

Imagining Ourselves: Constructing American Identity

The Civil War marked a turning point in American History, a loss of innocence, or at least the loss of an innocent belief in innocence. Reflecting deep structural changes in society, artists' self-portraits became increasingly complex, political, psychological, and doubtful. The self no longer sat nobly among his things, certain of the world's order, but was now enmeshed in a world of commercial pressures, conflicting identities and changing hierarchies. "The pursuit of reputation in the eyes of others" may still have served as "the overriding preoccupation of human life,"¹ but portraying the self behind the reputation became fraught with complications. Identities began to shift, gender roles were less certain, and the divide between rich and poor was a deepening chasm. The constructed (or de-constructed) self was no longer adorned and surrounded with simple symbols of self-definition, and the image began to fold in on itself as artists began using the self-portrait as a medium to examine the act of looking. The universal perspective of the privileged heterosexual white male gradually came into question while formerly excluded "others" struggled to overcome their invisibility and to enter into history. Yet, much remained the same: artists continued to look back at the viewer from their own time and place, and presented a view of the contemporary world that surrounded them.

Photography changed the role of art and artist alike, quickly replacing painting as the preferred medium for traditional portraits, and freeing artists from the necessity of creating illusionistic likenesses. Some artists used the camera as a tool for creating sketches and experimenting with composition, others embraced it as a fine art medium, and a few tried to uncover the lies beneath the photographic illusion of objective truth. According to Coco Fusco, "no other means of representing human likeness has been used more systematically to describe and formulate American

¹ Crozier, W. Ray and Paul Greenhalgh. "Self-Portraits as Presentations of Self." *Leonardo* 21, no. 1 1988. 29-30.

identity than photography. Envisioning and exhibiting the American self has been a photographic venture since the inception of the medium. It is an ongoing social, cultural, and political project.”²



Figure 1. Thomas Eakins, *Swimming (The Swimming Hole)*, 1885

Arguably the first modern American self-portrait, Thomas Eakins’ *Swimming* depicts a landscape created and peopled by men, wherein the artist’s identity is both revealed and submerged.³ The pond

serves as an allegory of

society entering the modern world, the young men emerging and rising up from the ruins of an eighteenth-century foundation and then plunging into a nineteenth-century pond, a man-made haven for urban dwellers; a new environment where their teacher, the artist, already swims.⁴

Partially submerged homosexual desire circles just beneath the stable pyramid of the composition. While the outer figures and arms akimbo create diagonals that lead to the apex of a standing youth’s neck, a circular motion is set into play below. The curved body of a diver on the right, and the direction of the swimming dog combine with reflections and the shore line to lead the eye in an arc from right to left, from the diver around the bottom of the lake to a leaning figure, who gingerly tests the water with one hand while maintaining contact with the safety of shore. The raised hand of

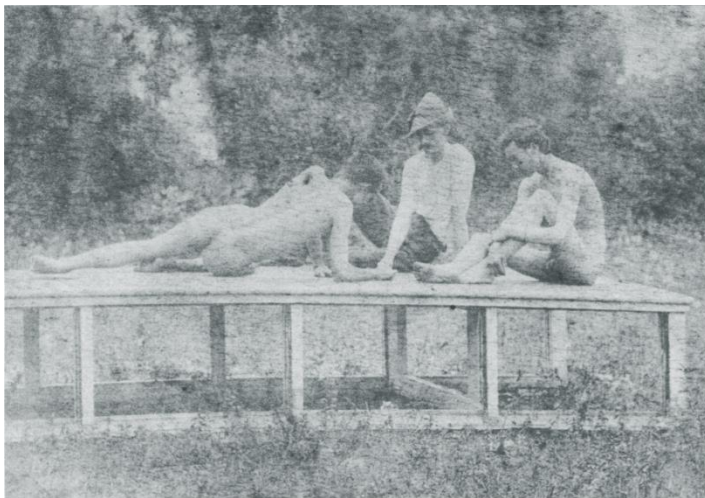
² Fusco, Coco, and Brian Wallis. *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. New York: International Center of Photography in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2003. 13.

³ Berger, Martin A., and Thomas Eakins. *Man Made: Thomas Eakins and the Construction of Gilded Age Manhood*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000. 89. This title, along with its nostalgic associations, was added posthumously by his wife. Eakins exhibited the painting twice, first under the title *Swimming* and then as *The Swimmers*, calling greater attention to the swimmer(s) depicted: himself and the dog.

⁴ Berger, 92-93.

the next twisting figure and the diagonal arms above transport the eye to the buttocks of the standing youth. Meanwhile, Eakins portrays himself with only his head, shoulders and hand revealed above the surface, at the edge of the group, looking, reaching, and swimming toward his students, his body mostly concealed beneath the water. The artist's voyeuristic gaze unifies the group of nudes, each absorbed in his own world. The dog swims from Eakins toward the beautiful young men, perhaps a vestige of Christian symbolism for the animal nature of sexual desire.

“In the manner of Oscar Wilde” was a euphemism for “nonprocreative” sex in Eakins’ day, and these words were used by Eakin’s sister to describe his scandalous relations with her daughter, which she alleged caused the young woman to descend into insanity and suicide.⁵ Although his niece was female, Eakins’ gender identity was certainly conflicted, and most of his nudes portrayed the male body as a sexual object of beauty. The figures are young and sinuous, and are often depicted sensuously reclining. Genitalia are usually hidden by legs and turned torsos, but buttocks of ambiguous gender are central in many compositions. Especially in his photographs, the male nudes are portrayed sensuously like traditional odalisques and Venuses, eye candy for the sexual gaze. He wrote that the female nude was “the most beautiful thing there is—except a naked man...,” and he attempted to portray the unclothed body while avoiding the controversial display of frontal nudity through careful positioning.



Although *Swimming* appears to record the spontaneity of a natural idyll, Eakins’ photos reveal the obsessive control the artist exercised in all of his compositions. Using a series of photographs in place of preliminary drawings, he staged his nude

⁵ Dovle, Jennifer. “Sex, Scandal, and Thomas Eakins’s the Gross Clinic.” *Representations*, no. 68 (Autumn, 1999): pp. 1-33. 9

Figure 2. Thomas Eakins, photographic study for *Swimming*

models on a wooden frame to work out the details of the painting's pyramidal structure. Not intended for publication, the photos were saved by a student, and remained secret until long after Eakins's death. Painted during a time when Eakins was still protected from financial insecurity by his teaching job, and his unmentionable desires hidden under the respectable clothing of marriage, *Swimming* reveals a seemingly innocent, yet erotically charged society of men, with the artist positioned on the group's margin, both a leader and voyeur.



Figure 3. Romaine Brookes, *Self-Portrait*, 1923

Perhaps it was easier to live outside of rigidly proscribed gender roles in Europe, at least for a person of means. The expatriate American painter, Romaine Brooks lived openly as a lesbian in Paris in the early 1900s, and portrayed herself in 1923 wearing the tailored tuxedo and cropped hair that defined the lesbian members of the literary salon to which she belonged.⁶ Her self-portraits also included a series of psychological line drawings through which she attempted to exorcise the unpleasant childhood memories that still haunted her as an adult.⁷

It may be her own ruined past represented in the background of her somber self-portrayal, as well as the devastation of war. Her masculine clothing declares her

liberation from traditional female gendered roles, and yet also functions as a both uniform and disguise, concealing all but the skin of her face and neck, and painted in mask-like impasto. Her eyes are obscured in the shadow of the hat, and a tiny spot of red on her lapel, palely reflected in her lips,

⁶ Lampela, Laurel. "Daring to be Different: A Look at Three Lesbian Artists." *Art Education* 54, no. 2, Considering Content (Mar., 2001): pp. 45-51. 49

⁷ Chastain, Catherine McNickle. "Romaine Brooks: A New Look at Her Drawings." *Woman's Art Journal* 17, no. 2 (Autumn, 1996 - Winter, 1997): pp. 9-14. 9-10.

highlights the absence of color in the rest of the scene. It is as if the alternate identity she has claimed has erased her individuality. While her eyes are almost invisible in reproduction, according to one critic, they are startling in the actual painting. "Alert, glittering, self-possessed ... she's watching you before you get close enough to look at her. She's not passively inviting your approach; she's deciding whether you're worth bothering with. Chances are, you're not, at least not if you're approaching with the conventional notions of what male and female mean."⁸

On the opposite pole of the conventional identity spectrum, Norman Rockwell was one of America's most popular painters yet, until recently, has been almost completely ignored in scholarly discourse. His paintings, widely distributed as illustrations and reproductions, were instrumental in constructing the identity of white, middle class, small-town America. Not universally accepted as art, let alone as high art, his images live on in the American imagination as nostalgic "memories" of a simpler time. *Pictures for the American People*, a 1999 retrospective exhibition, organized by the High Museum of Art as part of its series, *Great Forces in 20th Century Culture*, marked one of the first successful attempts to consider Rockwell's paintings as art. Part of what has made re-framing his work possible is the changing nature of institutional discourse, a shift of focus from revering great artists to studying the cultural context of art in society.⁹

Rockwell's 1960 self-portrait was used as the cover illustration for the Saturday Evening Post to announce the first eight installments of his autobiography. At the age of 66, it was a year that marked a turning point in his life and career. Rockwell's wife of thirty years had recently died and the following year he re-married, ended his 47-year association with the *Saturday Evening Post*, and went to work for *Look Magazine*. After a brief metamorphosis, he seemed to reinvent himself; his

⁸ Cotter, Holland. *Politics Runs Through More Than Campaigns*, New York Times, August 25, 2000, accessed May 11, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/25/arts/art-review-politics-runs-through-more-than-campaigns.html?pagewanted=print&src=pm>, accessed May 11, 2011

⁹ Ceglie, Clarissa J. "Review: Complicating Simplicity." *American Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (Jun., 2002): pp. 279-306., 281, 284

paintings began to represent non-white Americans for the first time, and he shifted his focus to contemporary issues such as civil rights, the space program, and the war on poverty.¹⁰

At a glance, this triple self-portrait is a clever illustration depicting Norman Rockwell at work, revealing the process of its own construction within a hall of mirrors: the artist looking at himself in the mirror, looking out from the reflection, looking out from the drawing on canvas, and by implication, standing in the position of the viewer and looking in. Formally, a complex set of diagonals control the viewer's access to, and movement through, the composition. Conceptually, the painting complicates some of the facets



Figure 4. Norman Rockwell, *Triple Self-Portrait*, 1960

of American identity that Rockwell helped to construct.

The mirror is gilded and topped with a bit of Americana, the eagle of self-reliance, as if to reveal the conventional, patriotic filter through which his reflected image has been strained. In front of, and mirrored in, the Federalist mirror is what appears to be a glass of Coke, as much a symbol of America's commercial bounty as Warhol's soon-to-be exhibited Campbell Soup. The canvas is topped with a helmet resembling Roman headgear. Rockwell purchased the object from a dealer who claimed it was a war relic, and he later discovered that it was a French fireman's helmet, thus it

¹⁰ Norman Rockwell Museum, <http://collections.nrm.org/search.do?id=217605&db=object&page=1&view=detail>, accessed 5-12-2011

was linked to a long tradition of actual and fabricated Western imperial history.¹¹ The symbolic helmet crowns a canvas that contains a drawing in process, along with a collection of tacked-on images and the artist's name. Rockwell links his own art to the art historical canon by positioning his thumbnail sketches directly across from self-portraits by Albrecht Durer, Rembrandt van Rijn, Pablo Picasso and Vincent Van Gogh, and asserts his direct connection to Durer and Rembrandt with a rod that links their images to his right hand. On the bottom right of the same canvas, he places an enormous trademark signature; identifying him as an illustrator, a maker of what the art world disparages as "low" or "popular" art.

Weak-shouldered, wide-hipped and sporting high-water pants, Rockwell perches crookedly on his simple wooden stool. Having been responsible for helping to construct the twentieth-century concept of American masculinity, it is interesting that Rockwell portrays himself in ways that call his own manliness into question.¹² He also shows himself "correcting" some of these indicators in the drawing, thereby calling attention to the difference. His pipe droops in the primary image of the artist and in his mirrored representation, but is presented as erect on the canvas. Also, his eyes are hidden by glasses and he squints myopically into the mirror, but his un-bespectacled eyes gaze out from the canvas with assurance. Many of his illustrations sought humor by contrasting manly men and boys with sissies, but this self-portrait begs the question of whether his sympathies might rest with the less masculine, sartorially challenged underdogs that many of his images seem to mock.¹³

Alice Neel was another artist who refused to follow the anti-figural fashions of her time, and she was not taken seriously by the art world until the 1970s, a time when feminist artists and scholars began dismantling the modernist bias against both figurative art and art by women, enabling her work to

¹¹ Ibid

¹² According an early leader of the Scouts, given the wrong circumstances, boys might age from "robust, manly, self-reliant boyhood into a lot of flat-chested cigarett smokers, with shaky nerves and doubtful vitality." E. T. Seton, *Boy Scouts of America: A Handbook of Woodcraft, Scouting, and Life Craft*, 1910, xi, quoted in Hantover, 189, quoted in Segal, Eric J. "Norman Rockwell and the Fashioning of American Masculinity." *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 4 (Dec., 1996): pp. 633-646. 640.

¹³ Rockwell noted in his autobiography that he was bothered by the "queer notion that Perceval (and especially the form Percy) was a sissy name, almost effeminate," and he first reduced his middle name to P. and then dropped it altogether. Quoted in Segal, 638.

gain wider recognition.¹⁴ Born in 1900, she worked for the WPA during the depression and lived in New York, collecting souls – first in Spanish Harlem, and then painting a who’s who of the art and literary world. As a young artist she sometimes represented herself in context, but from a distance. One such painting, which she later titled *Alienation*, appears to depict the post-coital intimacy of a bohemian couple peeing in the bathroom; another shows the artist in a well-baby clinic that feels more like a mental asylum. Although she sometimes painted her youthful face, she felt she looked too soft for a portrait to show her true character until age etched it onto her face and gravity claimed her curves.¹⁵ At the age of eighty she completed what may be her most subversive painting, within an oeuvre that includes portraits of communists, gays, artists, intellectuals, family members and a Fuller Brush man who survived the holocaust, many of whom were painted in the nude.

Neel delights in art historical quotation, posing her subjects both to mirror and mock canonical images, and her self-portrait successfully subverts both the art world’s self-portrait and female nude painting conventions. In keeping with tradition, her portrait emphasizes the hand and eye, elevated above and divided from the body by the brush. She looks intently out from the canvas as if into a reflection, but the subversive subject is her eighty-year-old, naked, female self. Her pose holds up a distorting mirror to the entrenched art historical



Figure 5. Alice Neel, *Self-Portrait*, 1980

¹⁴ Allara, Pamela, and Alice Neel. *Pictures of People: Alice Neel's American Portrait Gallery*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England [for] Brandeis University Press, 1998, 192

¹⁵ Cheney, Liana, Alicia Craig Faxon, and Kathleen Lucey Russo. *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2000. 200

practice of representing young fleshy females for the pleasure of the male gaze. Her sagging flesh is emphatically unerotic and her direct gaze challenges the viewer, brazenly claiming a place for herself within the history of art.

Neel's body is subtly divided along a left/right axis, emphasized by a division of yellow and green in the floor. Her right hand actively wields the brush and her right foot curls up in a lively gesture, while her left side is passive, the gaze is more inward, the rag in her limp hand droops toward the floor, and the left foot slopes down into a field of green. The duality played out across her body evokes life and death, as if at eighty she had a foot in each world. It also represents the artist as one who looks both in and out, simultaneously thinking and acting. A chair leg between her legs puns on the absent phallus, a retort to Freud, whose legacy she disparages in one of her typically acerbic comments. "To permit a psychiatrist to say you suffer from 'penis envy' is like singing 'Old Black Joe' to a Black Panther."¹⁶

Neel's feminism, although conflicted, spanned the first and third waves, and was connected to a deeper belief in social justice and equality. She stated that "injustice has no sex and one of the primary motives of my work was to reveal the inequalities and pressures as shown in the psychology of the people I painted." By stripping her subjects of clothing she sought to reveal the whole truth of a person without their accessories superficially defining their social position.

While Neel sought to reveal the truth of a person's character, Andy Warhol's self-portraits present a total absence of self, his repeated self-image just one of many commercial icons, a motif in which he reproduced the superficial trappings of his various disguises. In Neel's revealing portrait of Warhol, his eyes, the windows to the soul, are closed. Reacting against the mythology of universal truths that attached to the abstract expressionists, Warhol famously celebrated the mundane and superficial in his art. However, his own larger-than life persona, as well as the size of his canvases, continued the

¹⁶Nemser, Cindy. "Art Talks", *Scribner's*, New York, ii, quoted in Cheney, 200

heroic modernist vision of the great (male) painter. Claiming that he wanted to be a machine, he challenged the role of the author, and helped change the artist's role from creator of original artifacts toward performer of celebrity identity.

Warhol's artworks and his persona are similarly formulated cultural constructions and are inseparable in interpretation. His self-portraits present themes and variations on affectless photographs, screened in a variety of trend colors and camouflage patterns, related to media iconography and the mass production of consumer culture. Neither mirror nor



Figure 6. Andy Warhol, *Self-Portrait (Camouflage)*, 1986

window, Warhol's images present unemotional

renderings of banal surfaces, manufactured in flat purity.¹⁷

Chuck Close also rebelled against abstract expressionism and tried to introduce a machine-like aesthetic into his work, removing expressive brushwork while maintaining heroic scale in his canvasses. He also rejected the anti-figural bias of modernism, using the human face as a motif that he could fracture into minimalist patterning. Suffering from face-blindness, Close used these portraits to study the nuances of structure and subtle indications of emotion and identity that he was unable to perceive. His photographic images resemble the impersonal institutional snapshots of passports and mug shots, poised between personal and anonymous, analog and digital, natural and constructed. His working method involves working from photographs, so he often uses his own

¹⁷ Dyer, Jennifer. "The Metaphysics of the Mundane: Understanding Andy Warhol's Serial Imagery." *Artibus Et Historiae* 25, no. 49 (2004): pp. 33-47.36

face as a test before photographing his subjects. He claims that the prevalence of self-portraiture in his body of work is based largely on convenience.¹⁸

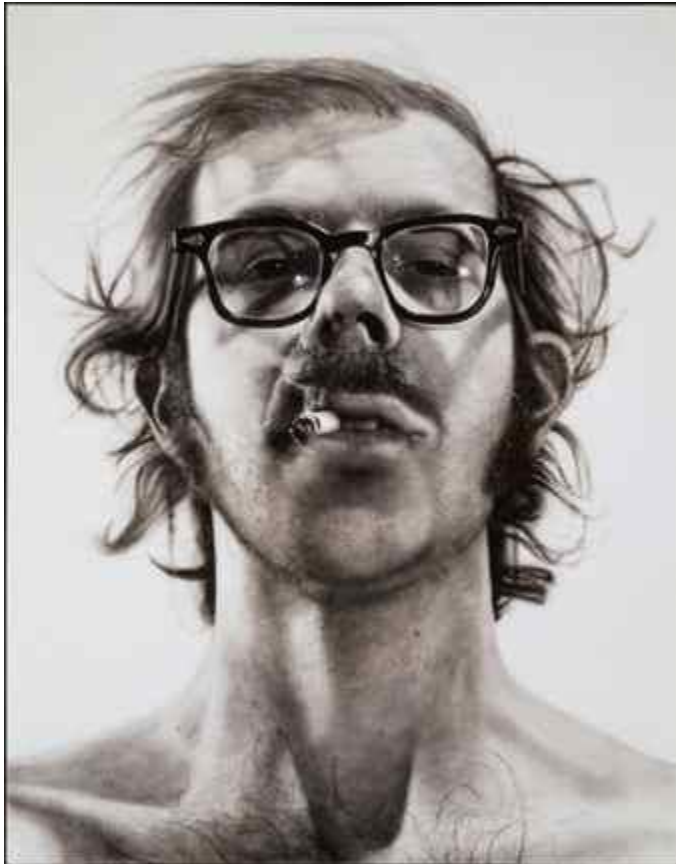


Figure 8. Chuck Close, *Big Self-Portrait*, 1968

Close begins each portrait by taking Polaroid photos, overlaying a grid, and then carefully transferring the image to canvas one unit at a time. Like an ink-jet printer, he begins painting in the top left corner of the canvas, continues down line by line, and finishes in the bottom right, sometimes making two passes to create an underpainting and then a final surface. He allows himself a certain degree of freedom within the individual pixels, and over time, his work process gradually became less restrictive. At first he painted exclusively in

black and white, and then added color, and in his current work the individual grid elements are painted using small gestural strokes, their pixels of vivid color combining to evoke the dazzling brilliance of Byzantium mosaics and a hyper-reality that transcends his images' photographic origins.¹⁹

Emotional detachment is central to his enormous self-portraits, many of which appear to be partially obscured beneath patterned glass. His 1968 *Big Self-Portrait* depicts

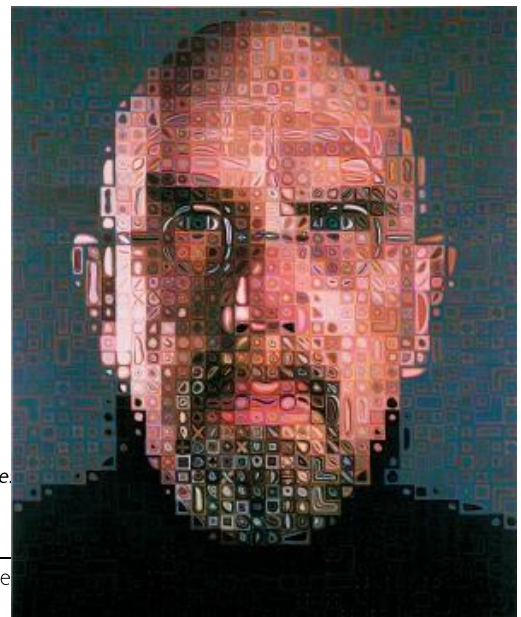


Figure 7. Chuck Close, *Self-Portrait*, 2004-2005

¹⁸ Close, Chuck, Madeleine Grynsztejn, Siri Engberg, and Douglas R. Nickel. *Chuck Close*. Museum of Modern Art, 2005. 118

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 119

Susan Barnett, *Imagining Ourselves*, 2011, re

his youthful face framed by wild hair, head tilted up in defiance with a rebel's cigarette dangling from his lip. Since 1970 he has completed at least one self-portrait each year and, viewed serially, they provide a narrative chronicle of the artist's advancing age.²⁰ His self-images have grown more detached and introspective and, as his hair retreated and then vanished, his likeness became increasingly sculptural, coming to resemble a bust carved from stone. His work does not always progress in linear fashion; he often returns to earlier photo maquettes to work out new ideas using a familiar framework. For instance, in 1980 he went back to the photograph that served as the model for his famous 1968 image, reversed the negative, and used it as the basis for a charcoal drawing. Close also created another rendering of the image by pressing his inked fingerprints on paper, perhaps inadvertently punning on the concept of digital imagery by using the digits of his hand.

The grids and dot patterns of Close's portraits paralleled the rise of the computer, the advent of digital imagery, and the evolution of printed half-tone screens into pixels. His desire to paint like a machine does not include using machines to produce his images. He was shocked to see an image of Jefferson reproduced on the cover of *Scientific American* in 1973 that had been fractured like his own paintings by engineers using computer technology. While sensing a connection, he says, "I quickly realized I wasn't interested in having the machine do the work for me, or in having any kind of artificial layer between the image and me."²¹ In all of his work, he continues to negotiate the boundary between handmade and original, mechanical production and reproduction.

While Chuck Close deconstructs and reassembles his own face as one head among many, Cindy Sherman uses her own body as subject within each theme she has explored. Like many artists of her generation, Sherman rejected not only



²⁰ Friedman, Martin L. *Close Reading: Chuck Close and the Art of the Self-Portrait*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005. 90

²¹ *Ibid.* 99.

Figure 9. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978

expressionism, but the entire genre of easel painting, and she uses the photograph as the end product.²² Her face is more a prop than a subject; a blank screen on which she projects constructed stereotypes from the commercial media; her work calls into question the very possibility of constructed identities to contain inner truth. Her pictures are not portraits of self in the traditional sense, but simulations of the fractured selves and recycled performances that pass for identity in American culture. Sherman maintains that “my photographs are not really autobiographical. I’m not trying to show who I am or what I look like in my work. I’m really trying to hide myself in it.”²³

According to Jean Baudrillard, in this era of networks, connections, production and consumption, the self has become a blank screen upon which networks of influence are projected. “With the television image—the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era—our own body and the whole surrounding universe become a control screen.”²⁴ He posits a world in which the real, or hyper-real, is generated without origin or reality. “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.”²⁵

Influenced by the writings of the philosopher Jean Baudrillard and by the fabricated social environments and interactions of “reality” TV, Nikki S. Lee uses the medium of photography to represent a series of constructed selves and to reveal the unstable nature of identity. Her work is also informed by her Korean perspective; she claims that identity in Asian culture is seen “not as a static set of traits belonging to an individual, but something constantly changing and defined through relationships with other people.”²⁶

²² Ibid. 295

²³ Ibid. 293

²⁴ Baudrillard, Jean, and Sylvère Lotringer. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1988. 127

²⁵ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. 1.

²⁶ Museum of Contemporary Photography. *Nikki S. Lee*. http://www.mocp.org/collections/permanent/lee_nikki_s.php. Accessed 5-11-2011

According to writer, critic, and activist Lucy Lippard, it is a common notion that it is unnecessary to explore or question the dominant gender and culture, while “everyone else must be ‘studied’ within an inch of their lives.”²⁷ Thus in America white people have no culture and men have no gender, their universal perspective serving as an invisible and ubiquitous frame of reference. Lee, defining herself as an *Archetype archeologist*, in some ways appropriates the traditional (Western) position of the insider exploring (or exploiting) exotic cultures, but she reverses the dynamic, along with the relative positions of East and West. Her own perspective



Figure 10. Nikki S. Lee, *The Ohio Project* (7), 1999

fluctuates between insider as subject and outsider as the object of study.

Growing up in a small rural village, Lee was exposed to a variety of cultures through television, music and print media. Later, as an immigrant immersed in a foreign culture, she noticed that her persona changed depending on social setting, and set out to discover who she might become given different circumstances. In her *Projects* series of 1997-2001, she tries on serial identities, researching various subcultures over the course of three months; living for a month as a group member and being photographed within the context of their society. Unlike Sherman, who uses costume to assume identities within the privacy of the studio, Lee actually lives within her roles, and places herself in circumstances that she cannot entirely control. She hands her automatic “snapshot”

²⁷ Lippard, Lucy. “Differing Differences” in Pearlstone, Zena, Allan J. Ryan, and Joanna Woods-Marsden. *About face: self-portraits by Native American, First Nations, and Inuit artists*. Santa Fe, NM: Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian. 2006. 71.

camera to a member of the group or to a passerby to take a photo; captured in low resolution, with a date stamp and arbitrary cropping.

Lee is forthright about her role as an artist when she approaches the members of her *Projects* groups, and does not try, beyond costume and mannerisms, to represent herself as authentic. She says that, for instance, when she did the Hip Hop and Latino projects, she did not try to become Black or Hispanic, but to act out the person she might have been if she had been adopted by parents from a different culture.



Figure 11. Nikki Lee, *The Hip Hop Project*, 2001

Although the *Projects* seem simple on the surface, they raise disturbing questions about the nature of identity that extend beyond Lee's role-playing. How much of identity is essential and how much is ingrained by socialization and experience? Her ability to blend exceeds what we would deem possible within the socially proscribed boundaries of race, age and class. There is a line of political correctness that her documentation of stereotypes transgresses, yet the groups she works with seem

to enjoy their role in the performance, and to accept Lee's constructed self. Although the work calls the authenticity of group and individual identity into question, Lee's subjects and collaborators appear to be unoffended by the implications. Her images can be viewed alternately as a shallow engagement with, or critical commentary on, the prepackaged selection of American social roles, walking a fine line between cross-dressing and drag, passing and parody, assimilation and camp.²⁸

According to a recently abandoned page of the US State department website, "Since the United States was founded in the 18th century, Americans have defined themselves not by their racial, religious, and ethnic identity but by their common values and belief in individual freedom."²⁹ While it is tempting to believe these words, and to embrace a post-racial, post-feminist America, where we are all part of the "family of man," our roles, neighborhoods and opportunities are defined by race, class and gender. The prison population has increased tenfold over the past three decades, and more than 70 per cent of prisoners are people of color.³⁰ In the inner cities, more than half of all black men do not finish high school, and nearly 60% of black men who drop out of high school spend time in prison by the time they reach their mid-30s.³¹ Although the wage gap between men and women has narrowed, this has been mostly due to reduction in men's incomes, and women still earn only 82.8 percent of the median weekly wage of men.³²

Although race and gender are flexible social constructions, until financial, social and educational opportunities are equal, we cannot pretend to live in a post-identity world. Superficial attributes continue to signify and privilege one group over others. Although we have moved beyond seeing cultural markers as essence, we have yet to arrive at a place where color, gender, age, and other individual differences are accepted as attributes rather than indicators of status.

²⁸ Smith, Cherise. *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 198, 10-11

²⁹ Friedman, Michael Jay. America.gov Archive, <http://www.america.gov/st/peopleplace-english/2008/February/20080307154033ebyeessedo0.5349237.html>, 2008, Accessed May 12, 2011

³⁰ CPIC, State University of New York, Binghamton, <http://cpic.binghamton.edu/resisting.html>, accessed 5-13-2011.

³¹ Eckholm, Erik. "Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn," *New York Times*, (March 20, 2006) <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/20/national/20blackmen.html>. Accessed 5-13-2011.

³² Cauchon, Dennis. "Gender pay gap is smallest on record." *USA Today*, Updated 9/14/2010. Accessed May 13, 2011

The self-portrait genre, along with figuration, is again permissible within an art world overwhelmed by the infinite possibilities of accelerating change, simulation, and global connection. Close investigation of the specific always reveals larger patterns, and at the same time has the potential to lead toward a greater appreciation of difference. Artists continue to discover complex, multi-layered subjects no further than the nearest mirror, inseparable from the social and political world that appears in the background of their own reflection.



Figure 12. Nikki S. Lee, *Layers (Madrid 1)*, 2007



Figure 13. Nikki S. Lee, *Layers, Prague 2*, (2007)

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