

Me, myself and I. The Self-Portrait in Postmodern Time

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Abstract

In 1984, the literary critic and philosopher Frederic Jameson theorized the replacement of the individual subject of the modern era with the fragmented, decentered and multiple ego produced by the postmodern culture, absorbed in a continuous present that erases history and distinguished by a sort of emotional flatness. As postmodern theorists debated contemporary identity, several visual artists produced self-portraits that multiplied, fractured or disguised their image, reflecting on the condition of the ego in contemporary society. Subject to the cultural, aesthetic, social and anthropological transformations, the self-portrait has indeed changed form and symbology over the centuries, infusing the image of the artist with multiple meanings, focusing firstly on a question: how do I want you to see me? In the postmodern context, the answer to this question acquires many forms, as does the representation of the artist's identity. In order to understand the peculiarity of the self-portraits of this period, the essay will focus on several works, including *Spermini* (1997) by Maurizio Cattelan, *The Book of Food* (1985-1993) by Vanessa Beecroft, *Untitled #193* (1988) by Cindy Sherman and the *Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002) by Matthew Barney. Concerning this, the focus will be on the artistic production of the 1990's because, as far as I can see, it seems to display a relevant maturation of the features that Jameson assigns to the postmodern ego. In the guise of self-projection, duplication and disguise, these and other self-portraits appear as the symbol of a multiple, evanescent and chameleonic ego, aimed at impersonating multiple roles and characters, assuming different self-concepts or a changing identity. In order to analyse these artworks, I will use an interdisciplinary approach combining an art historical and anthropological perspective (Belting, Hall) with postmodern self theories (Jameson, Gergen).

Introduction

At the end of the 20th Century, in line with the profound transformation of the ego described by postmodern theories, the self-portrait – historically considered as an expression of the self and its status – seems to face a dramatic representative shift, marked by the use of new elements and representational models.

Maurizio Cattelan's puppets, the body sections designed by Vanessa Beecroft, the multiple identities interpreted by Cindy Sherman and Matthew Barney display a tangible representative mutation, highlighted by the staging of a manifold, chameleonic and evanescent personal image that reflects an unstable and fragmented idea of the subject.

Masks that conceal the identity of the wearer, fragments of faces or limbs, projections of the subjective image on multiple bodies, technological prostheses and disguises are indeed common elements in many self-portraits of the late 20th Century which, within a process of detachment from the previous iconography, embody the signs of a broad social and symbolic transformation involving the very concept of subject and its modalities of representation¹.

The processes behind the development of this typology of self-portrait and the modalities in which it differs from the previous examples can be analyzed from different perspectives. In addition to the historical and artistic one, which is essential to understand the images, the phenomena of self-presentation are closely linked to sociological, philosophical and anthropological theories on the perception of individual identity and its transformation over time². According to several sociologists and anthropologists, it seems indeed an acquired notion that individual members of any society share a common idea of the self and that this idea structures their perception and bounds between themselves and the others, reflecting on the way they represent themselves³.

In order to link the phenomena of perception and representation of the self, we will examine a selection of self-portraits made in the last decade of the 20th century associating them with the theories on postmodern identity elaborated by Frederic Jameson. The focus on works produced mainly in the 1990s is motivated by the fact that they seem to reveal an interesting maturation of the features assigned by Jameson to the postmodern ego and its representation: fragmentation, decentration and multiplicity.

Concerning this, in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson describes the disappearance of the individual subject of the modern era and its replacement by the decentered ego of the postmodern culture through pictures, choosing examples from visual arts. In particular, he mentions the painting *The Scream* (1893, fig. 1) by Edvard Munch as the emblem of the modern age of anxiety, because it conveys “the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation and isolation” through which the individual expresses its subjectivity⁴.



Figure 1: *The Scream* (1893) by Edvard Munch. [Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.](#)

Regarding the postmodern subject, instead, Jameson points out its incapacity of organize time into a coherent experience, connecting this inability to the “weakening of historicity” and to the “breakdown of the signifying chain” in language⁵. According to the critic and philosopher, if personal identity is the effect of a certain temporal unification, the result of the loss of ability to create a sense of continuity between past and future is a schizophrenic subject which lives in a perpetual present and experiences plurality, fragmentation and emotional flatness. Consequently, a painting like *The Scream* - which expresses strong affects, such as anxiety and alienation – cannot longer exists in postmodern time, because the very concept of expression presupposes a unified and unique self, a coherent temporal experience and some separation between what is internal and external to the subject⁶. As an example of an early stage of postmodern artistic production, Jameson mentions Andy Warhol’s works, which reflect the emergence of a new kind of flatness, the breakdown of the distinction between high and low culture and the waning of affect⁷.

In the case of Warhol’s portraits, like Marilyn Monroe or his self-portraits, the subjects are multiplied, commodified and transformed into their own images, as the reference to their individual lives or emotions is suppressed: a movie star or a soup’s can (fig. 2) are represented with the same indifference and depthlessness. The expression of complex emotional concepts or conditions through the portrait is eroded by the repetition of the subject to the extent that the personality disappears behind the sparkling seriality assigned to its medial image.

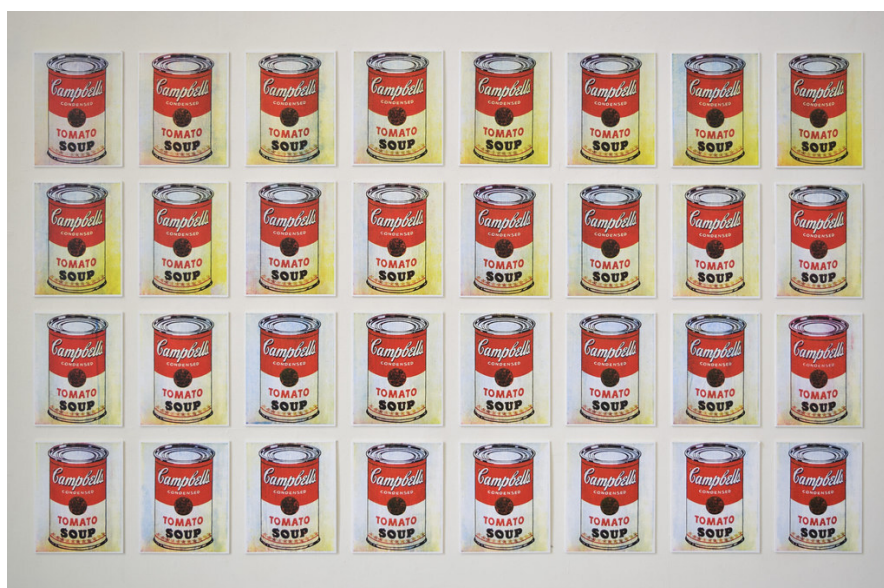


Figure 2: 32 Campbell's Soup Cans (1962) by Andy Warhol.

Photo by [Wally Gobetz](#), June 17, 2007. Licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

Therefore, in summary, the postmodern self as meant by Jameson is a fragmented, multiple and decentered subject who lives in an incongruent temporal dimension, connotated by a sort of emotional flatness and nourished by the images from the media.

According to the psychologist Kennet Gergen, this fragmentation of the self-conception corresponds to a plurality of incoherent and detached relationships, which invites individuals to play a variety of roles that erases the very concept of an "authentic self"⁸. Moreover, the postmodern subject is saturated with images from the media that "furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self"⁹.

In line with these claims, the tendency to play different roles and to display multifaceted and fragmented versions of the Self appears as a significant component of several self-portraits of the 1990s, which seem to mature the transition from modern personality to postmodern personality, as described by Jameson and Gergen.

Multiple Identities

In 1997, for instance, Maurizio Cattelan realizes *Spermini* (*Little Sperms*, fig 3.), a self-representation made by hundreds of painted latex masks in the likeness of himself. The eloquent title refers to the process of human being's making, with its manifold possible results. As many other works by the artist, such as *Mini-me* (1999) and *We* (2010), *Spermini* investigates the thematic of personal identity through the representation of multiplied images and fictive alter egos of Cattelan, revealing a certain ambiguity promoted by the splitting into several faces or puppets who wear the artist's features like a mask¹⁰.

The slight diversity of skin tones and facial features of *Spermini's* masks highlights the plurality that Cattelan assigns to the representation of his self: multiple, varied and fragmented. More or less dark, serious or smiling, in some installations the masks hang softly from the wall, devoid of content. In the same way, from a metaphorical point of view, the viewer who wants to understand something of the subject is deprived of useful contents: the artist dissolves in the multiplicity of his representations.



Figure 3: *Spermini* (1997) by Maurizio Cattelan.

Photo by ひでわく, August 21, 2017. Published on Photozou, Japan. [Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.](#)

As Jameson claims about the depthlessness of postmodern pictures, *Spermini* doesn't provide any element on the artist's private life, personality or emotions. The expressivity of the portraits is abandoned in favor of an ironic representation where Cattelan's face become itself a mask, behind which we cannot detect anything. *Spermini* is not the only work where the expressivity and uniqueness of the modern ego is eradicated: in fact, Cattelan has created many works where his physical features, not exactly reproduced, possess slightly dissonant or caricatural aspects compared to the model, multiplied and serialized. Among them, we find *Super-Noi* (*Super-Us*, 1992-1998), a work consisting of numerous facial composites of Cattelan made by police sketch artists and based on descriptions provided by friends and acquaintances.

It is relevant to note that according to Gergen, the postmodern self is free to float from one image to another and arises only in relation to external images, which are conveyed to and received from others. Consequently, instead of the inner core of the past, the postmodern "interior" self is inhabited by others and their images, becoming through stages a relational self¹¹.

Precisely with regard to this, in *Super-Noi* the representation of the Self and the responsibility for defining it is left to others: the effect is a collective portrait conceived by Cattelan but accomplished out of his control. This process leads to a relational concept of the subject, forged on other's impressions and memories, where the "Me" of the Self becomes a plural "Us", as the title indicates.

If we assume that the single identikits represent a fragment or a version of the identity of Cattelan, it must be noted, however, that even as a whole they are not able to reconstruct a complete image of the artist, because we could not identify a self-core in them. As Gergen underline, in postmodern time the perpetual attack of external influences and images erodes the very sense of an authentic

core and abolish the distinction between the real and the presented self¹². As a result, it cannot be established which is the real Cattelan between his representations, as well as it cannot be affirmed that his self-core lies in their whole. The tendency to elude categorizations and to realize chameleonic representations distinguishes also the work of Cindy Sherman, who has been creating photographic self-portraits since the end of the 1970s, highlighting and overturning the dominant models of representation of the female body. Starting from the famous *Untitled film stills* series (1977-1980, fig. 4), Sherman has composed photographic tableaux in which she portrays herself inside history paintings, films, fashion's and pornography's scenery, wearing costumes, wigs, props, prosthesis and makeup to interpret movie stars, valley girls, Renaissance ladies, clowns and sex dolls.

These representations are united by the constant presence of Sherman as the subject. Nevertheless, they are anything but real self-portraits: as Sherman declares in several interviews, none of the characters are her, because she is "really just using the mirror to summon something" that she doesn't even know until she sees it¹³. The body photographed, however, is her own body and this detachment between what is seen and what is represented produces an ambiguity that pervades all her works. In *Untitled #193* (1988), which is part of a series stemming from a collaboration with Limoges, Sherman models herself as Madame Pompadour, portraying the mistress of Louis XV as she gets older.



Figure 4: *Untitled #23* (1978) by Cindy Sherman.
Photo by [Viola Renate](#), February 7, 2009. [Licensed under CC-BY 4.0](#).

Although at first glance the work would appear to imitate the composition of an 18th-century portrait, there isn't a specific source and, as often happens in Sherman's production, the mimic of certain genre conventions presents distorted and defamiliarized aspects. The fake breastplate, the imperfect make-up and, mainly, the big monstrous toes emerging on the bottom right corner, makes clear that we are not observing the portrait of a real person, but a representation of a fictional identity.

The same characteristics can be found with slight diversity in every work of the artist, such as *Untitled #276* (1993), which is part of the "fashion portrait's" series. In this case, the artist interprets a model who provocatively stares at the viewer, while her body is displayed as imperfect, the clothes are cluttered, and her pose is bored and clumsy. Even then, it may be observed a divergence between the apparent subject of the picture (a model on a magazine cover) and the altered and distorted way in which it is shown.

The most relevant aspect of these pictures, however, is the way Sherman uses her image and body without making it an autobiographical narrative, producing multiple fictitious selves that say nothing about her personal life, her emotions or experiences (fig. 5). Therefore, she works on identity focusing on how she can imagine herself, interpreting hundreds of possible personas, always remaining anonymous. In the late 1980s and into the '90s, Sherman expanded her focus to more grotesque imagery, like the mutilated mannequins of the *Sex Pictures* (1992). With their artificial appearance, they display a certain degree of similarity with the self-representations that simultaneously Matthew Barney develops through the *Cremaster's* movie cycle (1994-2002). In these films, he impersonates different hybrid identities, mixing autobiographical threads, such as his childhood plays in the sport fields of Idaho, with mythological elements. Through the creation of artistic alter egos, such as the "character of positive restraint" inspired by the famous magician Harry Houdini or the post-human character modelled on the football player Jim Otto, Barney redefines and forces the limits of the body, using his image to create personal identities in a perpetual metamorphosis¹⁴. The works of Vanessa Beecroft instead, as well as the portraits of Cattelan, display fragments of the artist's identity by multiplying them through the bodies of the models who compose her performances. Chosen on the basis of specific physical features in which Beecroft identifies herself, such as extreme thinness, they represent the personification of the drawings like those of the *Book of Food*, where she depicts herself in fragments.



Figure 5: *Untitled #282* (1993) by Cindy Sherman.
Photo by [Johanna](#), June 9, 2012. [Licensed under CC-BY 4.0](#).



Figure 6: *Untitled* (1993 – 1994) by Vanessa Beecroft. Image courtesy of the artist © Vanessa Beecroft 2020.

In the drawings, the artist's body is separated and multiplied into immature, angular and skinny bodies that narrate the obsession of Beecroft with her own image and her compulsive relationship with food (fig. 6)¹⁵. Sketched with interrupted and concise lines, the drawings are defined by synthetic marks that separate the figures from the background, highlighting isolated portions of the body such as heads, hands and legs.



Figure 7: *VB45* (2001) by Vanessa Beecroft. Image courtesy of the artist © Vanessa Beecroft 2020.

The same fragmentation is reflected by the bodies of the models who, during the first exhibition (*Despair*, 1993) and afterwards, impersonate various features referable to the identity of the artist. Disguised, adorned and wearing wigs, the models of her performances together with the drawings form a plural ego, which aggregates different aspects of Beecroft's identity (fig. 7).

Final Considerations

They may be listed several other relevant self-representations of that time, however the characteristics manifested in the works of Cattelan, Sherman, Barney and Beecroft seem sufficient to delineate an overview of the most frequent representations of the identity in postmodern time¹⁶. In their works, the shift from the alienated subject of modernity to the fragmented subject of postmodernity, as described by Jameson, seems to have matured. If we compare their self-representations to Warhol's, which represent an early stage of this transition, we can indeed observe relevant differences.

In his self-portraits Warhol uses wigs and other objects to connote himself and multiplies his image, nevertheless his identity always remains strongly recognizable. In the process of reproduction and commodification – during which the expressivity of modernist works vanishes – the artist's image is indeed not fragmented and remains clearly identifiable in all its variations: the Warhol of the *Self-portrait* of 1967 (fig. 8) is undoubtedly the same person (albeit older) depicted in the *Self-portrait* of 1985 (fig. 9). In the self-representations of the Nineties, instead, the multiplication of the image and the make-up and disguise are used to stage different simultaneous versions of the self, where every fragment is slightly or very different from the others: Cattelan's multiple faces in *Super Noi* and *Spermini*, Barney's or Sherman's portraits reveal a modality of representation marked by plurality and based on the absence of a recognizable self-core. The disguised representation of personal identity eventually leads to the emptying of the personal image, filled with temporary and constantly changing content. The self of Cattelan, Sherman, Beecroft and Barney is therefore represented as "decentered, relational, contingent, illusory and lacking any core or essence", malleable and fluid¹⁷.

Furthermore, if there is a reference on the artist's life and experience it is invariably vague and undetermined, placed in an indefinite time and mixed with other millions of references. The flatness of the images and the impossibility of decoding them in depth, reveal an anti-narrative way of telling, which doesn't convey substantial information about the subject. As Jameson highlights "it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments' and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory"¹⁸. The self-portraits of the 1990s represent in conclusion the plurality and fragmentation of the postmodern identity in a mature stage through an original iconographic model based on camouflage, multiplication and partitioning of the subjective image, diversified in all its variations. In them, the presented and real self are finally placed on the same level and reveal the equivalent function of every portrait of the artists: no longer the representation of an authentic identity, but infinite possible roles to play.



Figure 8: *Self-portrait* (1986) by Andy Warhol.
Photo by [Jim Linwood](#), January 15, 2007. [Licensed under CC-BY 4.0](#).



Figure 9: *Self-portrait* (1963) by Andy Warhol.

Photo by [Fred Romero](#), August 3, 2017.

München, Pinakothek der Moderne. [Licensed under CC-BY 4.0.](#)

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Notes

¹ Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 37-61.

² James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (London: Thomas & Hudson, 2014).

³ William V. Dunning, "The Concept of Self and Postmodern Painting: Constructing a Post Cartesian Viewer", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49, n. 4 (Autumn, 1991), 331-336; Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'identité. Séminaire interdisciplinaire dirigé par Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Quadrige/Presses Universitaires de France, 1977); Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," in *The Language of the Self*, ed. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1968), 178-179.

⁴ Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, n. 146 (July-August 1984): 61.

⁵ Ibid., 58, 71-73.

⁶ Ibid, 61.

⁷ The waning of affect is described by Jameson as a feature of the new depthlessness in art attributed to the cultural transformation of the Postmodernism. According to Jameson, in the Postmodern time the impact of the pictures on us must be thought in terms of intensity rather than affect, because we cannot reestablish the individual life or life-world which is their point of reference in the reality.

⁸ Jameson, "Postmodernism," 7.

⁹ Kennet Gergen, *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 6.

¹⁰ Massimiliano Gioni, "Maurizio Cattelan, Infiniti Noi," *Flash Art - Italy*, n. 287, October 2010, 90. <https://flash---art.it/article/maurizio-cattelan-infiniti-noi/>

¹¹ James E. Cote and Charles G. Levine, *Identity, Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis*, (New York: Psychology Press, 2014), 26.

¹² Gergen, *The saturated self*, 155.

- ¹³ Carol Vogel, "Cindy Sherman Unmasked", The New York Times, February 16, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/arts/design/moma-to-showcase-cindy-shermans-new-and-old-characters.html?searchResultPosition=79>; Betsy Berne, "Studio: Cindy Sherman. Interview with Betsy Berne", Tate website, June 1, 2003. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/cindy-sherman-1938/studio-cindy-sherman>. The complete sentence is: "I'm really just using the mirror to summon something I don't even know until I see it".
- ¹⁴ Giovanna Zapperi, "Matthew Barney, or the body as machine", in *Cremaster Anatomies*, ed. Christiane Hille and Julia Stenzel (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2014), 191-204.
- ¹⁵ Emily L. Newman, *Female Body Image in Contemporary Art. Dieting, Eating Disorders, Self-Harm and Fatness*, (New York: Routledge, 2018).
- ¹⁶ For other examples of contemporary self-portrait please refer to the following book, which includes examples of artworks from the 1990s: Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate, *The Portrait Now*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
- ¹⁷ Viktor Gekas and Peter Burke, "Self and Identity", in *Sociological Perspectives on Social Psychology*, ed. Karen S. Cook, Gary A. Fine, and James S. House, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 57.
- ¹⁸ Jameson, "Postmodernism", 71.

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