2007

Within and Without

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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WITHIN AND WITHOUT

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Abstract

WITHIN AND WITHOUT

By Shane Rocheleau, M.F.A

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: Paul Thulin
Professor, Photography and Film

Within and Without is a document which illustrates my personal and artistic research into the nature of the postmodern conception of the self: that self is unfixed, multiple, and reactive. It explicates my myriad and explorative approaches to photographic portraiture. Furthermore, it indicates many of my theoretical and artistic references and how I have applied my lessons both as an artist and a researcher to maximize the effect of my concepts within the formal and aesthetic confines of my photographs. Finally, this document explains my own beliefs concerning the nature of self and how a synthesis of my influences has led me to these beliefs.
The portraits represented in my Graduate Thesis exhibition, *Within and Without*, are progeny of those artists and theoreticians I shall discuss below. They are progeny, as well, of many others, including, if I may, of myself. Furthermore, my portraits succeed many previous attempts to visually represent the complexities of self that I will personally and theoretically discuss. At the outset of my graduate studies, my goal became quickly and succinctly clear: create a portrait that could express how I feel: conflicted, scared, embattled for my livelihood, for myself; create a portrait which expresses the multiplicity of a human being, which explicates the struggle between internality and externality.
The Theoretical and Personal Location of the Self; or, My Self

A considerable percentage of the people we meet in the street of a great town are people who are empty inside, that is, they are actually already dead. \(^1\) —G.I. Gurdjieff

How does one locate self? Theoretical locations abound; they are splintered effects of journeys realized only as a symbolic recess on a vast, unmarked desert. It is a recess the inquisitive individual may tolerate: ask this question, then move aside, and peer over at the footprints in the sand. One’s pen scribbles, and the self becomes as each scribbled word is: a signifier; or, maybe, far worse, a simulacrum—an imagining mistaken for the real. But, alas, it seems it is the best one could do. Second best, perhaps, would be to honestly survey such ‘self’ signifiers—those grand, impenetrable ruminations written on the subject of such footprint observations (by Descartes or Lacan or Chuang Tzu or Gurdjieff or)—then perform a subsequent evaluation and necessary (or inevitable) synthesis, and the resultant squat on some hybrid point amidst those theoretical selves—or, amongst those partial footprints—would be the, and merely the, symbolic answer.

I try both.

The Pursuit of Theoretical Selves

In Taoism, no distinction is made between the ‘I’ and the ‘not I’. Chuang Tzu wrote that “Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me.” In one is everything, in everything, one. This Eastern conception of the self directly contradicts the Western, ‘modernist’ conception of the self. Roland Barthes, identifying ultimately, and perhaps unwittingly, with a more Eastern ideology in his The Death of the Author tells us that with the rise of modernism and capitalism comes the illusion of the “prestige of the individual”, or, the ascension of the individual above a history. From competition emerges a winner and a loser; these are not consequences absorbed back into a greater history but individuals declared responsible for their respective fates. Self within this logic exists as one, the I, separated from other, or the not I. In this dialectic exists a rich struggle, a powerful question: Do I locate my self in harmony with that which I perceive as not my self, understanding my individuality as no more than a perspective—faulty in its absolute and inherent limitations? Or, do I locate my self as a separate entity amongst separate entities, an agent unto myself?

My primary interests encompass three perspectives situated on the continuum of ‘self as all or illusion’ and ‘self as one or singular’. Each begins on a point on this line, and each only touches there.
Perspective One: G.I. Gurdjieff

(Through conscious observation) he will record with unmistakable clearness the fact that his actions, thoughts, feelings, and words are the result of external influences and that nothing comes from himself. He will understand and see that he is in fact an automaton acting under the influences of external stimuli. He will feel his complete mechanicalness. Everything 'happens,' he cannot 'do' anything. He is a machine controlled by accidental shocks from outside. Each shock calls to the surface one of his I's. A new shock and that I disappears and a different one takes its place. Another small change in the environment and again there is a new I. A man will begin to understand that he has no control of himself whatever, that he does not know what he may say or do the next moment, he will begin to understand that he cannot answer for himself even for the shortest length of time. He will understand that if he remains the same and does nothing unexpected, it is simply because no unexpected outside changes are taking place. He will understand that his actions are entirely controlled by external conditions and he will be convinced that there is nothing permanent in him from which control could come, not a single permanent function, not a single permanent state.⁴

Mystic G.I. Gurdjieff, thinking and writing in the early part of the twentieth century, seems to foresee the rise of postmodernism before even modernism was wholly defined.

Baudrillard responds to this rise in concert with the Mystic, observing that "we are here at the control of a microsattelite, in orbit, living no longer as actor or dramaturge but as a terminal for multiple networks."⁵ According to Gurdjieff, the self, as we commonly conceive of it, is not the sum total of our actions, for our actions are not ours. Rather, what we refer to as our actions are actually our reactions, inevitabilities prescribed by “change(s) in the environment.” What we conceive as self, according to Gurdjieff, is no more than a

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series of masks appropriated to respond as a proxy for self. Only through an intentional struggle with these false masks, or I’s, can one actualize one’s true self; via an arduous process of identifying and cataloguing one’s false I’s one can begin to make contact with the I, the self, which hides beneath, sheltered, ideally and hopefully unaffected.

Gurdjieff allows for the Taoist conception of self only inasmuch as the individual in question is unaware of this condition of multiplicity. So long as this individual remains unaware, the self is an illusion, constructed out of one’s fluid cause and effect relationship with all stimuli existing and imposing from outside that individual. Here, he claims, is where one would locate the self in most people: in automation, in a patently and deluded self-less selfhood, buried by a multiplicity of I’s which react with chemical precision but never formulate anything unified or whole or remotely self-like.

However, almost in spite of the ‘Western individual’, Gurdjieff contends that a few who choose to struggle may realize and actualize a unified self.

My primary interest in Gurdjieff’s assertion of the self is two-fold: self exists; and, one apprehends it only through laborious intentionality.

Perspective Two: Jacques Lacan

According to Lacan, self-consciousness arises in the following manner: By internalizing the way the Other sees one, by assimilating the Other’s approving and disapproving looks and comments, one learns to see oneself as the Other sees one, to know oneself as the Other knows one. As the child in front of the mirror turns around and looks to the adult standing behind her for a nod, recognition, a word of approval or ratification...she comes to see herself as if from the adult’s vantage point, comes to see herself as if
she were the parental Other, comes to be aware of herself as if from the outside, as if she were another person.6

Jacques Lacan, twentieth century Psychoanalyst, contends with his Mirror Theory (above, succinctly) that the self is closer to self-consciousness. It is not the physical body occupying a physical space, nor is it the sum total of external causality. Self is the unique human phenomenon yielded by the ability to mediate between the physical body and the world which does not occupy that same physical space. Simply, the mediation of consciousness—or, of self-consciousness—between these two features—the internal and the external—describes self.

Strangely, the orientation of this self-consciousness is outside of oneself; it assumes the position of Other, or reflection, or not-self. To be oneself, one must be not-one-self and by doing so one is no longer oneself. It is this inherent contradiction which most intrigues me. It seems that Lacan would argue that the self is, ultimately, an illusion, one constructed basically, if only vaguely, upon the Saussurian rules of language. To understand the sound-image, or signifier, HORSE as referring to the physical ‘horse’—or, signified—in reality, one must necessarily know what is not a ‘horse’. Therefore, according to Lacan, our ‘self’ is simply a linguistic creation, a necessity of language whereby through the realization of oneself as other than the ‘horse’ one can begin to conceive of a ‘horse’ but only after conceiving of the ‘self’, the horse’s other, as the other of everything not-self.7

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My principal concern with this facet of Lacanian theory is the importance of mirror-consciousness. Lacan assigns a profound power to the mirror, as both literal and metaphor, in the formulation of one’s self that few others do.

_Perspective Three: Jean Baudrillard_

_The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the “real” world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness._

If Disneyland functions as Baudrillard claims, then it is not a stretch to conceive of self as the sum total of such constructed illusions manifested within one’s presentation of self. This larger illusion would not refer to or reflect an internal, permanent self, but refer to or reflect nothing which is, itself, a self. Rather, it would mask a much larger truth: that the self no longer exists; that the self has been murdered by its own simulation. The collective simulacra collude to destroy a human being, to construct a world of self which exists outside of a self’s capacity to live: that is, outside of the internal world of a human being.

Baudrillard states that “the age of simulation…is…a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself.”

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8 Jean Baudrillard, _Simulacra and Simulations_ from Selected Writings (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 175.
9 Jean Baudrillard, _Simulacra and Simulations_ from Selected Writings (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 173.
10 Ibid, 167.
still exists something real, reality itself. (There rests, unused, self.) Though I can generate no strategies toward the penetration of this pervasive system, if a simulacrum exists as a replacement for a thing, then the existence of a simulacrum indicates the existence of the thing replaced.

Most people may be, as G.I. Gurdjieff observed, “already dead”\(^{11}\), murdered, perhaps, by their own simulacrum. But, there is hope in the assertion that this death is indicative of something alive, if only within a few, and even if it be gasping for its final breaths.

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*My Personal Recess; or, the Other Pursuit of Self*

Through my observations of my self—or, perhaps more importantly—through my own desire for a self, despite claims contrary to its existence, and with those impenetrable ruminations written as perspectives above, I have synthesized a spot in that desert where I shall take a short recess:

I believe in a self as a matter of faith. That self is hidden—or, hiding—beneath a postmodern barrage of signifiers which, intentionally or not, seem to by design unceasingly cannonade so as to require one’s full processing attention. This barrage is a proxy for interiority, a proxy for meaning, and a proxy for self. I can only believe in self as a matter of faith, for I can not consistently dodge the barrage. Furthermore, I have come to accept the mirror, literally and metaphorically, as a growing phenomenon in our conception of self (be it illusion or not). Advertisements and movie stars alike serve the

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same personal purposes: they are reflections used in the formulation of a self. For many, the question, “who should I be?” is followed by an evaluation of that barrage: is followed by a formulation based on what one wishes that reflection staring back to be: perhaps: all Gap®-ped out, underweight, tan, nonchalant, donning razor defined abdominals, jaws, cheeks, and butts, etc—like a magazine cover model. Who we are is stolen from the simulacra of who others are, two generations, at least, from a true self. We see in our hyper-productive culture a reflection of our wishes and in us our culture sees a reflection of itself.

But I trust, flinchingly, that beneath there lies a basic human struggle: it is a postmodern struggle but is not unique to this age: shall I give in to reactivity, be of otherness or, perhaps, by otherness? Shall I allow my representation to ultimately “pervert a basic reality” or, worse still, to “bear no relation to any reality whatever?”\textsuperscript{12} Or, shall I slough that which is not my self, slough my simulacrum, toil and toil some more, until I behold me? If I shall, then I shall at my own risk, for I may dig as a grave digger digs: only to find nothing.

\textsuperscript{12} Jean Baudrillard, \textit{Simulacra and Simulations} from \textit{Selected Writings} (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 173.
My Graduate Art Process; My Crisis of Self

_If one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an “artless art” growing out of the Unconscious._ –D.T. Suzuki

As I researched portrait artists of the past—some of whom I shall discuss later—some things became apparent: either the subject looks at the camera or does not; either the subject appears alive or does not; only one side of any dichotomy appears. It seems that multiplicity is a difficult thing to represent, for an image of a single person shows only a single expression of that single person.

But, what if that expression is unavailable? Would my viewer use a tendency toward multiplicity to apply a multiplicity of emotions to a faceless face? These are the first questions I asked in my photographic approach to this concept. Using a medium format, twin lens reflex camera, I photographed persons walking the streets and sidewalks of Richmond, Virginia. To create a faceless face (figures 1 and 2) I opened my F-stop—to minimize my plane of focus—and focused to infinity. Additionally, I used a slower shutter speed—to blur movement—and shot from my hip—to minimize my intervention: a personal intervention which tends toward control and composition.

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The resulting body of images conveys uneasiness; however, they each, it seems, make obstacles of my subjects, that is, make them less human. This objectification disabled the empathy I thought necessary for a viewer to apprehend my message.

Perhaps, I thought, that by removing my subjects from an aesthetically attractive backdrop, objectification would give way to empathy. As figure 3 demonstrates, however, my faceless subject remains more an object.

As I pursued the questions above, I began to simultaneously pursue others: would identifying people as donning masks accomplish my assertion of self as multiplicity? Or, would, perhaps, the lack of a face altogether? Figures 4 and 5 reflect a logical response to these questions.
In figure 4, the subject is expressionless and without eyes: or, simply, is mask-like. He is situated before a blank background suggestive of a lack of place. Only once donned would this mask be activated, thereby asserting presence and, subsequently, its place. Though my message begins to emerge here, the image is explanatory rather than expository. And, my goal is to make photographs which show rather than tell.

Figure 5 represents my attempt to remove my subject almost entirely. By combining multiple images of shadows, only suggesting the presence of a subject, I thought, perhaps, the fleeting self would emerge as primary.

Instead, an apparent stylization overpowers content and concept.

These examples—in addition to many others not represented in the body of this paper—are not, inherently, failures. Each indicates an advancement of my explorations and
creativity; furthermore, though each does not successfully—or entirely—embody my concepts, they do embody a remarkable turn in my art-making process. Prior to my arrival at graduate school, concept only followed the making and inevitably existed as my revelation, not as revelation within my viewer. Each example above illustrates a shift: concept precedes, and, though not necessarily compelling, concept is apparent in the resultant art objects.

I began to understand that my extensive digital manipulations were largely responsible for the explanatory nature of my work. My next attempts at expressing multiplicity moved away from a trend toward stylization and manipulation and toward a straighter photographic approach. If I am able to observe people and subsequently infer the presence of a multiplicity of personality, perhaps I can cause my camera to capture what I see, allowing, then, my viewers to infer.

I photographed subjects seated against a white backdrop, staring, talking, laughing, smiling, frowning, yelling, screaming, etc (figures 6 and 7).

I used a slower shutter speed to capture the motion of their emotions, outbursts, and, even, stillness. From the many portraits I made using this method—in various incarnations—I
observed that because I asked my subjects to act rather than to actually experience the emotions, outbursts, and stillness, the images were often apparently dishonest examples of what I believe I see in human beings. I do not write of this dishonesty in respect to moral consideration but in respect to my viewer’s ability to decipher my ruse. These discoveries led me to pursue alternate, perhaps parallel, concepts in my portraiture. These I will not discuss in this paper.

However, during this time of exploration I assisted the writers of the screenplay, *Undefined*, and became the lead role in the resulting feature length film. These experiences led me to seriously consider the role of acting in formation of self, art, and honesty and how it may pertain to exposing multiplicity and the difficulty of a unified self in postmodern society.

I responded by authoring a screenplay—*A Reflection’s Breath*—which reacted to the above. Below is an excerpt:

> MELANIE is average in appearance. Perhaps she’s pretty, but if so, her demeanor masks this. She faces the mirror, smiling, posing for those she wishes would look at her. She struggles to hold the pose, favoring, it seems, discomfort to comfort.

This excerpt is important because it indicates the moment when I realized that by asking my subjects—in this case, actors—to act I would minimize the potential impact of presenting to my audience an honest depiction of individuals experiencing a crisis of self. As a result, rather than asking my actors to act-out their ‘mirror scenes’ into the lens of a digital video camera, I built an apparatus with a one-way mirror as its centerpiece, whereby my actors would be required to look into the mirror, without instruction or direction, while
from behind the mirror, unseen, my camera would record. The resulting footage shocked me and pleased me just the same: I believed I was at the cusp of capturing the crisis of self which I had thus far been incapable of eliciting, which I believed, increasingly, I could not capture. Though I initially followed my discovery through a digital video medium, I soon returned to where I had begun: photography.

Before I discuss the resulting imagery, I will discuss the contemporary artists who have provided me with much of my visual and conceptual inspiration.
Contemporary Art and the Location of the Self

What Postmodern theory helps us to see is that we are all constituted in a broad range of subject positions, through which we move with more or less ease, so that all of us are combinations of class, race, ethnic, regional, generational, sexual, and gender positions.

Many postmodernists make this rather pessimistic analysis in the hope of liberating us from it. Once we have been made aware of the dire effects of contradictory discourse upon us, we are expected to be able to find some kind of way out.  

I would perpetually hesitate to declare that such texts—of which I have discussed a few—that make these revelatory claims about human bondage will simultaneously effect, save few, those whom they observe. However, my own pessimism aside, many artists have become, at least, apparently aware. Some artists, such as Cindy Sherman, John Currin, and Rineke Dijkstra, explicate the potpourri dynamic of the individual. Other Artists, such as Gary Schneider, Jill Greenberg, and Katy Grannan, use their media in disparate ways to observe the manifestation of this dynamic upon individuals, creating likenesses which reflect basic truths about the postmodern individual. Still others—such as Thomas Ruff and Loretta Lux—seem to convey pessimism or present an omen, even if inadvertently, stating through their visual texts that, perhaps, there is no longer a self, no longer a “way out”.

Multiplicity as Postmodern Self

In her film still style photographs (self-portraits), Cindy Sherman gently suggests that in our visual and verbal discourses women are subjugated. If one is not attentive, this may be overlooked. In figure 8, the pictured female wears a skirt and is non-confrontational, her eyes looking away with her body turned; her breasts are full and firm; she is sexually vulnerable, as the language of a male dominated society prefers. Furthermore, she does not look at the book she chooses; her upward glance suggests that she serves the need of another, likely a stereotypically taller male; she is not educated but in service of the educated. It is our initial acceptance of these and other facets of Cindy Sherman’s photographs which so astutely reflect inequity in our culture.

While patriarchal discourse would have one believe that a woman is, for instance, a sexual object, emotionally and physically vulnerable, submissive, and intellectually inferior, these attributes are constructions, aspects of a false, rather than a true, self. Unfortunately, as such discourse is pervasive, individuals within our culture contend that, indeed, these are not constructions. What Cindy Sherman shows beyond power constructed discourse is the potential of a fragmented female—or, more broadly, of a fragmented person: one wrestles
with, and inevitably oscillates between, expectations imposed by language and one’s personal and internal obligations and tendencies which may diametrically oppose such constructions.

While Cindy Sherman more commonly analyzes the rhetoric of feminine inferiority and subjugation, painter John Currin does the rhetoric of the physical female ideal. A female who is tall, with slight shoulders and long slender arms, a thin waist, a smooth, featured face without blemish, and full, spherical breasts may be considered, upon such a verbal or textual description, to be physically perfect: that is, to be the ideal physical female. The women in figure 9 fit this physical description.

Upon closer inspection, however, one sees that their necks and fingers are too long; their breasts are solid and misshapen; their shoulders are childlike; their facial features are sharp but sickly. Through his depiction of the ‘ideal woman’ John Currin reveals the grotesqueness, the utter inhumanity of such cultural expectations. Furthermore, in the ideal is not a self but a lack thereof. Those who engage a quest to become as these representations are, that is, to become unreal, engage a quest away from their self.
Cindy Sherman, Currin emblazons a struggle between one’s personal and internal obligations and one’s cultural expectations: between self and simulacrum of self.

Rineke Dijkstra is, as well, curious about the self as cultural construction. In figures 10 and figure 11 Dijkstra has photographed three young males on a beach, all dressed in their swimming trunks.

The boy on the left stands slouched, unsure, and un-posed or un-poised. His eastern European culture has not the same early emphasis or pervasiveness as does, on the right, the boys’ American culture. They have inhaled deeply the cues of theirs: be stylish; stand tall; project confidence; tighten your bodies, inflate, be imposing and intimidating; be men. These two photographs illustrate, together, the struggle between internal—or self—and, the external—or culture.

In figure 10, without an external cue, the boy could be said to be more himself, even if entirely uncomfortable, than the two boys on the right. They, on the right, respond to the camera and all of its implications. They understand, if only unconsciously, the reproducibility of the photograph and understand, as well, what image they want to
convey, reproduce. They are not their selves but cultural constructions evoked in the absence, or, at least, subjugation, of self.

As did G.I. Gurdjieff, these three artists ultimately ask: Is there a self? Or, are we no more than cultural constructions, reactions to discourse and perpetually mutated and recycled external stimuli?

_Mirroring the Postmodern Self_

For his portraits, Gary Schneider asks that his subjects spend half an hour prostrate and still under his searching flashlight as it slowly passes over their faces, exposing the film.

Figure 12 shows a strange portrait of a woman. At first glance she is as grotesque as John Currin’s subjects are at second; she is drowning in ash or blackness. It is a foreboding image. But the stillness necessitated by Schneider’s photographic process inevitably surfaces. His subject is soft and calm. While she stares back into the camera, one is impressed by a looking in, by an introspection, or, maybe, by an absence: two eyes look out but each seems glossed or inactive.

Figure 12
The person in this portrait could be aware, observing her environment; she could be aware, observing her internal world; but, she could be unconscious, automatic, or, even, dead. We, as viewers, can not know the answer, as Gurdjieff could not know who in his town remained vital. The viewer’s reaction to Schneider’s portrait is an example of a larger disability: we can not know who has retained a self and who has appropriated fashionable constructions designed as perfect simulacra of the attributes of a human self. In addition, if one is to accept Lacan’s assertion that the creation of self progresses through an understanding of how one views one’s self, into an assumption as other observing self, what are the implications in the formation of self if one is unable to ascertain anything tangible from observing others? Would this enable the imagination to concoct one’s own reflection? With self left to imagination, it seems such a difficulty would be a fertile plot for Baudrillard’s suggestion that all may finally be simulation.15

Jill Greenberg’s *End Times* portraits are more overt than Schneider’s.

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Figure 13 is an indicative example. Each portrait from this series depicts a child. Each child is so perfect as to be porcelain. But the children are crying, even wailing, inconsolably. Discussing the portent of the postmodern self, one could be moved to inconsolability. While Greenberg herself states that her portraits reflect “the current state of anxiety a lot of people are in about the future of the country,”16 it seems apparent that the content suggests a deeper anxiety: an anxiety about, purely, the future. I draw this conclusion because, inevitably, I will reflect my own anxiety in my observation of this photograph. The emotional content lends to such an individual response, and, unlike with Rineke Dijkstra for example, to a more personal reading. Consequently, I will acknowledge that following is an unsubstantiated, personal account of the meaning of her *End Times* series:

The children cry as they watch what they are to become. What they are, they know, they will bury slowly and alive. They will feel the heart of their soul beat slower as who they are chokes on dirt. Finally, each of these children will die. On the surface will remain a ghost created from the empty demands of the external. From above they will watch, fettered, voiceless, buried. And so today they cry. It is a last expression before their ritualized deaths. When I look at these photographs, I see what I hold onto: the original—before my division—and with a weakening grip I despair as I hold on still longer.

Like Gary Schneider and Jill Greenberg, Katy Grannan creates imagery which is reflective. However, while both Greenberg’s and Schneider’s subjects may substantiate a conscious

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self, Grannan’s subjects reflect an unconscious or false self constructed from the pervasive conception of self propagated through mass media. To make the photograph in figure 14, Grannan placed a want-ad in a newspaper in search of subjects to pose for photographs. Respondents were instructed that they should decide on clothing, pose, and situation. Consequently, these are photographs as her respondents wish—or desire—to be depicted.

Many of her respondents choose to be at least partially naked. Often, those that do not choose a provocative pose nonetheless. This reflects a need to be objectified; it reflects a need to be validated through the desire of an other. Furthermore, it reflects an inability to validate one’s self. Katy Grannan provides visual representation of Lacan’s mirror theory but provides, as well, representation of the simulacrum of a self. Only through the other can self become—in this case the imagined viewer desiring the young girl which in turn creates for the young girl a desire for herself. Additionally, as the young girl imagines or concocts a desirable self, she does so with only representations of the culturally-constructed-desirable as reference: this image, then, is a simulacra: at best, it is an imagining with only other simulacra as reference.
The photographs described above describe a reflection, a reference point for an individual within postmodern culture. They reflect the struggle of the individual, and, for the individual searching for a self, they provide a struggle to assume as one’s own.

*The Simulacrum of Self*

Thomas Ruff, considering his Portrait series, is explicit with his intentions:

My portrait series are critical in that they play fast and loose with the illusion of identifiability and with the assumption of recognizability—for instance, those “happy” faces in advertising or in portrait studio photography. Those pictures preserve the highlights of life. Weddings, births, birthdays, and what not, engagements…not divorce. They try to imitate an image that is meant to be captured as unmistakable and original, something that society, the people around you, try to force on you as an imperative.¹⁷

Imagery popularly circulated, he contends, presents a false sense of “life”. Ruff intends to strip from his subjects the impositions; he intends to present subjects whom do not reflect individuals reacting, donning masks, supplanting self—if self remains—with a temporary simulacrum—which will succumb, of course, to yet another. Rather, Ruff presents, he says, a subject—figure 15, for example—presenting as most persons do some of the time: that is, there is no sign of presentation. But his suggestion is not without cynicism. He plainly states that his blank, emotionless portraits are the alternative. Nonchalantly, Ruff proffers no solace for the void he identifies; he extends no condolences for our loss of an internal reference. If we are to shun the “imperative” then we are left with nothing but the theatre of simulation.

Additionally, Ruff’s portraits are posed identically before identically neutral backgrounds assuming the same vacant countenance. The question is clear, and it is pertinent: “are we individuals, unique, containing central, permanent selves? Or are we, simply, automatons, each of us replacements for each of us?” Like Loretta Lux to follow, Thomas Ruff suggests no alternative to the postmodern self.

Loretta Lux, like Jill Greenberg in *End Times*, focuses predominately on children. But, unlike Greenberg, Lux’s portraits suggest a hopelessness. It is commonly suggested that life—or liveliness—can be most clearly observed in a child. Lux does not give us this pleasure; rather, her subjects are cold, uncaring, perhaps absent. Figure 16 presents a pair of twins. They do not relate in spite of apparent physical contact. Life is not present. Nothing is present but, maybe, the automation of despair.
Loretta Lux’s photographs suggest self as simulacrum; but self as simulacrum with the faint acknowledgement of loss, of the nihility of the new and false self. She presents these images as a portent: if our struggle between self and exteriority weighs to the latter, our fate is dismal. Our last vestiges will no longer twinkle, no longer catalyze a tear in faint remembrance of our own loss, for even children will assume the guise, placing it upon the specter of self; we will then, each, be gone.
Portraits of Within and Without

Am I me, the one in the mirror? Or, am I me, the one watching? Perhaps it is neither but the mirror who is me. —Me

With multiplicity, struggle, and a one-way mirror, I began photographing again. Initially, I sought to capture only the isolated reflections of my subjects staring back from within their irises. To this end, I placed a light diffusing wall on either side of my one-way mirror apparatus; behind these (to the sides of the subject), I placed strobe lights. At the rear of the setup, I hung a black background but only to minimize light scattering. I stood encased in a large, custom-made dark cloth, behind my one-way mirror, with a 2 ¼ inch Hasselblad camera. I only shot a few shots before I realized that I should be taking portraits again.

From this initial sitting, I can describe my results only as strange. From my subjects’ gazes seemed to emanate something different than I had seen in most portraits from my research. I quickly asked, how can I come to understand the subtle elements of these processes and results so as to maximize this ‘strangeness’?

For assistance, I turned back to three artists who I previously discuss: Gary Schneider, Jill Greenberg, and Thomas Ruff. It is apparent from their product that each creates an intensely controlled environment. Schneider asks his subject to lay upon a padded floor. He stabilizes a large format camera above. He asks only that his subjects be still then opens the shutter and begins his process. Through experience, Schneider has mastered his
flashlight. He understands for how long the flashlight must attend to a given spot on his subjects and counts carefully to well expose his film. This process is long and arduous, and he does not deviate, starting and ending on the upper left side of the face and following the same path on each to full exposure.

Though Thomas Ruff does not rely on duration as Schneider does, he does rely on a similar control. Ruff, each session, places his studio lights so as to ensure even light; he places his subjects before a neutral background. He instructs his subjects “to look into the camera with self-confidence, but likewise, that they should be conscious of the fact that they were being photographed”. Using a large-format camera, a fast shutter speed, and a small aperture (to maximize both focus and detail) he releases the shutter.

Similarly, Jill Greenberg creates a situation in which her technical process is established. To photograph each subject in her End Times series, she arranges her studio strobes in the same manner each time, creating intense frontal lighting. As it is her intention to photograph crying kids, she employs tactics such as giving a kid a lollypop then taking it away. Like Schneider and Ruff, her situation is controlled wherein constants are introduced.

I introduced constants, subsequently, into my process. I photograph each subject using the same studio arrangement, same shutter speed, and same aperture, and they each stand in the same place. My only instruction to my subjects is: “engage the mirror”.

As I had discovered previously in the work of the artists above, through a series of controls I can create a ‘reliable’ document. Each of those artists presents to his or her
viewer a standardized situation. Consequently, their artistic influence is (ironically) less apparent allowing for their subjects to become apparently and truly unique and their results to become significant. Indeed, their approaches are scientific. Through the appearance of this repetition, the viewer can make reliable comparisons; each series of photographs, then, achieves unlimited variance.

I photographed many subject many times. I searched incessantly through the thousands of negatives I accumulated to identify tangibly the small pieces of visual language which best assembled the ‘strangeness.’ From the thousands, initially, emerged one (figure 17).

Maury is contained within the frame. His chin is fully revealed, and his ears are uncut. The top of the frame cuts his forehead low. Consequently, Maury appears to rest his head on the top of the frame; as there are no impediments but for the frail top frame, it appears to the viewer that there is the potential for him to push through. The image is not aggressive but poised with a potential energy.

Maury’s left eye (our right side) stares directly back at the viewer; his right looks beyond, past ours. Each eye seems to convey a different level of activity. Unlike the

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portraits of the past, this portrait demonstrates multiplicity: one eye looking at the camera and inactive, the other looking away and active. The subject appears, perhaps, embattled with self while simultaneously poised to push through toward or atop a viewer who is unconsidered or ignored by the subject.

Through these discoveries I was able to both effectively edit the photographs I had taken and continue the process of photographing more subjects. To some degree, from the discovery of constants emerged the eight photographs which comprise my thesis exhibition.

Gary Schneider, Jill Greenberg, and Thomas Ruff each photographed their subjects while remaining visible to their subjects. Here, however, is where my process diverges from theirs. My subjects do not look at my camera; they do not look at me; my subjects are photographed while looking at themselves. While the constants I discuss above contribute to the ‘strangeness’ I have identified, I believe it is this disparity with those artists which contributes greatest to the ‘strangeness’. As I photograph, I am often no further than one foot from each subject. I am allowed to inspect in a way that I could not were I visible or the heat of my skin palpable. Though each subject is aware of my presence, their preoccupation with the reflection in the mirror seems to preclude me from their consideration.

In addition, at no time does my subject look directly at the camera. This accounts for the cross-eyed appearance. What each subject looks at is inevitably between each and the camera: the mirror. This disconnect inevitably donates to the language impacting my
viewer. While most portrait artists attain their product through a direct interaction with their subjects—Gary Schneider, Jill Greenberg, and Thomas Ruff included—my portraits are created through a lack of photographer/subject interaction and instead through subject/subject interaction. Perhaps this is, most of all, strange, for culture calls to us to ignore ourselves—at least our genuine selves; the endless barrage yields increasing success, but for a moment, if only for a moment, the self within calls to the self without, and it is heard.

Though I cannot claim to have fully explicated the postmodern self through a photograph, all I have discussed above serves to explicate my ideas, emotions, process, and product. In addition, I believe I have located a teeming practice of research and action for future explications and explorations. My personal, theoretical, and artistic examinations clearly grow together, more now than ever; it is my intention to continue in this way: researching, exploring, and making, all at once, fervently.

Megan, 2007
Marilyn, 2007
Gail, 2007
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