

SELF-PORTRAYAL

By Peter Hunt Thompson

Originally published in **SELF=PORTRAYAL**, edited by James Alinder, Friends of Photography, Carmel, 1974.

Self-portrayals are a kind of confession. The fascination with self-portrayal resides primarily in the viewer's appreciation of a distinctive attitude on the part of the maker: that of simply allowing others to be included in an intimacy. Unlike autobiography, visual self-portrayals are often appreciated by an audience more interested in the work as artifact than in the person or qualities portrayed. There tends to be, therefore, a leniency of judgement exercised by the viewer. The self-portrayals of most artists do not equal their best work, but the viewer is recompensed by pleasure in simply being allowed to see another person see themselves.

By definition, that self-seeing is an act that no one else can do. The act of self-portrayal is one in which every maker goes from the rank of amateur to that of professional because it is an act in which a subject treats itself as an object of its own knowledge.

The history of the genre, however, suggests that it is wise to treat that knowledge as a species of fiction. It is impossible to completely mirror a life, because that mirroring process is a part of the life itself. The history of the representation of self-consciousness shows that artists and autobiographers who believe that they can avoid their own intimate involvement in self-understanding end the endeavor in frustration. Those who think, like Rousseau, that they have succeeded, are now appreciated precisely because of the discrepancy, in the work itself, between the avowal of self-understanding and the evidence of its lack.

I think it was Sartre who, when asked for a definition of progress, replied that it was "that long road which led to Me." That is, to the sense of one's self as a unique being and of worth as such. This sense of self-consciousness and individuality is historically a recent development, and a brief look at that development can help establish the context for a consideration of visual self-portrayal.

Between the 15th and 17th Centuries the feudal order rapidly declined in favor of increasing democratization. The economic order began to change from institutionalized scarcity to sufficiency; groups of people increased from comparatively small gatherings in churches, craft guilds and universities to large armies and large cities. Upward social mobility rapidly increased and the sense of privacy — a basic requirement for introspection — was given impetus by radical Puritanism and supported by such secondary activities as the increased availability of mirrors to the common person, allowing the development of a personal self-image. The autobiography as a spiritual undertaking and as a literary form was fully developed during this period. Cross-class verbal com-

munication progressed from orders given hierarchically to the Calvinist idea of a plain-speaking whose only justification was the sincerity of the speaker.

The most crucial event in the development of self-consciousness was the invention of sincerity. Sincerity is simply the marriage of what one professes publicly with what one feels privately. Or put another way, in spite of the fact that we are social beings with livings to make, at the base of the idea of sincerity is the belief that one has a self which is separate from one's social role, to which one owes primary allegiance.

Such an understanding of selfhood seems obvious, and it is surprising to learn that historians are generally agreed that sincerity as a moral ideal came into being in the 15th Century. Concurrent with the emergence of sincerity was the invention of the self-portrait — the self-portrayal in a non-religious context of an individual as an individual. The term self-portrayal refers to a representation of a particular body of information: one's concepts of self and one's interpretive relationships to those concepts. The term also makes explicit that self-consciousness is basic to the organizing principle of the work, that it is the interplay between time and a subjective consciousness of that time. The act of self-portrayal is, therefore, a projection of a being in relation to its own identity upon the unifying screen of a formal work or action. Because self-portrayal takes this consciousness of self as its theme and organizing principle, it is one of the most vital formulations and formalizations of the modern Western mind.

Both visual and verbal self-portrayals are distinctly Western cultural forms. There are, to be sure, verbal recountings in other cultures of personal histories, but those histories are generally truncated pieces written for such pragmatic social goals as political asylum or judicial redress. The authors never quite come to see the totality of their lives as worthy of the telling and fleshed with the integration of their public and private selves.

Like the autobiographies of poets and novelists, the self-portrayals of artists have always been dominated by the representation of themselves as artists. The history of visual self-portrayal is a casebook of the ways in which artists have seen themselves as both artists and as role-players within society. Between the 15th and 17th Centuries, Western artists gradually became aware of their activities as not only the exercise of an honorable craft but as an intellectual pursuit as well. The self-portraits of the time mirror that double awareness in their tendency to show the artist either at work or as a contemplative being at home with either emblems belonging to intellect or those of the aristocratic milieu to which artists were becoming accustomed.

The idea of the villain — a person who, like Shakespeare's Iago, lied and manipulated to achieve a social end — arose in the popular imagination of the 16th Century as an emblematic response to the lack of professions which would allow a person to achieve a place in

society commensurate with ability. As an extension of that idea, role-playing and disguise became an increasingly common artistic artifice in the 16th and 17th Centuries. Rembrandt is an example of an artist whose love of personal artifice coincided with his love for the artistic technical feats that were demanded of him by exotic costumes.

Some artists reflected the tension between artifice and sincerity in their acceptance of artistic patronage and in their editorializing against aristocracy within commissioned works. Velasquez and Goya are examples of artists who used both as a means of upward social mobility and in their portraits and self-portraits with royalty as a recording medium for their ethical and political concerns.

When artists became aware of their activity as something more than craft, the intellectual burden produced an awareness of the mission of being an artist. The tradition of the artist as spiritual advisor, and as sufferer because of that vision, developed from the combination of the religious tradition of art and the artist's need to witness to the vague spiritual values inherent in the process of artistic creation. Durer portrayed himself as Christ. Michelangelo portrayed himself as a torn skin. Caravaggio as the decapitated Holofernes — the examples are numerous.

By the 19th Century, artists' social mobility diminished because of decreasing upper-class patronage coupled with reduced understanding and appreciation by the general populace of their work. By mid-century, photography newly invented, carried the burden of the artistic search for the depiction of reality leaving artists the freedom to begin exploring the nature of their media without the necessity of bringing it into the collective world. At this point artists — that is non-photographers — began to lose their audience and the tradition of the artist as spiritual seer and sufferer became ever more strongly entrenched.

Prior to the development of photography, the introspection of self-portrayal was divorced from the action of responding to events as they arose. With photography came a kind of active introspection, a self-reflection at a moment in which the self finds itself. Inherent to photography is the balance between subjective awareness and the concrete evidence of being in the world. As a diary of perceptions, actions and environments, photographic self-portrayal is a more or less objective record which requires later subjective interpretation.

Today, the use of relatively non-self-expressive modes of representation, such as the snapshot, is an outgrowth of the search for authenticity. A significant number of artists from other media, such as John Baldessari, Douglas Heubler and William Wegman, have taken up the medium of photography because the myth surrounding its use proclaims it to be anonymous and objective. It is worth noting that photography is now also being chosen for its use in artifice, for the exploration of roles that are marked by obvious artificiality and perhaps historical

nostalgia, by artists such as Eleanor Antin, Judith Golden, Lynda Benglis and Lucas Samaras.

The 20th Century artist's relationship to technology has had a marked effect on the continuation of the tradition of artist as sufferer. New technologies allow an artist to alter or to begin again without annulling what formerly might have been the fruit of a years labor. At that point, the artist begins to question the whereabouts of the art work — and finally comes to see that the controller of that process and the one crucial factor in it is the artist. From there it is an easy step to the position that the art resides within the artist, that the artist is, finally, the work of art. When that concept is married to the tradition of the artist as both sufferer and role-player, one gets, to take but two examples, Chris Burden lying on a highway or nailing himself to the back of a VW, or Vito Acconci telling personally compromising information to strangers who approach him on a New York dock at night. The tradition reaches finality in Rudolph Schwartzkoglher who, in a variation on Rauschenberg's action to a de Kooning drawing, "erased" himself as an artistic artifact by dying of self-amputation.

The self-portrayal of the artist as sufferer seems to have run out of nourishing things to say. There is the feeling, materially aided by the women's movement, that artists and their activities might somehow be a little more humble in their aims — even that both might be models for a new Kind of health. That health is connected with sheer awareness, of subtle reaction to the everyday, of self-transformation, of an affirmation of both play and of social interaction — even to an affirmation of what Heidegger saw as the basic characteristic of human beings: care. We can perhaps look forward to a fuller and presently unforeseen translation of those qualities into the tradition of self-portrayal.

One Question to ask now is this: which future men and women, standing before the works and examples of prior artists, will carry forward this tradition in a manner which does not betray them? They are those who, realizing the barrenness of their meal, as William Burroughs says, in the "frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork," nevertheless can affirm that meal, saying, with Cage, "Here we are, let us say Yes to our presence together in Chaos,"

Peter Hunt Thompson is the Director of the Generative Systems Program at Columbia College in Chicago, He was Curator of The Friends of Photography between 1971 and 1974 and has taught photography at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Copyright © 1974 by Peter Thompson.