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Title: Sophrosyne and simulacra: probing the nature of a constructed self-image

Abstract:

This essay resulted from an analysis of an artwork where the artist was motivated to construct a representation of herself. A social semiotic analysis of the self-image indicates interchangeability and tension among artistic elements with assumed, dialectically opposed meanings. Discussion with regards to the nature of the self-portrait touches on philosophically influenced interpretations that pose the image as a cyborg and the cyborg as a simulacrum. Upon reflection, the self-image can be interpreted as having the qualities of a simulacrum (a reproduction that is self-contained and autonomous) more so than of an authentic expression of representation. This essay hopes to contribute to the continued critical examination of individual visual representations in order to help enrich the growing knowledge base from which we derive a fuller understanding of our surrounding culture and ourselves.

Keywords: Visual semiotics, Social semiotics, visual arts, Philosophy, Simulacra

Introduction: semiotics and visual meaning-making

> Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.—
> Paul Klee

We live in an image-rich culture. Within this culture, images serve as perceptible demonstrations of the interplay between inner and outer influences, between individual inspirations and societal effects. These demonstrations help us to interpret the world around us, communicate with others, and contemplate new ideas and representations. In the creation of images, a motivated individual attempts to capture some internal imagery and manifest it in some way. In doing so, they cannot help but reflect facets of the human condition (Barry 1997). However, because the process of image-making is one where a variety of influences are individually reprocessed and manipulated, interpretations of the resulting manipulations remain necessarily problematic. Questions concerning whether or

how meaning is transmitted or claimed and what we can know about some particular image are raised. Visual semiotics is thus a research field that is both creative and challenging. Because "some believe that the image is a very rudimentary system in relation to language, and others that signification cannot exhaust the ineffable wealth of the image' (Barthes 1985, p. 21), modifications to the statement, "An image transmits meaning," are continually refined.

Semiotic research looks at similar sources of data as do other traditional disciplines, but in different ways and for different reasons. Semiotic inquiry and methodology are "multidimensional, presenting the coordinate functions of time, space, material, and motion as dynamic events" (Kevelson 1986, p. 530). This essay began with an artwork I created where I was motivated to paint my first self-portrait, which I titled "*Sophrosyne*." When I completed the piece, I did not anticipate that it would become research material for my interests in semiotic analyses. However, I found myself contemplating the finished image less in terms of its artistic merits and more in terms of its potential meaning-making impact. In the essay that follows, which moves from semiotics and cyborgs to simulacra and the self, I illustrate thoughts inspired by the semiotic analysis and interpretation of this artwork.

I believe that visual semiotics research is enhanced by the continued examination of images with a variety of critical lenses. The resulting interpretations from such inquiries add to the knowledge base from which we draw understandings about our surrounding culture and ourselves. While this essay does not propose a new theory of semiotic representation or analysis, it was conducted in the spirit of exploring and adding to existing semiotic understandings. In the continued examination of individual visual representations, perhaps a richer understanding of cultural stimuli and symbolic expression can be cultivated.

Semiotic context

Eco states in his *theory of a lie* that:

A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it. Thus *semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie*. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all. I think that the definition of a 'theory of the lie' should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics (Eco 1976, p. 7).

Eco's "theory of a lie" identifies two important characteristics of a sign. First, it addresses a sign's representativeness (or how faithfully a sign reflects some reality). Second, it addresses the authenticity of that sign. Representativeness and authenticity are central issues (given to a variety of interpretations) that all semiotic approaches struggle to address. For example, representativeness and authenticity are implicitly and intrinsically incorporated in Saussure's linguistic sign; in the relationship between signifier and signified, between what is seen and what it represented (Culler 1976). Exploring different methods of discovering how accurately some image substitutes for something else (i.e., some reality, human epistemology, etc.), as well as how to discern the meaning of that substitution, is at the heart of all semiotic research regardless of the diverse and separate areas of semiotic inquiry that exist. This essay contemplates the representativeness and authenticity of a particular image, initially using a social semiotic analytical approach. Social semiotic research proposes that rendered images are indicative of not only self-constructed facets of particular values, but also of a series of contrasts reflected in the surrounding culture. This particular theoretical approach and its accompanying analytical tools proved useful as a starting point for examining the image.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) semiotic approach to understanding the representativeness and authenticity of an image is embedded with a variety of foundational visual semiotic theories from such theorists as Saussure, Barthes, Halliday, Arnheim, and Bakhtin. However, their social semiotic method builds upon the work of these theorists and moves to an understanding that specifically describes the visual image as a process. In this process, the sign maker's interest in the object he or she is attempting to create motivates and informs his or her selection of what aspects of that object are critical for integration into its representation. Additionally, social aspects are necessarily incorporated into the creation, transmission, and perception of meaningful visual code. Their techniques for analyzing visual images proved a valuable tool with which to begin looking at the image, *Sophrosyne*. In addition, I drew upon the philosophical theories of Baudrillard, Dyens, and Hayles when reflecting upon the implications of the resulting semiotic analysis and the nature of the body.

Semiotic analysis of the image

Using techniques described by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), I analyzed the artwork by delineating and coding different aspects of the image. Primarily, I considered where the image's modality cues fell along scales that ranged from maximum to minimum. The modality cues of an image refer to color saturation, color differentiation, color modulation, contextualization, representation, depth, illumination, and brightness (For a meticulous description of analysis techniques based on modality cues, please see Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, p. 119-229). These cues function as "motivated signs" on the part of the artist in particular contexts and evoke certain "truths" that "rest on culturally and historically determined standards of what is real and what is not" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, p. 159; 168). An image is said to convey particular meanings, based on the collection of the "truths" inherent in that image. The artist's choices in assigning different values to different modality cues are driven in part by how society will generally interpret those modalities. Modality cues also contribute to an image's modality orientation, which

can be seen to gravitate towards one (or more) of the following: technological, sensory, abstract or naturalistic.

In addition to modality cues, several other factors also play a part in image analysis. These include the interpretation of the following: composition, information value, salience, framing, gaze, social distance, perspective and angle, and inscription technologies. The analysis of each of these factors points to particular understandings about some aspect of the image. For example, information value relies on both the composition and placement (i.e., top, bottom, left, right, and center of an image) of different elements in an image in order to glean meaning about that element, as well as its relationship to the image as a whole. Thus, both the characteristics of particular elements, as well as their locations, could indicate certain assumptions that are implied by the image.

Sophrosyne was painted by hand with primarily acrylic paint on a 36 in. x 36 in. (1 m. x 1 m.) square canvas (See Figure 1). Red foil, crystal and seed beads, stones, thread, cosmetics, glitter, pussy-willow branches, black locust thorns, peacock feathers, and lacquer were all used to construct various parts of the image (some of them applied and/or three-dimensional). The inscription technology used to create this image is significant, for the artist's technique or choice of mediums necessarily imbues the piece with a particular style (Gombrich 1969). The image was constructed entirely by hand technologies with the aid of hand tools (such as brushes or palette knives), but without the use of recording or synthesizing technologies (such as photographs or a computer). Hand inscription technology invites the viewer to relate to the image in different ways. For example, the viewer can look at the image in terms of its representation (i.e., "This painting is a self-portrait" or "This painting is a picture of a woman") or in terms of its materiality (i.e., "This painting was created with fine, blended brushstrokes" or "This painting uses a variety of mediums"). The artist's choice of hand inscription technologies "encourages us to focus on the 'graphology' of the painting, as a symptom, a trace

of the individual temperament of the artist" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, p. 236) in a way that reproductive and synthesizing technologies do not. Consciously or unconsciously, the choice to use solely hand technologies signifies the desire to project an individual representation (in an individual and singular manner) to the canvas.

Figure 1. *Sophrosyne*. 36 in. (height) x 36 in. (width) x 1.5 in. (depth); [1 m. (height) x 1 m. (width) x 4 cm. (depth)]. Acrylic paint, red foil, beads, stones, thread, cosmetics, glitter, pussy-willow branches, black locust thorns, and peacock feathers on canvas. This piece is a self-image, motivated by the intent to create a representation based on the knowledge of oneself. The resulting figure is literally and figuratively shaped by a culture of signs, images, and codes where a tension exists between understanding the image as a self-reflection and as a construction of a reflection. The piece can be interpreted to effectively function as a simulacrum (a self-contained reproduction), rather than as a representation of purposefully intended reality.

The image is of a three-quarter length, supine female form on a red, fluid background. The figure lies on her left side facing the viewer with her arms crossed in front of her body. She grasps her right upper arm with her left hand. Her right hand lays limply in the foreground. Her cool-hued skin is finely blended and appears distant and flat against the rich proliferation of reddish-gold hues that fill the background. At the waist, the icy blue-white skin morphs into a thin swath of pointillism, punctuated by crystal appliqués that edge overlapping peacock feathers. Neither fish nor fowl are her nether regions, but some construction that attempts to incorporate both. Appearing to arch from behind her right shoulder, a single web-like wing hovers above her body as well as approximately half an inch (1.5 cm.) from the flat surface of the canvas. The wing is a spidery prosthesis created from pussy-willow branches, shaped with wire and weights to create the skeletal armature.

The image is rendered in a simplistic, somewhat stylized manner. This method of rendering pares the figure down to a connective collection of specific details. Particular details are amplified (both their renderings and their meanings) by the use of this painting style. Certain elements of the image are inscribed in greater detail (such as the figure's face and heart), giving those elements greater salience than others (such as the figure's skin and hair).

It is difficult to read the expression in *Sophrosyne*'s heavily-maquillaged eyes: Are they emotionless or passionate? It is also difficult to engage her eyes for two primary reasons: 1) the figure's head is tilted approximately 90 degrees away from the angle of an average viewer's eyes and 2) her eyes seem to be looking both a) directly at the viewer and b) just above and beyond the viewer's eye level at the same time. This ambiguity in the figure's gaze places the image somewhere between a demand picture and an offer picture (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). On one hand, the figure seems to establish eye contact with the viewer and thus demands some interaction, forcing the viewer to enter into an imaginary relationship of some kind

with the figure. On the other hand, the figure avoids eye contact with the viewer and seems to passively offer itself up to the viewer's critical and impersonal contemplation.

Similarly, *Sophrosyne*'s social distance invites two opposite interpretations of the figure's presence at the same time: a personal interpretation and a social one. While the figure is fairly close to the viewer (three-quarters of her life-sized body fill the canvas), at the same time she is not quite within the viewer's reach (the manner in which she is fore-grounded makes her appear just beyond the viewer's touch). The figure is set against an ocean of bold, red brushstrokes, with no borders or delineating marks. This absence of framing stresses commonality with a group identity, rather than stressing individuality by setting the figure off in its own framed area or framing it within the background in some way. Interestingly, this absence of framing seems to contradict the apparent motivation for the creation of the image: that of representing an individual.

I coded *Sophrosyne* for various aspects of modality along different scales. Its resulting "truth-value" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996) seemed to lean primarily towards a sensory orientation and to a somewhat lesser degree, towards an abstract orientation. Sensory orientation indicates high modality in the application and differentiation of color, and indeed, the canvas is heavily saturated with a variety of lush, hyper-real colors from rich red tones to icy blue tones to a myriad of jewel tones sparkling from different applied elements. These colors are meant to evoke the "pleasure principle" where "colours are there to be experienced sensually and emotively" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, p. 170). In addition, the image also had a less pronounced and partial lean towards an abstract orientation. Abstract orientation indicates that there is an attempt to reduce the individual to the general, to bring an image to a realm where it can be generally understood or portrayed without employing specific cultural or societal particularities. The stylized treatment of particular elements in the image emphasized what was essential, while it

consequently downplayed the rest of the image. The absence of framing also contributed to the image's generality. There remained enough details in the overall image, however, to prevent a high modality towards abstract orientation.

The composition of the image further helps to determine its information value. The nucleus of the painting is a brightly colored heart, crowned by flames and circled by thorns. Torn layers of red foil overlap to create a heart-shaped, bittersweet union that is simultaneously protected and constricted by a ribbon of organic thorns, lacquered paper, and clots of thick crimson paint. The heart is rendered in an iconic style, reminiscent of both Christian religious and Mexican "Día de los muertos" visual traditions. Pertinent features that convey an iconic code can be recognized in the shape, colors, and placement of the heart within the image. These features establish an equivalence or an impression of similarity with like heart renditions in the aforementioned traditions (Eco 1976). The choice to render the heart in this fashion connects *Sophrosyne*'s foil heart to the cultural meanings assigned to such icons: passion, suffering, and faith. However, while *Sophrosyne*'s heart may iconically represent these traditions, at the same time, it also semiotically signifies a variety of interpretations (Damisch 1975). The heart may represent love, vigor or simple biological functioning. *Sophrosyne*'s heart is crowned with a lightly-drawn symbol—an ankh. It appears to have been scratched into the drying paint of the bright yellow and orange flames above the heart with a black marker. The ankh symbolized the word for "life" in the ancient Egyptian language. This symbol could thus be interpreted as a compliment or continuation to the meaning implied by the symbol of the heart (i.e., heart = love, ankh = life; heart = life, ankh = life). However, ankh was also the word for "hand mirror." If this is an intentional play on symbolism, the image can be read with a variety of conflicting interpretations (i.e., Does this image represent life? Does this image represent reflection? Do reflections represent life? Or vice versa?) Regardless of the final interpretation, the central positioning of

the heart and ankh symbols indicate that the viewer's understanding of these symbols is crucial to the interpretation of the image as a whole.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the left of a composition represents the "Given;" information that is assumed, culturally widespread or commonsensical. The right of a composition represents the "New;" information that is not yet known or agreed upon, problematic or unfamiliar. There is oftentimes an implied connection or movement between these two edges of a composition and indeed, the left and right of this composition are two halves of the same figure. The left of *Sophrosyne* is dominantly filled with the lower half of the figure from the waist down. Although this area should give us insight into the "known," it is an ambiguous area. Overlapping feathers (that appear patterned after fish scales) seem to surface from beneath the skin at the waist and throw into doubt the humanity of the form. The following question is raised: Is this a human figure clothed in feathery garb or is this a half-human, half "not-human" figure? The eyes of the peacock feathers look out from the image and into our own. These symbolic eyes could be interpreted as directly engaging the viewer's gaze, but the nature of this engagement is unknown and unfamiliar. The sex organs (if there are any) are hidden or obscured by feathers; what representation is nestled among these scaly feathers punctuated by green-indigo eyes? Sexual promise or sexual ambiguity? This indistinct (or lacking) sexuality contrasts with the prominently exposed female breasts flanking the central heart. It should be noted, however, that the breasts are not rendered with artistic weight or salience in the image. They seem to blend into the cool landscape of the flatly rendered body and reinforce a non-sexual (or asexual) sentiment in the image.

To the right, the figure's head is invisibly propped up on its left side. There is a single streak of wine-red hair through an otherwise pale, wheat-colored mane. The face, especially the lips and nose, is rendered from an oblique angle, placing the viewer somewhere below and to the left of the figure. Using this perspective, the

figure's horizontal form is placed on a perpetually higher level than the viewer's. The transparent blue hue of the skin concentrates in the lips, which are stained a dark blue. *Sophrosyne*'s russet eyes are ringed with both paint and cosmetics, resulting in heavily layered circles of varied peacock hues. Unlike the contradictory reading of the elements in the left/Given, the ambivalent gaze of the figure's eyes and the non-naturalistic rendering and coloring of her skin, face, head, and hair do encompass the concept of the right/New—that which is unknown, not fully explored, and not fully agreed upon.

The top of a composition represents the "Ideal," while the bottom represents the "Real" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). Generally, there is less of a unifying connection between these two edges of a composition and more of a sense of contrast or disconnect. In this image, however, the top and bottom are linked because they both comprise parts of the same figure. The top/Ideal corresponds to that which is ideal, generalized, and salient, while the bottom/Real corresponds to that which is more specific, practical, and grounded. As with the left and the right of *Sophrosyne*, it is again somewhat difficult to cleanly ascribe these interpretive correspondences to the elements at the top and bottom of the composition. In particular, the interpretation of the top/Ideal proves problematic, much as the interpretation of the left/Given.

The prosthetic wing arcs above the figure's shoulder and into the top of the composition. It is intricately crafted from bent pussy-willow branches, tightly wound wire, strung beads and crystals, and singular peacock quills. Despite the wing's three-dimensional quality (both in terms of its components and its placement above the flat surface of the canvas), its salience is somewhat diminished in comparison to the artistic weight given other elements in the image. Ideally perhaps, the wing represents flight, freedom and protection. However, its construction in this image seems to belie its culturally and symbolically assumed interpretations. This

representation seems more of an earthbound backdrop framing the figure; intricate, tangled, and unlikely to help the figure take to the sky.

At the bottom, the figure's right hand rests on the dark red-colored foreground. The skin of the hand is rendered to appear somewhat aged and worn and the fingertips are dotted with tiny pearls and crystals. The thumb wears a thick, pewter-colored ring inscribed with a skull. The wrinkled skin of the hand contrasts to the flatly rendered skin that comprises the rest of the figure. It seems to represent the reality of working with the hands/body, of aging, and of dying (this sentiment is also echoed by the symbol on the ring). The pearls and crystals appear physical calcifications depicting aging or continuous layers of time. In line with the information value attributes of the bottom of a composition, the right hand ties the figure to elements of the Real and the practical; time, mortality, and death.

Discussion: from representation to simulacrum

A social semiotic analysis of this image revealed a number of instances where tension existed between the rendered artistic elements and their culturally-assumed meanings or their semiotically understood interpretations. For example, the image's gaze and proximity seemed to both engage and disengage the viewer at the same time. While the image could be interpreted as a demand picture with close proximity (establishing a relationship to the viewer and inviting him or her into a close personal space), it also seemed to function as an offer picture with vague proximity (dissuading the viewer from coming too closely while he or she examined the image from an objective standpoint). While the motivation for the creation of the image was to create an individualistic self-portrait, the figure was visually framed in such a manner as to identify with group or common identity. While the left and top of the image should have signified (respectively) known information and ideal aspirations, the artistic elements in these areas did not seem to signify either. While the heart was the central focus of the image, it was rendered

in such a fashion as to make its interpretation semiotically and iconically complicated.

> Vision is always a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted? …We are not immediately present to ourselves. Self-knowledge requires a semiotic-material technology linking meanings and bodies (Haraway 1991, p. 192).

In illustrating her understanding of the intersection between the human, the animal, and scientific culture, Haraway describes the cultivation of a partial, flexible, and cognizant self as crucial to open-mindedly seeing and understanding cultural symbols. This concept helped me to objectively reflect on this image and shape particular interpretations about the body and the representation of this particular body. Additionally, Walker-King's notion of "body fictions" (2000, p. vii) and Hines' notion of "corporeal semiotics" (2000, p. 39), helped me to begin to think about this particular self-image in terms of an artificial construction—a body influenced by a variety of identities and justly or unjustly assigned physical and visual markers that were defined, created, and maintained by social and cultural forces. Eventually, I came to interpret this image as not so much a reflection of the individual, but rather as a simulacrum: a reproduction, a self-actualized piece, a self-contained entity. As I considered this image, I thought about what elements may have constituted genuine demonstrations of self-image and what elements were simply nostalgic acts on my part to prove symbols in relation to myself.

The self-image as a cyborg. Although ostentatiously a self-portrait, *Sophrosyne*'s physical exterior (the visual representative copy that the viewer inevitably compares to the artist) can also be seen as a mimetic cyborg sheathed in symbolism. At first glance, *Sophrosyne* does not appear to be a cyborg as there is little fusion of the mechanical and biological in the figure. To be sure, there are several aspects of the image that invite a reading of human/non-human integration:

the cool-hued, metallic or "dead" coloring of her flesh; the spiky, sharp armature of the prosthetic wing; her inscrutable and unreadable expression; her body pieced together below the waist (possibly from two different sources). However, elements such as these, which point towards superficial mechanical-biological fusion, have become paradoxically one-dimensional characteristics of cyborgs as presented in many artifacts, texts, and films that have been analyzed.

Overt mechanical and technological symbolism seems somewhat ornate and superfluous, especially since it has become increasingly clear (especially over the last few decades) that bodies and technologies will not stay on their own physical, let alone conceptual sides (Thurtle & Mitchell 2002). The concept of a cyborg implies a complexity beyond some physical melding of metal and flesh. Rather than a physical cyborg of biological-technological fusion, I interpret the image *Sophrosyne* as a representation of a conceptual cyborg; a body that is "becoming," evolving from a multiplicity of elements (Wise 1997, p, 42). The combination of individual, societal, and cultural effects shapes the cyborg into a body with "several owners and originating from several territories...in which (and upon which) technology, biology, and culture meet" (Dyens 2001, p. 81). Thus, *Sophrosyne* can be interpreted as a cyborg because the figure represents a layering of systems—one symbol system atop another—until the original, proposed body essentially disappears, replaced by another, body-like form composed of layers with social, cultural, technological, and biological meanings. However, the "becoming" and "layering" properties of a cyborg representation disassemble human identity and throw motivations and possibilities into question.

Gray (2001) states that as humans aspiring to understand ourselves, we are also in some sense aspiring to be cyborgs: "Cyborging ourselves is costuming ourselves from the inside out...[mapping] intersections where thesis and antithesis cross; mutations that are always synthesis; amalgamation and creation in the invention of prosthesis" (Gray 2001, p. 193). However, at the same time we desire it,

we also resist this transformation. In the creation of a self-portrait, an artist manipulates different understandings of the self in an attempt to resolve them within a visual medium. In trying to balance self-understanding with a constructed representation, the resulting self-image oftentimes reproduces the tension between the artist's vision of self-image and the choices made in mediating the construction and appearance of that self-image in the flesh (so to speak). The resulting self-image is to some extent, an external prosthesis that results from a cyborging of the self; a result of an examination of the intersections, mutations, and amalgamations within.

Finally, the constructed body does not only convey individually motivated meanings, but also meanings that have been socially, culturally, or otherwise collectively assigned: "The cyborg is as semantic transformation of the body; it is a living being whose identity, history, and presence are formulated by technology and defined by culture" (Dyens 2001, p. 82). The body transmits certain meanings in certain cultural contexts, even if those meanings were not individually motivated or intended. *Sophrosyne* is an image of a female body and I believe the choice of this body is a genuine result from the artist's vision of self-image. However, this female figure is both literally and figuratively constructed by a culture of signs, images, and codes. Thus, in addition to whatever other symbol systems *Sophrosyne* touches upon, within this culture she also (intentionally or unintentionally) represents the tensions of being female and of being constructed. The cyborg becomes a space (in this instance) where representation and authenticity can intersect.

The cyborg as simulacra. As discussed previously, the ambiguous representation of artistic signs and layered meanings in *Sophrosyne* contributed to this image's tension and its further interpretation as a conceptual cybernetic construction. The image's tensions initially became evident through social semiotic analysis and aided my interpretation of *Sophrosyne* as a simulacrum rather than an authentic representation of an intended self-image. Specifically, the conceptual cyborg that *Sophrosyne* characterizes can be understood as a simulacrum because

its composition depends on the rape, reproduction, and layering of original matter within the constraints of surrounding influences.

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard discusses the "interchangeability of previously contradictory or dialectically opposed terms" (1988, p. 128): Everything becomes undecidable, whether it be the true or the false in a media message, the usefulness or uselessness of some mass-produced object, the right or the left of political proclamations (Baudrillard 1988). This same concept of interchangeability appears to suffuse the assumed meanings of many of the symbols and signs in *Sophrosyne*'s composition. The image is profoundly ambivalent. It is simultaneously and alternately: passionate and apathetic, human, not-human, and posthuman, sacred and blasphemous, exposed and secretive. The image dwells on the borders between organic and contrived, apparent and indistinct. While there seems to be a sense of balance among the disparate elements, a sense of pattern (perhaps due to the personal interpretations and placements of visual elements), there is also an absence of pattern and this absence produces an expected tension: "Perhaps this is how the repressed is returning in cyborg—as imperfection, self-contradiction, and unresolvable paradox" (Gray 2001, p. 194). For instance, the artist's real, flesh-and-blood heart becomes a mere representation in *Sophrosyne*'s breast and further, one that is reminiscent of mass-reproduced symbols of inviolability. According to Baudrillard, this constitutes an example of the hyperreal, a natural by-product of a vacuously reproductive and symbol-saturated contemporary society. The hyperreal is a reproduction of reality. It is a simulation that has little relation to actual reality and rather more interaction and relation to other signs, symbols, and codes (Baudrillard 1983).

With regards to the relationship between cyborgs and simulacra, Hayles (1999) explains that the formation of the posthuman depends on the interplay between the dialectics of "presence/absence" and "pattern/randomness." Hayles postulates that interaction between the dialectics of "absence" and "pattern"

results in "the collapse of the distance between signifier and signified, or between an 'original' object and its simulacra" (1999, p. 249-250). This collapse between signifier and signified, between the authentic and its copy, is essentially another incarnation of Baudrillard's hyperreality (Hayles 1999). In *Sophrosyne*, semiotic analysis discloses the nature of the interplay between pattern and absence. Many of the visual elements lend themselves to obscure or unclear interpretations. This arbitrariness can be interpreted as a lack of adherence to some greater overriding pattern. The perceptible lack of patterning forces the viewer to intentionally create a singular relationship with the image and its elements, based on his or her interpretation of the image's coded symbols (which are already culturally interpreted and abundantly reproduced). Although the motivation was to create a genuine self-image (a pattern representing an understanding of the self), a social semiotic reading of visual cues in *Sophrosyne* biases interpretation towards a self-contained entity that lacks such patterning. Each viewer constructs his or her own pattern in order to redress the apparent absence of pattern in the image. Following this reasoning, the self-image interpreted as a cyborg, progresses to that of a simulacrum.

Conclusion: the simulacra and the self

The semiotic analysis of the figure represented by *Sophrosyne* led me to interpret it as less of a self-image and more of a simulacrum of a constructed, sacrosanct reality. Because this artwork reproduces existing codes and symbol systems, it is probably a fairly accurate representation of perceived self-image, translated from the fabric of my experience, awareness, and authenticity. While it could be argued that authentic self-image resides only within an individual's own consciousness, it could also be argued that it is simultaneously a synthetic construct that exists partially (if not entirely) within and as a consequence of culture and society. The guise and form of the cyborg latent in this image adds a subsequent

layer of interpretation and meaning; that of the problematic nature of the cyborg and the difficulties it poses in recognizing exactly what we are looking at. Accordingly, we must question whether we are witnessing the original or its copy, the authentic or the simulacrum. In striving to craft a represented identity within the current mythic of the hyperreal (the context of interchangeability, the realm of familiar/unfamiliar, the definable/indefinable) the resulting self-image can be interpreted as less of an authentic reflection and more of a simulated space for reproduced reflection in the postmodern condition. This estranged refraction simultaneously has all relation, and yet no relation, to its creator.

It is exciting to explore conceptions and constructs of self—especially at this time when more complex relationships between biology, technology, semiotics, and culture are being proposed: "Dreaming of possible constructions of the impossible leads to real transformations, new types of life, changes in the very way we think of space, time, erotics, art, artificiality, perfection, and life, ourselves" (Gray 2001, p. 194). Crafting an individualistic portrait within a culture that is influenced by a multiplicity of layered and amalgamated constructs generates problematic questions that may upset the notion of a self-image as being both distinct and authentic. Although the realm of the constructed, cybernetic being is not a new space in which to contemplate perimeters of human identity, *Sophrosyne* lingers in a human/not human, authentic/reproductive space and eventually forces a reorganization of the perceptions that might have initially fueled understanding of this self-image:

> …We form, sculpt, and contaminate ourselves out of endless perspectives, representations, and materials…whether we saw evidence of fusion…between human being and robot, or between human being and culture, the message was always the same: the body, like all surrounding phenomena, is a mosaic (Dyens 2001, p. 90).

Meaning-making choices always have raised interpretive questions. How we choose to decipher and represent ourselves is becoming an increasingly complex undertaking, especially within our significantly-saturated culture. However, individual meaning-making, expression, and interpretation remains a vital element to our continued exploration of our semiotic understandings and our postmodern selves: "We must carefully choose our stimulations, the music we dance to, the costumes we wear, or the future cannot be ours and we will not even have a good time. We are, after all, our rituals" (Gray 2001, p. 196). *Sophrosyne* was the product of artistic inspiration and purposeful execution. Despite a premeditated approach (and perhaps premeditated expectations), the resulting self-image is complicated and self-actualized. This self-image/cyborg/simulacrum can be considered as much a work of art as our own identities are (Gray 2001).

Coda

Sophrosyne was an ancient Greek word that has a variety of modern-day interpretations. Since the actual application of this term has been long ago abandoned, it is difficult to assign it a singular English translation. In researching this term, however, I eventually understood sophrosyne to represent the positive blending of intense passion and perfect control; the inspiration behind such contemporary maxims as "Know thyself" and "Nothing in excess." I wonder whether the illusive concept of sophrosyne resists translation in our modern world and whether its potential becomes distorted in the attempt to actualize and represent it.

A painting is never finished—it simply stops in interesting places. –Paul Gardner

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