

Crystal Anne Madrigal-Aguilar  
Academy of Art University  
Master of Arts – Art History  
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“Self-Portrait” by Layne Staley:

Portrait of Generation Grunge through Iconology and Structuralism

As with all generations of humanity, there are characteristics that define the mentality, struggles, similarities, expectations, experiences, and unique circumstances only shared within that generation. Within these generations, symbols and icons become synonymous with its conditions and are easily distinguishable and recognizable through its association with said era. Within each generation exists subcultures that further identify members’ aesthetics, philosophies, and experiences. Generation X, 1961 – 1980, were the offspring of the Baby Boomer generation that emerged post-World War II and revolutionized for political and social change, while modernizing institutional norms. Their resulting children encompassed Generation X characterized by rallying against social norms and constrictions, retaliation against pre-assigned labels, and earned independence not yet known in previous generations.

These ideals were especially prevalent within the Grunge subculture that originated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in Seattle. Identified by an eclectic, individualistic, and staunch non-conformity to social expectations, this subculture was complete with its own personal and artistic aesthetic, enforced by the fashion, lyrics, and music of the Seattle Sound. Grunge musicians such as Layne Staley (Alice in Chains), Chris Cornell (Soundgarden), Kurt Cobain (Nirvana), and Eddie Vedder (Pearl Jam) established the battle cry for identity, amidst societal and familial pressures to conform to normalcy. Layne Staley, former lead singer of Alice in Chains and Mad Season, rose to prominence with his powerful vocals and haunting, self-prophetic lyrics. His performance and prominence within Grunge promoted him to one of the reluctant symbols of the

movement. In 1994, he created and exhibited his artwork and self-portrait (Figures 1 and 2) through various pen and ink drawings.<sup>12</sup> His depiction portrays a man in crisis and despair, engaged in a self-reflective posture, thus invoking catharsis between him and the audience. Using the characteristics of Generation X's Grunge movement, Layne Staley's self-portraiture represents the solitary journey of self-discovery through doubt and struggle, experienced by Generation X through its iconology and post-structuralist presentation. Members of Generation Grunge can identify its relevance in their own journeys, while revering the artist whose journey ended prematurely. The tragedy of Layne Staley is memorialized in his self-portrait, which acts as a lifeline to his fans for its symbolism and semiotics.

Layne Staley's "Self-Portrait" depicts a monochromatic quarter view of a man in crisis. Layne's abstract appearance generalizes his appearance and demeanor, making it universal, while indicative of a soul and body in transformation. His downcast head, neck, and posture indicate withdrawal into self and the contemplation of struggle and doubt. Layne, as he presents his self-image, is depicted shirtless, a sign of vulnerability of heart and soul, while the downward head looks internally for relief. The darkness surrounding the eyes and lips reinforce the notion of withdrawal into self, as both are closed to the audience. The black and white presentation represents the duality of internal and external conflict ensconcing Layne and audience, alike. The dominant black background illuminates Layne, as a source of hope, despite the context for which he may have based this self-portrait, his poem "Core" (Figure 3).<sup>3</sup> "Because expression grows

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<sup>1</sup> "'Self Portrait' by Alice in Chains' Layne Staley," CollectionZZ, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.collectionzz.com/Skotchek/collectionzz-reserve/self-portrait-by-alice-in-chains-layne-staley>.

<sup>2</sup> "Sharp Wit Gallery Seattle," Layne Staley's Alice in Chains, Facebook, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/41082513750/posts/sharp-wit-galleryseattle-fine-art-exhibit/10156907210783751/>.

<sup>3</sup> "I Am Tired, I Am Numb," Layne Staley's Alice in Chains, Facebook, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/41082513750/posts/-i-am-tired-i-am-numb-and-i-am-so-very-very-lonely-i-amlayne-staley-core/10156712530813751/>.

from choices made by the artist, to a considerable degree the content of an expressive portrait is not the person but the artist's view of the subject's personality and appearance".<sup>4</sup>

The perceptions of Generation X never inspired much hope from its preceding generations, social institutions, and even media and popular culture. What is absent from these critiques are the unique characteristics of the first generation experiencing two working and/or divorced parentage, latch-key lifestyles, and growing unease of imminent adolescence, individually and generationally. Generation X were viewed as rebels with no cause, counter to the activism of the Baby Boomer generation. Gen Xers needed their own cause, after being told they could achieve anything for which they desired and worked. This newfound freedom, absent in generations prior, allowed Gen Xers to break from imposed confines of traditional ideals and virtues toward their own individuality. For this reason, the institutions who bore these ideals trusted not in the Generation's capacity to produce or contribute to expectations, but to collectively rebel, "It is this indignation at what is felt to be intolerable that unites people into a countercultural *movement*".<sup>5</sup> Thus, the "slacker" generation was labeled and ridiculed.

This label, amongst other derogatory perceptions, was also placed on Layne Staley because of his associations with the counterculture movement of Seattle Grunge and for his struggles with drug addiction. As with his Generation X counterparts, Staley was erroneously characterized and stigmatized, rather than valued for his individuality, talents, and contributions. Layne Staley's "Self-Portrait" is representative of the generational struggles experienced by Generation Grunge and its symbolism counters societal dismissal of Gen X mentality, independence, and self-reliance. Layne's fans identify this piece as their own self-portrait of doubt; however, its iconology and structuralism is indicative of a generation in crisis, that

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth J. Proctor, "More Than Likeness," *Drawing: The Complete Course*. (2011): 126.

<sup>5</sup> Irving Kristol, "Countercultures," *Commentary* 98 (December 1994): 37.

utilized their empirical experiences to ensure a metamorphosis of individuality, counter to what was expected. Staley's artistic contributions in "Self-Portrait" validate his and Generation Grunge's value, despite social commentary to the counter.

The Seattle Grunge subculture inspired, much to its own dismay, a universal following of like-minded Gen Xers, thus creating Generation Grunge. The aesthetic, attitude, and music of Seattle Grunge solidified the movement and the generation's quest for identity and belonging. In reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss, author Annette Michelson states that the ensuing group becomes a collective "not in the manufacture of artifacts but in the constitution, through communication, of the social group, in the structuring experience through exchange, governed by rules and articulated through signs".<sup>6</sup> As a collective, Generation Grunge gave credence to symbols representative of the psychomachia-inspired internal conflict that arose from societal pressures to assimilate, "The Whiners were afforded even greater scope for educational success but many of them failed to maximize their opportunities. They had the chance to reach higher but often chose not to or chose foolishly or unwisely."<sup>7</sup> Such grim confidence unified Generation Grunge through the ensuing self-doubt that crept into the individual and collective psyche. This manifested in the music and visual art that came to symbolize the sentiment of self-discovery and individuality. Album covers and liner notes, clothing choices, music lyrics, and videos perpetuated the spirit of doubt and self-reflection, cultivating a language understood and used by Generation Grunge, "pictures show how things look from viewpoints; and what a picture depicts derives from how it shows things looking".<sup>8</sup> Thus, a relationship between artist and audience

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<sup>6</sup> Annette Michelson, "Art and the Structuralist Perspective," *October* 169 (2019): 7.

<sup>7</sup> David Martin, "The Whiny Generation." *Newsweek* 122: 18 (November 1, 1993): 10.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9310267784&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>8</sup> Dominic Gregory, "Pictures, Pictorial Contents and Vision," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (January 1, 2010): 20.

creates the unique system of signs that correlate to the shared experience and discovery. Based on this relationship, “the study of social institutions as systems or structures, their nature depending not upon the nature of the individual signs which compose them but on the relationships which organized those signs into meaningful systems”.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Generation Grunge identifies their own circumstances in the structure created and represented in the artist’s contribution. Through this process is created the symbols and icons that underscore the collective identity and phenomenon of its structure.

Images that pervaded the Seattle Grunge scene showed the authentic selves of those photographed and portrayed, as well as their self-representations in art, lyric, and song. Self-recognition of struggle and doubt inspired the internal sentiment and dichotomy of individuality and social expectations, creativity and despair, freedom and confinement. Many representations of self, intent, and sentiment were distorted, surreal, and abstract. These notions conveyed feelings of confusion, alienation, and self-deprecation, all of which were themes felt and instilled by the growing resentment of Generation X’s eventual metamorphosis to greatness. Thus, the iconography of Generation Grunge represents the duality of a generation on the line between self-crisis and self-actualization.

As an influential musician within the Seattle Grunge scene, Layne Staley set the standard for the existential challenge faced by his generational counterparts. The internal struggle he portrayed in his lyrics gave Generation Grunge permission to release into a catharsis that inspired creativity and self-realization. Layne’s music reflected the struggles of his fans in Seattle and abroad. They began to identify with the haunting notions of self-destruction and, hopefully, redemption. The structural relationship cultivated from his music and connection with his fans,

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<sup>9</sup> Annette Michelson, “Art and the Structuralist Perspective,” *October* 169 (2019): 9.

easily is translated in his visual art. Layne's "Self-Portrait" is a visual representation of the lyrics he shared in his music, as well as his own battle of duality. "An image was defined by its explicit duality: it constituted the point of intersection between reference in art to nature and reference to literature".<sup>10</sup> The iconology of his "Self-Portrait" is indicative of the unique landscape of Generation Grunge; it explains the struggles faced in maintaining individuality over social expectations, while achieving the much sought after "work-life balance" gaining prevalence. Layne's struggles with corporate success over creative independence, lack of privacy and autonomy, and the eternal search for peace of self and soul further mimicked the circumstances faced by the maturing Generation X. This only further deepened the relationship he always maintained with his fans. This symbiosis between artist, Layne, and Grunger, me and the rest!, is then mutually identified in "Self-Portrait".

The value system that reinforces context in work, rather than an objective view of form, is iconology, which finds importance in the historical, cultural, narrative, and theme. Within this construct, the viewer is presented with context-rich work, in which each element is representative of a specific concept. Amassing each of these elements provides a comprehensive understanding of the narrative and theme within work, thus providing the tools for a proper iconological analysis. To establish criteria and strategy for iconological analysis, Erwin Panofsky generated a triadic system that funnels through various layers of analysis, with the goal of a panoramic view of the various cultural, social, and historical significance of each element represented. Exercising Panofsky's system to a work of art educates the viewer on the full scope. Panofsky's iconographical system employed three levels of analysis: pre-iconographic,

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<sup>10</sup> Christine Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36, no. 3 (1978): 290.

iconographic, and iconological.<sup>11</sup> The first, pre-iconographic, works as the first impression of the piece's theme and generalized information. Iconographic serves to better understand the narrative and its purpose. Iconological, the last level, requires significant understanding of the work's breadth of meaning, context, and narrative. It is within this last construct that Generation Grunge applies its own iconology through the internal and external conflict unique to members of Generation X. The validity of Grunge's influence and attitude of its counterculture members is defined by Panofsky as, "those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed in one work".<sup>12</sup> That work, for Generation Grunge, is Layne Staley's "Self-Portrait".

The development of Structuralism came through Ferdinand de Saussure's inquest on the relationship between representation and meaning. His background in semiotics provided inspiration on the correlation that signs and symbols converge, convey, and represent a universally understood image and context. "The symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of a symbolizing mind, without which no such connection would exist".<sup>13</sup> The resulting structure emphasizes the importance of signs, which are easily interpreted for their representation of the viewer's shared, universal reality. Within the construct of this phenomenon is the sign's connection to its viewer's recognition and understanding. Defined by Saussure as signifier and signified, they are incorporated into representation and meaning of sign. The former underscoring sign recognition and the latter refers to the viewer's interpretation and cognition of

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<sup>11</sup> Christine Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36, no. 3 (1978): 290

<sup>12</sup> Christine Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36, no. 3 (1978): 291.

<sup>13</sup> Annette Michelson, "Art and the Structuralist Perspective," *October* 169 (2019): 9.

the sign. “It is, then, the business of the structuralist analysis to reveal the extraordinary propensity of the human mind to organize, through symbolic sign systems, its experience of the world”.<sup>14</sup> He refers to this phenomenon of signs as referents, which represent tangibility in the real and external world. This is the basis for the structuralist principle, which links the idea with its corresponding sign. The result is the viewer's understanding of their world.

The Structuralist movement recognized the culmination of intrinsic ideas and corresponding representations into a whole. Comprised within the whole are the signs and symbols visually representing and communicating a recognizable idea. The connectivity between meaning and image provides a basis for language and cognition. Within the construct of cultural relativity, the signs provide structure to universal recognition and meaning. Thus, “structuralist analysis places an emphasis on what we term the synchronic aspect of systems – their manner of arrangement, the relationship of parts within the structure”.<sup>15</sup> This propagates the transmission of intrinsic ideals and beliefs into visual representations. This is the principal component of structuralism, the curation of tangible elements into a comprehensive understanding of the real and universal world.

The theories of Iconography and Structuralism allow the audience to visually identify and relate to a work based on its content, symbols, and underlying meanings. Staley’s self-portrait brings the language of his struggle to a visual and relatable presentation, underscoring the shared themes of loneliness, isolation, self-deprecation, and choice faced in Generation Grunge’s existential crises. Thus, like many symbols representing cultural relativism, “Self-Portrait” is representative of the generation’s journey from self-questioning to, hopefully, self-assurance, through its iconographic representations characteristic of this generation’s presence. The theories

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<sup>14</sup> Annette Michelson, “Art and the Structuralist Perspective,” *October* 169 (2019): 6.

<sup>15</sup> Annette Michelson, “Art and the Structuralist Perspective,” *October* 169 (2019): 10.



of Structuralism are the foundations for the iconology of “Self-Portrait”, as its signs and signifiers communicate the ideas presented in the work’s iconography.

Viewing “Self-Portrait” through a Structuralist analysis requires recognition and assignment of language and meaning within the work’s presentation. Each sign in this piece serves a dual purpose in that it reflects the self-image and representation of artist Layne Staley, as well as the self-reflection of the viewer. This is based on the above premise that the relationship between artist and audience instills a system of relatable signs, circumstance, and experience. Layne’s choice to create a monochromatic image signifies its universality to the audience. His furrowed brow indicates stress, worry, despair, loneliness, and hopelessness; a depression born of anxiety to conform, while the necessity of individuality is challenged in this tension of internal and external conflict. A sentiment and reality experienced by most Generation Xers, and most particularly those in the sub/counterculture of Generation Grunge. Development of social anxieties, depression, ADD, and other stressors forced Generation Grunge to seek inward to transcend from the mounting pressures of conformity toward a self-defined and purposeful existence. Layne’s self-portrait is reminiscent to Grungers of that self-defining moment that propelled us toward our individually inspired fate. The responsibility that social institutions take in creating Generation Grunge is reflected in the language and images that inspired Layne’s “Self-Portrait”. Pre-assigned labels and responsibilities, growing unease and distrust of society, and the desire to metamorphosize past struggle and doubt define the structure of “Self-Portrait” and how it represents and becomes the icon for Generation Grunge.

The Iconology of Layne Staley, through his “Self-Portrait”, depicts the contemplative and cerebral artist, as well as the audience with whom he symbolized and hence became iconic. The generational impact of Layne’s contributions in music and visual art gives credence to

Generation Grunge's concurrent circumstances (late 1980s – late 1990s) that defined the attitude, defiance, and ultimate redemption of a generation which inspired little hope from its predecessors. Using Parnofsky's method of identification, "Self-Portrait's pre-iconography is a man demonstrating feelings of alienation and despair, a universal sentiment shared through the ages. The iconographic builds upon the initial understanding of internal struggle and reflection, from which the context of the piece comes into purview. Generation Grunge identifies their own conflict of maturation and individuality depicted in Layne's self-portrait. Layne's posture, facial expression, and dichotomy of choice resonates with the generation that fought to maintain the independence of self and mind that defined their break from Baby Boomer expectations and ideals. Thus, the iconology present in "Self-Portrait" signifies the cultural and social shift that Generation Grunge initiated through their desire to maintain their unique talents, intelligence, and creativity that inspired a movement to refute institutional dominance over individuality, no matter the consequence.

Culturally, socially, and artistically, each generation initiates a movement that defines their priorities, struggles, and resolution of self and collective. Encapsulated in these movements are the icons and symbols that, when assembled, capture the reality, spirit, and optimism of a better circumstance and future; one that allows individuality to be self-defined and embraced, individually and collectively. As Michelson stated, "considered within this perspective, classes of objects or institutions within a given culture demand to be treated in terms of their formal coexistence".<sup>16</sup> The sub/counterculture of Generation Grunge, once ridiculed for its aggressive repudiation of conformity to economic, social, and cultural expectations, demands to be recognized for their fight for individuality. The cathartic process Generation Grunge endured is

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<sup>16</sup> Annette Michelson, "Art and the Structuralist Perspective," *October* 169 (2019): 9.

symbolized through Layne Staley's "Self-Portrait", as it reminds his audience of the perseverance for identity, despite the internal battles experienced, universally. Layne's representation of self and audience instantly captures the iconology of Generation Grunge, while offering longevity of hope for his fans. When "Self-Portrait" is viewed, Layne's fans remember their continuing journey, guided by the talents and contributions of the icon that inspired and represented the battle cry of Generation Grunge.

To you, Layne Staley, I owe my life.

Images



*Figure 1 "Self-Portrait", Layne Staley, Seattle, 1994*

**"Self Portrait"  
by Layne Staley  
A Collection of Pen and Ink**



"I began drawing just a short while ago, and have found it to be a wonderful means to express emotions and feelings in a way that can be seen, rather than trying to mentally portray the same through words and music."

"I do not claim to be an artist in this respect, but do enjoy and am proud of my finished drawings. I am thrilled to be able to show these pieces, and hope others enjoy them as much as I."

~ Layne , 1994

**Sharp Wit Gallery  
216 First Ave. South Pioneer Square  
206.441.0883**

*Figure 2 Sharp Wit Gallery, Layne Staley, 1994*

## Core

Self Imprisonment.

I suppose somewhere inside me  
I yearn for freedom from  
That which holds me stagnant  
Over-exaggeration turns under estimated  
Emotion...

Emotion. Why the urgency to hide and  
Slow the flow of that which could,  
And perhaps will, Imperfect and  
Heal the burning inside?

I am protecting my pain  
It is mine!

And I so badly want to keep my  
Pain to myself

But, in doing so I am hurting  
So many who cross, or care for me.

Aching for love and acceptance  
Only to throw you down in the latter  
of love, shared love.

Yet anger and guilt not shared between  
Me and you

You are blamed for all that is a mystery  
Within myself - Burning

Oh I pray that I might someday  
Throw a blanket over that angry child

If the strength is found within the  
Core of my being

His tears/sack my heart and weight  
it down

I am tired, I am numb, and I am so  
very, very lonely

I am...

Layne Staley

Figure 3 "Core" by Layne Staley

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