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## **The Artist, the Image and the Self: Representation in Rembrandt, Bacon, Mapplethorpe, Sherman, and Nan Goldin.**

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# The Artist, the Image and the Self: Representation in Rembrandt, Bacon, Mapplethorpe, Sherman, and Nan Goldin.

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## Abstract

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Before photography, only painters, printmakers, and sculptors could tell, through self-portraits, how they saw themselves and how they were perceived. In the past, only artists had the resources to capture and picture themselves. From one brushstroke to another, this mediated gesture marked the perception of the self. Western art highlights numerous works from artists who wrote the history of culture through portraiture and *self*-representation. In contemporary art, some artists have been able to explore new means to investigate new possibilities of representing the self. In the past, painters seemed to scrutinize the mirror in search for hidden truths; in our era, however, dominated by uncertainty, ambiguity, and speedy records that carry out their obsolescence, new issues cross the representation in contemporary art. It is undeniable that the history of art reveals how self-representation has been an essential tool for artists, regardless of the historical time in which they are inserted, in their search to reflect on themselves and their relations with the world. In the face of an immensely large and virtually inexhaustible universe, in this study we focus on five artists: Rembrandt, Francis Bacon, Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, and Nan Goldin.

**Keywords:** self-portrait, image, painting, photography.

# El Artista, la Imagen y el Mismo: Representación en Rembrandt, Bacon, Mapplethorpe, Sherman, and Nan Goldin

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## Resumen

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Antes de la llegada de la fotografía, sólo los pintores, grabadores, escultores podían decir a través de los autorretratos, cómo se veían a sí mismos, cómo fue su percepción de ellos. En el pasado, sólo los artistas tenían los recursos para la tarea de representar ellos mismos. El gesto mediado marcó la percepción de uno mismo. El arte occidental ha destacado obras de numerosos artistas que escribieron la historia de la cultura a través del retrato y la auto-representación. Algunos artistas contemporáneos han sido capaces de explorar nuevos medios para investigar nuevas posibilidades de auto-representar. En el pasado, pintores parecían escrutar el espejo en busca de verdades ocultas; hoy, por otro lado, domina la incertidumbre, la ambigüedad y registros rápidos que logran su obsolescencia, nuevas cuestiones cruzan la representación. Es innegable que la historia del arte revela cuánto la auto-representación ha sido un instrumento esencial para los artistas, independientemente del tiempo histórico en que están insertados, en su búsqueda de reflexionar sobre sí mismos y sobre sus relaciones con el mundo. En este estudio nos centramos en cinco artistas: Rembrandt, Francis Bacon, Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, y Nan Goldin.

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**Palabras clave:** autorretrato, imagen, pintura, fotografía.

**T**He self beyond the mirror: In contemporary practices of self-representation such as that of the *selfies*, we face the lenses of the photographic device by ourselves or in groups; however, independently of the situation, we never are alone, we never are isolated in the world. On the contrary, while keeping in mind that the destination of the images is, in general, a so-called “social network,” when we put ourselves in front of the lens, we are very far from being in an isolated situation, from being alone.

It is very common that we place ourselves in front of the lens of the device that captures said images with the aid of a *selfie stick* that causes the subject to move from ourselves to an external situation, creating a fictional idea of another witness when clicking the button. This device –the *selfie-stick*– helps incorporate this “other” as an eyewitness to the event, thereby increasing the degree of truthfulness in building a picture of what we believe we are, or at least of what we would like to be.

By distancing the lens from the object that has yet to be registered, with or without the selfie-stick, mirror or any other device, we seek to eliminate unfavorable distortions due to the lens proximity; thus, we reveal the function and the destination of these images: a positive self-representation waiting to be uploaded on social networks. Assuming the benefits of the speed of time, we try to make people believe that we are what we want to be, building up and spreading an image designed in the field of desire.

Unlike what happens today, in the past, only artists had the resources to capture and picture themselves. In the surge of photography, only painters, printmakers, and, even less common, sculptors were able to tell the world, through a visual rich text, a self-portrait, how they saw themselves and how they were perceived. In a self-representation process constructed with tramping, the painter would incorporate fractions of time, legitimizing a documentation of their anxieties, joys, and desires. From one brushstroke to another, interspersed with long periods of observation and reflection, the mediated gesture marked the perception of the self.

In other situations, it was more common for an artist to use their talent to record his/her perception of the *other*, transforming this other in the object within the portraiture. However, this representation is based on something outside this other, in this case, the gaze of the artist in a process that kept the other in an object condition with no chance of becoming a subject. Only the artist, with the proper tools and resources needed for a self-portrait, is granted

such a confrontational process with (self) representation in a dialectical movement that promotes a collision between subject and object.

The history of Western art highlights numerous works from artists – painters, in specifically– who wrote about the history of portrait and self-representation in art –a legacy that tells man’s history through the perception of the self in images frozen by strokes left on the surface of a picture.

Throughout historical time, artists faced an exciting issue when creating self-portraits: how to make his/her vision reach his/her face and thus overcome the dilemma post by eyes that see and that do not let themselves to be seen. Artists, more often painters, who resorted to the mediation of various devices, such as still water, glasses, and reflective surfaces, eventually elected the mirror “as an invaluable instrument for the art of self-portraiture. A flat mirror is a static, two-dimensional surface that displays, by reflection, a non-static, three-dimensional image” (Wilson 2012, p. 57).

But, what is effectively a mirror? What does it reveal, hide or subtract? Who is that in the mirror looking back? Who is this *I* seen before me, that looks like me, but that is unrecognizable? Who is this person that looks at me in “a place where I know I am not?” As stated by Michel Foucault, “the mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to me, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent” (Foucault 1986, p. 24).

Echoing these same questions and anxieties, the great Brazilian novelist João Guimarães Rosa would ask, “but what kind of mirror is that” to remind us that “there is the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ ones, those who favor and those who distract; and those who are just honest [...] How are you, me, and the others in the visible?” (Guimarães Rosa 2005, p. 113-114). Soon after, he completes with analogies between the mirror and photography on the precariousness to capture the visible:

I answer: in addition to prevailing for the lenses of the machines similar objections, their results support before belie my thesis, since they reveal superpose to iconographic data the rates of the mysterious. Even when they are taken immediately one after another, pictures will always be very different from each other. If

you have never looked at it, it is because we live in a hopeless way, distracted from more important things. (Guimarães Rosa 2005, p. 113-114)

For us, at this point in the history of culture and technology, it is a given to know that lenses and photography, facing their limitations, potential and platitudes, are not able to prove or demonstrate anything.

The mirror, on the contrary, forces us to face our truths in different times; the mirror reflects and forces us to think about copying our present selves at odds with what we *have* been and with what we *would like to be*. Through its layers and succession images, the mirror throws us mercilessly against the image that we nourish of ourselves. In addition, the mirror, in the midst of tasks and everyday banalities taken out by razors, toothbrushes, combs, makeup brushes and the like, projects self-portraits with a vain expectation that we will somewhat understand what we are.

### **Self-Portrait: a Compression of Times**

The mirror used in portraiture projects the artist's image, for and about himself; an image offered to him in the labyrinthine practices of self-portrait. The alleged facilities, that try in vain to justify the choice of the mirror by the artist, which supposedly lets him always available in front of himself, thus freeing him from depending on models and other motifs for the practice of painting, does not consider, however, the coping difficulties filed by exploitation of the self. Making a self-portrait demands dedication and patience with a potential to observe the self reflected in the mirror.

For British Professors W. Ray Crozier and Paul Greenhalgh, this "prolonged exposure" may in some cases lead to a contaminated state of negative thoughts that turn out to be embedded into the representation of the self-portrait: "since these should be captured in the completed picture –either because the picture is expressive of the artist's psychological state or because the artist copies an adopted pose, facial expression, etc., which communicates a negative emotional state." (Crozier and Greenhalgh, 1988, p. 29)

The advent of photography promotes a substantive transformation in the perception of time in art, opposing the idea of an elongated exhibition, typical of the nature of painting, to the photographic myth of the now, even if

photography in its earlier days had snapshots as an elongated condensation of multiple instants. This time-relationship distances painting from photography. In painting, different times are compressed within the picture. It is a final recording of moments that successively extend itself between the comings and goings in the painter's creation process.

The painting, when compressing times in succession, gets vertiginously closer to cinematographic art. In the case of self-portraits, the capturing of different mental states and different moods of the artist-subject-object make image compression seem to contain a collapsing of time that leaves an imprint on the pictorial object. Gilles Deleuze highlights this dynamic of painting in his dialogue with the Irish painter Francis Bacon, when he notes:

In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. For this reason, no art is figurative. Paul Klee's famous formula "Not to render the visible, but to render visible" means nothing else. The task of painting is defined as the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible. Likewise, music attempts to render sonorous forces that are not themselves sonorous. (Deleuze 2003, p. 56)

Here Deleuze discusses the Irish painter's ability to give visibility to forms we cannot see, which guarantees him an outstanding position in painting history. For Deleuze, this Bacon's power appears in extensive series of heads and especially in self-portraits: "the extraordinary agitation of these heads is derived not from a movement that the series would supposedly reconstitute, but rather from the forces of pressure, dilation, contraction, flattening, and elongation that are exerted on the immobile head. They are like the forces of the cosmos confronting an intergalactic traveler immobile in his capsule." (Deleuze 2003, p. 58)

It is possible to elaborate, from Deleuze, that Bacon's painting incorporates film elements in attracting and recording unseen forces plaguing us incessantly to format, warp, and consume us. One should not confuse this capturing of forces with the distinct commitments of the Futurist painters with the visible dynamics of movement obtained as tracks in pictorial waves.

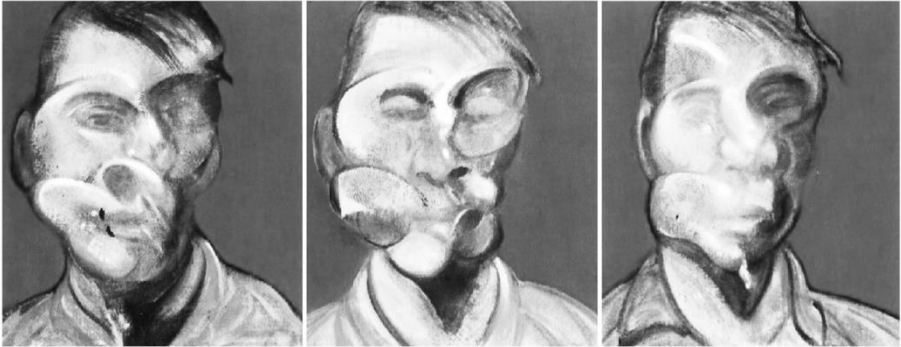


Image 1. Francis Bacon. 1973. *Three Studies for a Self-Portrait*. Oil on canvas. Recovered from [http://www.all-art.org/art\\_20th\\_century/](http://www.all-art.org/art_20th_century/)

Francis Bacon is part of a long and extraordinary lineage of artists-painters in general-who wrote the history of culture through portraiture and self-representation. Among these artists, it is undeniable the prominent place of two great Dutch painters, Rembrandt and Van Gogh- the latter an enthusiastic admirer of the former.

In a letter to painter and friend Émile Bernard dated 1888, Van Gogh wrote that “when I’m in the Louvre, I still go, with a great love in my heart, to the Dutch, Rembrandt first of all. Rembrandt, whom I used to study so much.” (Van Gogh apud Auden 1961, p. 304). Van Gogh's admiration extended towards all the works of the great Dutch masters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but he gave particular importance to Rembrandt’s portraits and self-portraits. Van Gogh was captivated by the absence of complacency or condescension of Rembrandt in front of the mirror in which he (Rembrandt) saw himself as old, battered by the intransigence of time with wrinkles on his face:

He paints a self-portrait, old, toothless, wrinkled, wearing a cotton cap, a picture from nature, in a mirror. He is dreaming, dreaming, and his brush resumes his self-portrait, but only the head, whose expression becomes more tragically sad, more tragically saddening. He is dreaming, still dreaming, and, I don't know why or how, but just as Socrates and Mohammed had their familiar spirits,



Rembrandt paints behind this old man, who resembles himself, a supernatural angel with a Da Vinci smile. (Van Gogh apud Auden 1961, p. 306)

Van Gogh continues expressing his esteem for Rembrandt's work, extolling its qualities, describing it with uncontainable enthusiasm to his friend Emile Bernard, trying to make him understand the greatness of this Dutch master's work:

Am I very incomprehensible, my dear comrade Bernard? I am just trying to make you see the great simple thing: the painting of humanity, or rather of a whole republic, by the simple means of portraiture. This first and foremost. When later on— in the case of Rembrandt— we happen to meet with mysticism, with Christs, with nude women, then it is very interesting but it is not the main thing. (Van Gogh apud Auden 1961, p. 309)

Born in 1606 in Leiden, Netherlands, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn built an exceptional legacy for the history of art: part of a set of about 85 works cataloged as self-portraits, painted, engraved or drawn (Stichting Foundation 2005, p. 158), works that lie among the most extraordinary self-portraits in the history of painting.

Painted regularly over more than forty years, Rembrandt recorded in self-portraits his anxieties, joys, perplexities, writing a visual chronicle that records the passage of time and its signs upon the artist's body especially on his face. Historian and art critic Roger Fry, in a text dated in 1921, praised the expressive qualities of the painter, his full, absolute control of technique and pictorial means: "What brilliance and surety of handling in the rapid brush work of this amazing notation of form! What miraculous co-ordination of eye and hand" (Fry 1921, p. 262) The art critic does not hide his amazement and his exaltation, "so that what Rembrandt made of Van Rijn's head becomes almost a mythological personification, an ideal figure: but ideal and universal without losing anything of the sharp particularity of the individual." (Fry 1921, p. 263).

Retreating still a little more in time and anchoring our reflections in a final study of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we borrow visions of life, art, ethics, and aesthetics

from American historian and theorist Estelle May Hurl, whose views bear the marks of another time. The historian stresses Rembrandt's dedication and determination to return successively to the very same model, painted and repainted tirelessly in a thorough and exhaustive observation of the expressions carved on the face and body of the painter himself. At this point, Estelle May Hurl recalls that, to Rembrandt:

There was one sitter who was always at hand, and ready to do his bidding. He had only to take a position in front of a mirror, and there was this model willing to pose in any position and with any expression he desired. So obliging a sitter could nowhere else be found; and thus it is that there is such a large collection of his self-made portraits. (Hurl 1899, p. 91)

Rembrandt's self-portraits, when referred to a visual chronicle of time, seem to hold a succession of moments that, in a way, expose a notion of a photographic mythical moment, or, perhaps, even of a representation of moments that are dedicated to the appreciation of these set of pictures, lined up successively. In light of these self-portraits, framed by cultural, ethical, and aesthetic perspectives of present times, we are led to a sort of reading of them as cheap instantaneous images, images that create their history and project themselves as a series of moments that seem to ignore the real dimension of time.

In a more careful observation of Rembrandt and Bacon's self-portraits confronts us with an immediate culture, the culture of the here and now, of the fast, of what is passing by, of what has already passed and seems to surround us. This is a culture that imposes its principles over life, death, and our perception of things in the world. Self-representation follows the parameters of social life reflecting our needs at different times throughout history. British authors W. Ray Crozier and Paul Greenhalgh highlight that:

The implication of all this is that the self-portrait will have different meanings for people at different times. Wider social and economic changes lead, on the one hand, to changes in the concept of self and in the significance of appearance, and these are reflected by changes in portraiture. On the other hand, they lead to changes in the role and

self-conception of the artist, and these are evident in the rise in popularity of the self-portrait and in the decline of the portrait. (Crozier and Greenhalgh, 1988, p. 30)



*Image 2.* Rembrandt van Rijn. Self-portraits dated 1629, c. 1629, c. 1629, 1633, 1634, 1640, 1659, 1661 e 1669 (from left to right, from top to bottom). Oil on canvas or wood. Recovered from [see note 1].

In various points of the past and in the historical present as well as in different latitudes and cultures, we encounter a slow and permanent shift of perceptions we throw over ourselves, perceptions of self following ethical and cultural changes that reformat social life. From time to time, without notice, this process –slow and permanent– undergoes a deconstruction and acceleration towards innovations in the field of technology or as a result of natural or cultural tragedies such as wars. Thus, modes representing the centrality of man in the world come into question, following new ways of relating and organizing social relationships. For other times in history, Crozier and Greenhalgh recall that social changes trigger shifts in the design of the self and in the importance of appearance as a form of representation, stating, “they lead to changes in the role and self-conception of the artist, and these are evident in the rise in popularity of the self-portrait and in the decline of the portrait.” (Crozier and Greenhalgh 1988, p. 30)

### **Photography as a Mirror**

Some artists have been able to explore contemporary means to produce their art, seeking to understand the ongoing processes of change, reorganization, and reformatting of social life, coupled with the new possibilities of techniques and technologies. Set before us the artists’ production such as those by Robert Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman, and Nan Goldin, to name just a few that looked into representations of the self in contemporary times, we now face new issues in the art of representing the self. In previous times painters seemed to scrutinize the mirror in search for hidden truths; in our era, however, dominated by uncertainty, ambiguity, and speedy records that carry out their obsolescence, new issues cross the production of contemporary art. The American artist Robert Mapplethorpe attacked, radically, current perceptions about the art of portraiture in the field of photography, combining the control of classical aesthetics with political and ideological issues that gave his work a unique dimension and identity.

On the other hand, it may be Cindy Sherman who better shows in her production the uncertainties of present times. The vast production of “portraits” by Cindy Sherman can be crossed without reaching even a clue of who, indeed, stands before the camera in building a “fiction of the self.” In reconstructed scenarios, Sherman emerges representing dramas in situations

that conceal her identity as a person, while they seem to emphasize the fluid character of her identity as an artist; thus, mirroring the chameleonic nature of art, a nature that is able to subtract the artist's identity as a person so as to stage, as if saying that in the art world everything was possible, including a permanent process of metamorphosis between various "selves." All of this is surrounded by the mystery of "a drama whose particulars are withheld." As pointed by American critic Douglas Crimp:

This ambiguity of narrative parallels the ambiguity of the self that is both actor in the narrative and creator of it. For though Sherman is literally self-created in these works, she is created in the image of already known feminine stereotypes; herself is therefore understood as contingent on the possibilities provided by the culture in which Sherman participates, not by some inner impulse. As such, her photographs reverse the terms of art and autobiography. (Crimp, 1993, p. 122)

Going in another direction, the American photographer Nan Goldin, aware of the formatting and reformatting imposed by different levels of contemporary social life, has made use of art and photographic devices as tools to ensure some control over her history, her life, and the world around her. In this sense, Nan Goldin suggests that "snapshots are taken out of love and to remember people, places, and shared times. They're about creating a history by recording a history." (*Art and Smoke*, 2016)

Nan Goldin manages with zeal for her life instances registration, avoiding the editing of her life by others. Similarly, the artist understands that photographic records in difficult times can act as a key to an overcoming action of the difficulties. In the words of the artist, "I photograph myself in times of trouble or change in order to find the ground to stand on in the change. [...] You get displaced, and then taking self-portraits becomes a way of hanging on to yourself." (*NYT Magazine*, 2000)



*Image 3. Robert Mapplethorpe. 1980. Self-Portrait as Cross-dresser. Photography. Recovered from <http://www.mocp.org/>*



Image 4. Cindy Sherman. 1978. *Untitled Film Still #14*. Photography. Recovered from <http://memsk.ru/sherman-film-stills/original/>



*Image 5. Nan Goldin. 2013. In My Hall, Berlin. Photography.*  
Recovered from <http://fraenkelgallery.com/exhibitions/>



Pictorial art brought some sort of discredit to painting genres that guided and mastered the art for centuries, as the portrait and self-portrait. However, vitality is still present in a large number of contemporary artists that testify to the permanence and strength of representations that locate us in the world. Images inevitably being settled and reformatted by impositions of the times confirm the interest in representations of the self as a central issue in art. Beyond the superficialities accompanying the fascination with images and self-representation as a form of socialization in these shallow times, it has been possible to witness the consolidation of new possibilities of art making that update once abandoned issues that are parallel to the decline of painting in the twentieth century.

Furthermore, the surge of images in the contemporary social world has triggered new forms of life experience in society, generating ordinary situations that seem to move the subject's experiences from the center of his/her concerns in favor of registering them. As if it were the record of something that has passed without being effectively lived or experienced. As the case of the young man who turned his back to the Pope in visit to his hometown and virtually stood next to the Pope in the image captured by his phone at arm's distance. For younger generations, the fact that the young man had turned his back on the Pope did not seem to matter, thus placing an emphasis and priority on the registration of an experience that was not experienced. To put it mildly, something that happened in its precariousness.

In any case, it cannot be ignored that the world (and those who inhabit it) are submerged by images of all kinds. The representation of self, which in the past was regarded as an exclusive privilege of artists, especially painters, has today become a common action of those who seek to occupy their place in social networks. However, we must not forget that an image is only an image, that it is not the thing itself, but only the representation of that thing.

## Notes

Image 2 recovered from:

- [1] <https://www.fruugo.lu/head-of-a-young-man-or-self-portrait-1629-poster-print-by-rembrandt-van-rijn-18-x-24/p-8977229-19327353>;
- [2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-portrait\\_\(Rembrandt,\\_Indianapolis\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-portrait_(Rembrandt,_Indianapolis));
- [3] <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/new-study-rembrandt-used-projections-to-create-masterpieces-559364>;
- [4] <https://www.rembrandtonline.org/Self-Portrait-Wearing-A-Toque-And-A-Gold-Chain.html>;
- [5] <https://www.bing.com/discover/rembrandt-self-portrait?first=1&tab=REC>;
- [6] [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Self-portrait at 34 by Rembrandt.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Self-portrait_at_34_by_Rembrandt.jpg);
- [7] <http://www.rembrandtoilpainting.org/Rembrandt-Self-Portrait-with-Beret-and-Turned-Up-Collar.html>;
- [8] <http://latorredemontaigne.com/project/el-espejo-de-rembrandt/>;
- [9] <https://artmight.com/Artists/Rembrandt-Harmenszoon-Van-Rijn/sp1669a-243889p.html>.

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