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# TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF-PORTRAIT

IDENTITY, PRESENCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF THE SUBJECT(S) IN TWENTIETH AND  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ART

GABRIELLA GIANNACHI



# Technologies of the Self-Portrait

This book demonstrates how artists have radically revisited the genre of the self-portrait by using a range of technologies and media that mark different phases in what can be described as a history of self- or selves-production.

Gabriella Giannachi shows how artists constructed their presence, subjectivity, and personhood, by using a range of technologies and media including mirrors, photography, sculpture, video, virtual reality, and social media to produce an increasingly fluid, multiple, and social representation of their 'self'.

This interdisciplinary book draws from art history, performance studies, visual culture, new media theory, philosophy, computer science, and neuroscience to offer a radical new reading of the genre.

**Gabriella Giannachi** is Professor in Performance and New Media, and Director of the Centre for Intermedia at the University of Exeter.

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Gabriella Giannachi

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For my mother, Liselotte Giannachi-Mangels,  
and my father, Bruno Giannachi,  
with infinite gratitude and much love.



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# Introduction

This study illustrates how artists, over time, continuously revisited the genre of the self-portrait by adopting different technologies in conjunction with theatrical and performative strategies to produce works that shaped our understanding of what we mean by ‘self’. The study shows how artists often staged their presence by using a range of technologies to capture their appearance, construct their identity, define their personhood, design their relatability, continuously reworking and expanding their conception of what they meant by ‘self’. The study illustrates how the self-portrait represents a medium for the exploration of a temporally, spatially, and socially expanded notion of the self which includes, whether through their presence or implied absence, both the artist and the viewer. In this sense, the study shows, the self-portrait is not only about self-representation, but also about the anticipation of reception. The self is in fact constructed not only for but through the actual or implied presence of an other. Hence the self-portrait is about the construction of a space–time that is facing towards both the past (implied by the presence of the artist) and the future (implied by the presence of the viewer), so that the selves in question shift between the artist and the viewer.

I use the term technologies to refer to a range of practices, crafts, and tools which include various kinds of mirrors, chisels, drills, cameras, mobile phones, among others. In using these technologies, artists often produce traces that reveal information about the *actions* involved in the creation of the self-portrait. By looking at these actions it is possible to see how artists constructed their presence, their ‘self’, whether by adopting combinations of technologies and props, or experimenting with ‘palettes’ of roles, moods, and staged behaviours. In fact, artists not only documented but also literally practised the performance of their presence, representing themselves, often across a plurality of locations, as both the object (the image) *and* subject (the artist at work). In this sense, the self-portrait could be considered as a selves-portrait, not only a representation of the artist (often as a multiple) but also a shifting act of co-presencing between the artist and the viewer. But before I say more about how these technologies effected self-representation, or what I mean by presencing and co-presencing, I need to revisit how the concept of the self came to be.

## Introducing the self

It is very difficult to conduct a study of the self or even define the self, as concepts of the self vary profoundly depending on the cultural frames that are used to analyse them. While I cannot in the short space of an introduction do any justice to the full range of studies that have been written about this topic (for that, for example, see Seigel 2005), it

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is useful to briefly recall some of the most important debates in the history of Western philosophy to draw attention to how the concept of a self evolved over time.

The OED tells us that the actual compound self- first appeared around the middle of the sixteenth century and that during the seventeenth century the term became more common, especially in theological and philosophical writings. Before that, writings about the self tended to address the question as to whether there is such a thing as a self, usually in the context of metaphysics and ethics. At this point in time, different terms were used to define the self, often in relation to the soul (Sorabji in Crabbe 1999: 14). Thus, in ancient Greek philosophy, for example, a number of authors used the term *αὐτο*, i.e. *autos* or 'same'. One such author was Homer in the *Odyssey* at 11.601–3 where Odysseus is talking to the dead Heracles's shadow while he *himself* is said to be with the gods (Sorabji 2006: 3). Interestingly, the term was not necessarily associated with a singular entity. Hence Epicharmus, for example, believed in the notion of a 'non continuous self' and suggested that humans consisted of different selves, while Plotinus believed people had as many as five selves, including what have subsequently been described as an embodied self, a process in time, discursive reason, pure intellect, and a self that is 'capable of identifying itself with any of the senses' (Remes 2008: 240).

At this point in time the self started to be considered in relation to its perception. Thus, researchers pointed out that Socrates famously implied that self-knowledge comes about in conversations with other people and that knowing oneself is 'akin to, even continuous with, knowing someone else' (Moore 2015: 6), while Aristotle argued for a distinction to be made between self-thinking and self-perceiving, suggesting that self-awareness may depend on the awareness of what is outside of the mind (Owens 1988). These early reflections about the self illustrate how philosophers built on the relationship between self-perception and knowledge creation, formulating interdependencies between them that were subsequently elaborated on by early Christian thinkers.

During the last century BC and first centuries AD there was a proliferation of new ideas about the self. Hence, for example, Seneca and Plutarch made a connection between the self and narrative and the Stoic Panaetius associated the self to the creation of personae and roles (Sorabji in Remes and Sihvola 2008: 21). It was during this period that some philosophers argued that human beings had some sort of self-awareness. Thus, in the fourth century, Augustine suggested that the mind can gain knowledge of itself through itself (Matthews 1992; Cary 2000), though much later, Aquinas, writing in the thirteenth century, and drawing together Platonic and Aristotelian traditions (Cory 2014), suggested a form of awareness for which 'the mere presence of the mind suffices', as well as a form that depends on the cognition of external elements for which 'the mere presence of the mind does not suffice' (Kenny 1993: 120 ff). During this period thinkers became fascinated with the role played by the self in relation to society (see Gill 1990, 1996) and the self became something that could be constructed, staged even, rather than an entity that existed a priori which needed to be captured and reproduced.

### The self-determining individual

The notion of a self-determining individual is historically specific to Europe and Northern American societies and has been prevalent since the Renaissance though, as James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium suggest (2000), the first theorisation of a self-determining individual was probably made by René Descartes in the seventeenth century in his dictum '*cogito ergo sum*' – 'I think therefore I am' (1986: 18). It has been shown that two

principles can be identified in the dictum: an I (*'before anything, I am I'*) and a reasoning capacity (*'I make sense'*) (Mansfield 2000: 15, original emphasis). However, as Lex Newman shows, Descartes's reference to an 'I' does not necessarily presuppose 'the existence of a *substantial* self' since in his subsequent sentence the meditator states that they do not entirely understand the 'I', or even know whether it actually exists (2019). Descartes then continued: 'But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions' (1986: 19). As Stephen Menn indicates, the meditator in the text 'knows *that* he is, he does not seem to know *what* he is' (1998: 249, original emphasis) though he clearly perceives and so imagines, understands, affirms, denies, wants etc. While references to a self-determining individual have been made since the Renaissance, these references still did not necessarily amount to a definition of what was in fact meant by a self. Interestingly, with Descartes the self becomes an *action* as well as an object or thing (*res*) that thinks as it perceives. Thus, it is this cognitive action ('I think') causes ('therefore') the recognition of the state of being ('I am'). In this sense there is a connectedness between the self as object ('a thing') and the self as a subject in action ('that doubts, understand, affirms, denies, is willing, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions') that we will see is at the heart of the genre of the self-portrait. This doubling of the self as a subject and an object implies that the object became *a sine qua non* for the subject to recognise itself as such.

David Hulme's philosophy built on these definitions of the complex interrelationship between the perceiving 'I' and the I's act of perceiving itself by stating that one could never catch oneself at any time without a perception, and could never observe anything other than the perception (1739: 534). This proposition implying a cohabitation of a self, or an I, and perception, was of crucial significance in defining the self as something that could not be separated from its own experience. Like Hulme, Immanuel Kant also suggested that 'it must be possible for the "I think" to accompany all my representations' (1929: 152). Thus, Kant went a step further in suggesting that representations are intertwined with the perceiving 'I' which in turn would be interpreted as 'the feeling of connection or consistency between all your perceptions, the collection point of all your thoughts' (Mansfield 2000: 19). Hence for Kant, as for Hulme, the self can 'only be perceived in relation to the world' (Baumeister 1998: 683). This suggests that the self is 'always situated' in its own perception (684). In this sense, for Hulme the self is not an abstract or independent subject or object, rather, it is what is perceived or even 'believed about it' (687; Higgins 1996). So, for Hulme and Kant, the subject cannot perceive itself directly, and our perception of the self is reliant on and intertwined with our perception of the world and our perception of ourselves *within* that world. The making visible of the moment of perception, and the situatedness of this moment, is at the heart of many of the self-portraits analysed in this study.

While for John Locke the self was closely linked to personhood and identity (Torchia 2008: 195), describable as a 'conscious thinking thing' (Martin and Barresi 2006: 92), for George Berkeley material things were not mind-independent as everything was grounded in perception (*'esse est percipi'*, 'to be is to be perceived', 1710), for James Baldwin the construction of the self could be described as a dialectical process between a self and what he called 'alter' (1895: 335). Thus, Baldwin writes: 'my sense of myself grows by my imitation of you, and my sense of yourself grows in terms of my sense of myself' (Ibid.). These kinds of 'social selves' are not only situated in the perception of the world or the perception of another, but could be described as 'reflected selves', capturing the idea that

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people would come to see themselves in the way they thought others saw them (Tice and Wallace in Leary and Tangney 2003: 91). Building on Baldwin (1895), Charles Cooley introduces the idea of a 'looking-glass self' (1902) and proposes that 'the self develops by mirroring society' (Hormuth 1990: 2). Thus, for Cooley, others constitute a social mirror whose opinions would eventually 'be incorporated into one's sense of self' (Harter 1999: 17). The image of the mirror, of course, was subsequently adopted by Jacques Lacan as a fundamental component in the formation of the *I* as it is experienced in psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the mirror in fact constitutes a metaphor capturing an early stage of development during which the child is fascinated by the reflection of their own image so that, in Lacan's words, the 'Ideal-I' 'situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in fictional direction' (1949: 503).

Overall, this period of history saw some of the most significant advances in relation to what philosophers, and, subsequently, psychoanalysts, thought the self to be. These, in turn, led to an understanding of the self as something that was inextricably linked to its perception and social construction, informing a conception of the self that was defined by a mirroring, social *process*. Not merely an entity, the self is formed and reformed through sets of relations.

#### Social selves

In the late 1890s, William James proposed a theory of the self that foresaw the possibility of a variable self. Thus, James talks about 'mutations of the self' which include multiple personality, amnesia, trance, among others (1983). For him, the self could be described as an object of perception or knowledge, divided into material, social and spiritual, including one's body, clothes, family, home, property, while the social self is what others may think of you. For James, a man in fact 'has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him in their mind' (1983: 281–282). Interestingly, James distinguishes between what he called the 'I' and what he called the 'me', allowing for reflexive self-consciousness in which the 'I' perceives the 'me' (Baumeister 1998: 683). Subsequent critics such as Susan Harter suggest that components of James's I-self include 'self-awareness', 'self-agency', 'self-continuity', and 'self-coherence' whereas components of the me-self include 'material me', 'social me' and 'spiritual me' (1999: 6). Hence, for James the self becomes a complex kaleidoscopic, multifaceted, assembled entity.

For George Mead the self is defined through social construction. Thus, Mead argues in *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) that individuals fashion a sense of their own self-hood through engagement with other selves, in that 'we appear as selves in our conduct insofar as we ourselves take the attitude that others take toward us', adopting the role 'of what may be called the "generalised other"' (1934: 270). For Mead there are in fact two sides to the social self, the 'me' and the 'I' and whereas 'the "me" represents the unique identity a self develops through seeing its form in the attitudes others take towards it', 'the "I" is the subjective attitude of reflection itself, which gazes on both the subjective image of the self and its own responses' (Burkitt 1991: 38) so that in Mead 'the "me" is the individual as an object of consciousness, while the "I" is the individual as having consciousness' (Joas 1985: 83). These theories draw attention to the multiplicity of factors that compose the self, its multifaceted nature, its ability to change over time and its construction in and through what is other to it, forming assemblages that can be seen in so many of the self-portraits discussed in this study.