sup>1</sup> By artists such as Claude Cahun, Lyle Aston Harris, Laura Aguilar, Robert Mapplethorpe, Catherine Opie, Tracey Rose, and Shigeyuki Kihara amongst many others.

<sup>2</sup> Participatory photography aims at helping (mainly under-represented) individuals and social groups to reflect upon their experiences and conditions of living. See, for example, the examples contained in projects such as 'Through Positive Eyes', instigated in 2008 (<http://throughpositiveeyes.org/participants>), or 'Life through the Lens', 2011 (<http://www.bastiram.org/life-through-the-lens-a-participatory-photography-project>).

<sup>3</sup> See the vast amount of examples in Del Lowenthal's book *Phototherapy and Therapeutic Photography in a Digital Age* (2013).

the recovery of the genre's sincerity in a changing cultural landscape. Before arriving at the core of this argument, it is essential to explain the relationship between photographic self-portraiture and narcissism.

### **Self-portraiture and Narcissism**

The associations between self-portraiture and self-idealisation and/or self-interrogation are deeply rooted in Western sensibility, starting from the myth of Narcissus, to the dual function of the mirror across the ages (as related to vanity or prudence), and, in James Sloan Allen's terms, the preoccupations of self-portraiture and other self-conscious cultural expressions with 'the subjective sufferings of a wounded ego' (1979, p. 620). As a genre that thematizes the very artist, self-portraiture is loaded with connotations and moral implications related to narcissism.

The most common and historically persistent interpretations refer to the possible reasons for an artist's prolonged self-encounter: it is often assumed that the artist is alienated; that the image is for the artist's own use or benefit – in other words, that it is not socially useful. The implications of the artist's intrusion in the work are transferred in stories as old as the golden age in Ancient Greece. Phidias (5th century BC), who is seen to be the most charismatic sculptor of that period and who was responsible for the sculptures of the Parthenon, was imprisoned for including a portrait of himself in the decorations of *Athena's* sculpture, a forty-foot, central piece made of gold and ivory. The artist's crime was to place his representation alongside the goddess' and his punishment is the result of his inability to empathize with or respect the culture's ideals.

It is within this framework that issues of self-serving idealization (as often happens in interpretations of Albrecht Dürer's paintings e.g., in Koerner, 1997), asocial introversion (assumed in Edvard Munch's work), or immaturity (in reference to Egon Schiele's production, e.g., in Knafo, 1991) also emerge, suggesting that, even though the work is still appreciated for its treatment of the subject, the choice of self-portraiture betrays psychological imbalance. Considering that self-portraits are usually no different visually from other representations, and that the information that an image is a self-portrait is usually provided in the title, or description, of the work, it is clear that these associations do not derive from the image, but from viewers' knowledge and preconceptions with the genre or the artist.

These ideas found support in Sigmund Freud's analysis of narcissism. In his classic essay 'On Narcissism: an Introduction' (1914), the fascination with body doubles derives from Primary Narcissism, a stage in infancy characterized by absolute investment in the ego. This fascination presumably fades away with the formation of the subject's conscience (embodying the criticism previously received from parents and society) and the ego-ideal (representing the common ideals of society by which the ego is constantly measured). Both mechanisms regulate narcissism and enforce investments in objects other than the subject's ego. To a certain degree narcissism is retained in adult life, and it is crucial for a subject's constancy. Further, it can emerge as positive and productive if presented as therapeutic in semi-conscious states that are experienced privately, where the restrictions of conscience are limited (as happens in sleep or organic disease). But when narcissism, or investment in the self, persists to an extensive degree, it is mainly considered counterproductive. This is because it implies self-centering, as opposed to

displaying social feelings. This interpretation of narcissism provides similarities to the Narcissistic Personality Disorder<sup>4</sup> and informs the term's general cultural sense, as possessing excessive pride, arrogance and/or egotism.

The associations of self-portraiture with self-idealization and narcissism persists even in representations that subvert the genre in order to communicate a set of ideas, or to underline the positive, productive outcome of the dissociation process. This argument has prevailed within feminist discourse. For example, Amelia Jones, in the late nineties, pointed out the possibility of narcissistic expressions being a radical tool for the negotiation of social dynamics:

[F]eminist body artists have tended to explore the gendering of (artistic) subjectivity by enacting their bodies/selves in a way that opens out the self-ascribed "plenitude" of Narcissus (who would love no one but himself) to a radical contingency of self/other relations. (Jones, 1998, p. 151)

Jo Anna Isaak, in her essay 'In Praise of Primary Narcissism: The Last Laughs of Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke' (2002), disapproves the association between narcissism and gender stereotypes in Freud, but defends works by artists like Hannah Wilke, accused of exhibitionism and self-indulgence, as illustrative of a 'strategic occupation of narcissism':

An examination of the *use* women artists have made of narcissism as a performative "act" opens the possibility of women's strategic occupation of narcissism as a site of pleasure and a form of resistance to assigned sexual and social roles, a way of transcending the "unkindness of the real circumstances". (Isaak, 2002, p. 54)

This strand of criticism maintains that the artist making self-portraiture operates outside and against normal behavioural structures and prohibitions of society and art. In this context, self-portraiture is a sign of empowerment for the female/gendered artist (otherwise disempowered from phallogocentrism); and as such, excessively assertive self-portraits and narcissism become signs of political consciousness and agency.

The positive shift in the theorisation of self-portraiture, from the 1990's onwards, has been influenced by the production of works by artists that used self-portraiture as a political tool to tackle issues of identity, mainly from the 1970s onwards. It has also been affected by 20<sup>th</sup> century discourses about subjectivity and photography (based on psychoanalysis and semiotics) presenting narcissism in a more positive light: within systems invented to impose human law and understanding on nature there can always be found traces of unconscious processes. Regardless of the primacy of conscience, consciousness, and language in a given culture, constructed systems do in some respects resemble the complexities of the inner workings of the human mind and its underlying dynamics.

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<sup>4</sup> For a definition in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth and Fifth Edition, see 'Criteria for the Personality Disorders' (American Psychiatric Association, 2012).

The current proliferation of selfie-images, on the other hand, has not been seen in similar light. For example, ‘Antisocial Media’ (Anon., 2014) deals with the gradually lifting ban on photographing in art museums and places the ‘inherent narcissism of the “selfie”’ amongst other reasons challenging genuine engagement. And perhaps it is the first time in cultural history that associations with a culture of narcissism are so closely associated with narcissism<sup>5</sup>. This shows that positive associations are embedded in a tradition of cultural theory, including art theory or gender studies, but escape the perceptions or ideas of the general, yet cultured, public on new narcissistic trends. Of course this has nothing to do with reflexive works that address network-societies in art galleries and museums. Works such as Petra Cortright’s or Erica Scourti’s webcam videos are praised for their currency and effectiveness in addressing ‘economies of attention’, even though they also they expose the same signs of individualisation and banality with other personal material circulated on the web<sup>6</sup>.

Narcissism is a marginal expression, but it is shifted to center stage when it is considered useful to serve the interests of a given individual, culture or society. The question is, whether this articulate and, ultimately, sociable form of narcissism that appears radical is actually narcissism at all, or if it is the trace of the assimilation of narcissism in culture, the translation of one system into another, where narcissism loses its actual meaning.

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Investment in one’s own image stereotypically indicates investment in oneself, but in ‘The Ego and the Id’ (1923), Freud defines the mental image of the body’s surface as a representation of the whole ego:

The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, [...], representing the superficialities of the mental apparatus. (Freud, 1923, p. 26)

This dubious function of the body’s image is well illustrated in Lacan’s theory on the Mirror Stage. According to Lacan (1949), during the Mirror Stage the unity of the body as witnessed in the mirror, gives the child an impression of coherence that contradicts its actual uncoordinated state. This model of unity assists the formation of the *ideal-I*, that is a permanent, fantasized image of wholeness, and the Imaginary order, linked to illusions of autonomy.

Nevertheless, narcissism does not always coincide with an actual or imaginary encounter with one’s own image. Further, unless we agree that the field of art attracts people suffering from personality disorders, narcissism should be better understood as a state that provides the conditions for investments in the self to take place and for self-perceptions, conscious and unconscious content, to unfold (for example, in

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979), Christopher Lasch claims that clinical aspects of pathological or Secondary Narcissism are apparent in the culture of the 1970s. In this influential book, his idea of ‘cultural narcissism’ is reflected in cultural production, but it is not directly associated with self-portraiture.

<sup>6</sup> See George Vasey’s article ‘Self 2 Selfie’ in *Artmonthly*, November 2013.

dreams or hallucinations). We are not always willing to enter into a narcissistic state. For example, for Freud, when a self-encounter emerges unexpectedly in waking life, it can be uncanny and linked to aversion. In his essay on the 'Uncanny' (1919), he considers the uncanniness and aversion to *Doppelgänger* encounters a sign of having overcome animistic convictions related to primary narcissism, which perhaps also explains the aversion to selfie-takers today.

Voluntary self-encounters have a different effect, as in 'Photo Therapy', where participants take on different roles to create their photographic 'psychic' images. According to Jo Spence who invented it (1986), 'Photo Therapy' is based on the exploration of one's self-perceptions. Spence explains that while some aspects of the self have been influenced by representations created for us by others, some other parts have never been revealed and seek expression. Through 'Photo Therapy', all these different parts of the self come into a dialogue. Thus Spence describes a process similar to that illustrated by Freud; nevertheless, this experience is associated with the generation of a narrative that holds the subject back from returning to an unproductive, primitive state. The creation of a narrative bringing this unconscious content to consciousness would have to be a deconstructed iteration. As such, self-portraiture operates as a reminder of narcissism and has a symbolic role in reinstating a person's self-impressions and constancy. This proposition also finds an application, for example, in the role of the family-album for strengthening personal or family identity.

An encounter with one's own image in photo therapy entails associations with the unconscious and narcissism. But narrativization and the re-structuring of one's self-image indicate a counter-narcissistic tendency and the intervention of conscience. In fact, the self-portrait can be seen as a symbolic barrier, indicating the actual inability to return to absolute narcissism.

To return to the question posed at the end of the previous section, in relation to whether the consideration of narcissism as a site of the radical negotiation of social dynamics really refers to narcissism in its psychoanalytic sense, it becomes obvious that what needs to be taken into account is the process through which an image/performance is made. If the making of the work requires self-interrogation then the work qualifies as narcissistic, but if it aims at communicating a message related to narcissism, then it addresses narcissism, without actually being narcissistic. The assumption of narcissism is often made by association, because of the presentation of the artist's body, (investment in one's own image equals to investment in oneself), but this complies with a social contract. The artist's self-centering is a reaction to an inability to identify with the center. And perhaps the reason why this is approved in culture: because it ultimately aims at the therapeutic re-integration of the subject into the whole.

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In self-portraiture the intentional and prolonged encounter with one's own image has often been seen as a response to the artist's need for cohesion through a specular image analogous to the one in the Mirror Stage. For example, performative self-portraits such as Cindy Sherman's, that thematize constructed identities or stereotypes, could be read as narcissistic, supposedly ritualistically renewing the process of pseudo-identification and pseudo-constitution. But in a similar way, as it is

implied by Freud's theory, for Lacan, after the Mirror Stage and a subject's acculturation, games with one's own image do not refer to narcissism; they refer to a conscious manipulation of appearances. He claims:

Only the subject – the human subject, the subject of the desire that is the essence of man – is not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation. (Lacan, 1973, p. 107)

Here Lacan claims that the screen, or the mental image of the body, is the locus of mediation. Signs like masquerade and acting out confirm the absorption of human subjects in the symbolic that is nearer to language (and conscience, in Freud's terms).

In fact, in the same book, the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan argues that the self-portrait artist does not necessarily want to be involved in a self-encounter or to be looked at; self-portraiture complies with a social contract to offer hurtful schemes of 'completeness' to arouse the viewer's envy.

Such is true envy – the envy that makes the subject pale before an image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the *petit a*, the separated *a* from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction, *Befriedigung*. It is to this register of the eye as made desperate by the gaze that we must go if we are to grasp the taming, civilizing and fascinating power of the function of the picture. (ibid., p. 116)

The viewer misinterprets the picture as an idealized scheme of wholeness, capable of raising his/her desire; the civilizing capacity of images lies with the methods invented to overcome such threat. These, as we saw earlier, can be linked to aversion or to constructing a narrative. Here we have a fusion between the artist's presumably sincere encounter and the viewer's unconscious processes. This indicates a shift from the artist's psychological processes to the viewer's imaginary capacity. Within this framework of misrecognitions and misinterpretations, self-portraiture appears as a regressive threat, lying in the primordial, inapplicable to conscious life schemes of completeness, but incapable of actualising regression. The artist is ultimately trying to communicate with the art audience.

From this point of view Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills* (1977–1980) do not require any more narcissism to be made than any other work of art. But the use of self-portraiture implies narcissism and imagined schemes of wholeness, as well as suggesting an alternative order to appeal to the viewer's sense-making capacity and subjectivity. Images that comment on oppressive realities are equally non-narcissistic, in that they indicate identification with a group, even if this group is marginalized within a larger framework. Selfie-images also have an ambiguous relationship to narcissism, in that they are made for a mechanism of self-promotion that is imposed by social media. Works addressing social media comment on the exploitation of our supposedly inherent narcissistic tendencies. In fact, a closer look at theories on narcissism makes it difficult to identify a narcissistic work.

Self-portraiture's 'ambiguity', due to its dual connotations as self-interrogation or self-idealization, served the purpose of giving a visual/symbolic expression to a complex set of interconnected values related to narcissism. Explaining what the relationship is between these interconnected values is a complex process. But it becomes even more complex because it mainly addresses the intersubjective relationship between artist and viewer. Investment in one's own image stereotypically indicates narcissism and investing in oneself. But the assumption of narcissism and the overall positivity (or negativity) of such investment, are closely linked to the image's effect on subjects other than the artist.

### **Photography and Projection**

At the heart of this complex function of self-portraiture is the illusory capacity of all representations and systems of signification to provide the projection of our perceptions, as well as schemes of wholeness. Reading signs refers to either conscious information processing or automatic access to memories. Narrative gaps suspend a definite narrative. They can distract or cancel narrativity; they can affect the easy imposition of meanings (as happens with the caption, or with culture-dependent connotations); but they can also encourage more elaborate sense-making procedures and the incorporation of the viewer's subjectivity in creating a meaningful whole.

Narcissism again becomes central here, because it is central to projection. It is an essential condition for creating wholes out of fragments in images and narratives<sup>7</sup>. In fact, narcissism can be seen as a fundamental element in our engagement with any readable discourse and produce a fusion between mediated and unmediated experiences.

The potential degree of engagement with a work seems to relate to the particularities of a medium and historical circumstances that have shaped its role. Photography's immediacy and illusory tautological relationship to reality has also been seen to encourage such elaborate engagements. In the early days of photography, people's excitement was fuelled by fear and superstitions regarding the perceived supernatural properties of photography. This is apparent in articles and anecdotes of that time, some of which include prominent intellectual figures. For example, according to Nadar (1981), who at that time was running the most popular photographic studio in Paris, Balzac believed that photography could, after a few exposures, erase a person by gradually absorbing leaf-like layers from his/her soul.

The reactions of photographers were quite different: they soon started using the medium to self-reflexively comment on photography's projective power. Most self-portraits of this period are staged, heavily coded, and imbued with narrativity: we have images about the process of portraiture and self-portraiture, acting out and masquerade (see for example, self-portraits by Octav Rejlander, Hippolyte Bayard and Adam Salomon). These self-reflexive images had an additional purpose: being obviously staged, they could prove that they were made and not captured, to emphasize the artist's contribution and question the dismissal of photography as a non-art form.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, Todorov's essay 'Reading as Construction' (1974). Here Todorov claims that the relationship between the imaginary universe evoked by the author of a book and the imaginary universe constructed by a reader is subject to projective psychology.



Besides the immediate emergence of self-reflexive approaches, photography provided opportunities for regressive self-encounters. August Strindberg, at the end of the nineteenth century, attempted to depict his soul through his self-portraits. Edvard Munch, at the beginning of the twentieth century, used the photographic camera to portray himself during difficult times (e.g. *Self-portrait at Dr. Jacobson's clinic in Copenhagen*, 1908-1909). And perhaps in this very short – and necessarily reductive – account, I should also include Francesca Woodman's self-portraits in abandoned buildings and that preceded her premature death at the age of 22. The information about when and where the images were made, the artist's gestures, and the images' blurry appearance that transforms the subjects into spectres, mark these images as personal and autobiographic.

We are no longer affected by photography as much as we used to be, perhaps because we no longer trust images, or because we are used to them. Traces of unconscious processing and projection are evident in viewers' involved readings, and have shaped photography theory. Along these lines, Rosalind Krauss claims:

Its [photography's] power is as an index and its meaning resides in those modes of identification which are associated with the Imaginary. [...] Whatever else its power, the photograph could be called sub- or pre-symbolic, ceding the language of art back to the imposition of things. (Krauss, 1977, p. 75)

Additionally, Roland Barthes (1981) refers to photography's projective power as a form of madness that should be protected from being called art.

The artist's supposed narcissistic encounter can be attributed to the metaphorical tie between the psychological withdrawal implied by the act of portraying the artist's self, the use of photography (with its implied withdrawal from the dominant language of art and conventional narrative structures), and in many cases, social marginalization.

### **Current Dilemmas**

These associations have been challenged in recent times. The images themselves have not changed: the devices used in self-portraiture since the early days of photography are still in use today. The immediacy of the genre has been retained too, as is apparent, for example, in the increasing use of 'self-portraiture' in psychotherapy. But the wider acceptance of photography as art, the genre's loss of reference to withdrawal, changes in viewing and responding to images, and perceptions of photographic self-portraiture challenge the integrity of the genre.

Art nowadays tends to view photography as a whole – i.e., "art" photography, documentary, advertising, etc. One issue that emerges from this is the loss of ambiguity in relation to the potential use of an image. If all photography communicates through art and in relation to art, then the use of the genre provides a legacy and an established vocabulary cunningly employed by the photographer to justify his/her involvement in art. This I believe happens with images like Jemima Stehli's series 'Strip' (1999) and Elina Brotherus' series 'Artists at Work' (2009). Both artists have been dealing with photographic self-portraiture for a number of years. Nevertheless these series make direct reference to art, and situate the artist

within the studio and at work. With the wider assimilation of self-portraiture into cultural production the genre loses its reference to withdrawal. The work and the artist communicate from center stage.

Gen Doy (2005) claims that it is inevitable to look at incompatibilities between self-portraiture's supposed claims and art's climate of exchange. She believes that it is increasingly important to present subjectivities from the center rather than the margins. It is not easy to disagree with Doy, as this is where the images she describes, and photographic self-portraiture as a whole, actually belong. But what does it mean to present self-portraits and subjectivities from the center? If we accept that narcissism is incorporated within an obsolete interpretation system based on the division between self and other, center and margins, consciousness and the unconscious, does this not also challenge the assumptions found in ethnographic and participatory projects, where self-portraiture is used as a sign of authenticity? While artists still express their attraction to geographical, conceptual, and artistic borders, the validation of alternative possibilities in both the actual and the conceptual definitions of borders, populations and subjects, may also require disambiguation and the reinvention of existing visual vocabularies, or the creation of new ones, dissociated from earlier traditions.

Another issue is related to the appearance of photography in a museum or a gallery space. For Roland Barthes (1981), Susan Sontag (2003) and others, the most effective way of viewing a photograph is in private or within a book: it is only then that a photograph can take on its full potential. When engaged in an act of reading the socio-culturally given, the viewer is deferred from a projective experience. This becomes particularly apparent in exhibitions such as the Guggenheim Museum's show 'Haunted' (2010) the uncanniness of the photographic image as a fiction of the past is presented in self-portraits (by Ana Mendieta and Robert Mapplethorpe, among others); while recent practice (by, for example, Gillian Wearing and Anthony Goicolea) appear to exploit this effect by appropriating early devices and technology (Blessing, 2010).

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, psychoanalytic and semiotic theories, as well as photography's uncanniness, reinforced the relationship of photographic self-portraiture to narcissism and gave it a political role. Nowadays the genre often embraces the subject of narcissism and its political role by default, resulting in the stereotype.

The model provided by photographic self-portraiture is particularly relevant to the valorization of cultural phenomena, and changes caused by their appropriation and assimilation. Representation does provide the means for personal or group definition and affirmation. Nevertheless, we also need to consider what representations, systems of signification, and genres, stand for. The example of photographic self-portraiture helps in processing the relationship between mediated and unmediated experiences, and reveals that symbolic elaborations of primary processes are also affected by overpowering cultural influences that aim to support the strength and validity of a given culture. This analysis also helps in processing notions of self-centering, decentering, and, ultimately, the relative nature of the center.

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