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The “Eternal Return”: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment

The subject “has no relation to him[/her]self that is not forced to defer itself by passing through the other in the form . . . of the eternal return.”

—Jacques Derrida (1982) 1985, 88

Awoman, **fleshy, middle-aged**, is luxuriating in a bed of animal fur and lush tropical plants. Moist, lipsticked lips barely parted, eyelids softly closed, the naked flesh of her chest (cut off by the edge of the frame) is covered with an odd talisman (animal bone or shell?) and perhaps a cat, who seems to be stretching its paw up across her chest to her neck. She is vibrantly alive, though somnolent, dreamy, erotically quiet. . . . She is dead to the world.

Claude Cahun, in this remarkable self-portrait (*Autoportrait*, c. 1939) (fig. 1), presents herself to us in a manner that transforms, at once, the conception of the self-portrait and the very notion of the subject. It is such moments of photographic self-performance, emerging sporadically in Victorian and modernist photography (think of the Countess de Castiglione, Adolph de Meyer, Florence Henri, and Cahun) and then, in

This essay was initially delivered at the “Performative Sites” conference at Pennsylvania State University in October 2000; I am grateful to Charles Garoian and Yvonne Gaudelius for the opportunity to participate in that conference and to deliver my essay in tandem with Peggy Phelan, whose work so clearly informs this project. Sections of this essay have also appeared in earlier forms supporting related arguments in the following texts: “Posing the Subject/Performing the Other as Self” (2000) and “Performing the Other as Self: Cindy Sherman and Laura Aguilar Pose the Subject” (in press). Finally, I am very grateful to the University of California, Riverside, for a sabbatical leave, which was instrumental to the completion of this essay, and to my colleagues and students there for ongoing dialogue. Thanks to Meiling Cheng, Peggy Phelan, and John Welchman for comments and suggestions that vastly improved this essay and to the anonymous *Signs* readers for questioning my own mode of self-performance, asking me to look more closely at some of the parameters of my argument.

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Figure 1 Claude Cahun, *Autoportrait* (Self-portrait) (c. 1939). Black-and-white photograph, 3 3/16 × 3 7/8 inches. Jersey Heritage Trust, United Kingdom.

force, in postmodern photographic practice (Andy Warhol, Yayoi Kusama, and beyond), which establish an exaggerated mode of performative self-imaging that opens up an entirely new way of thinking about photography and the racially, sexually, and gender-identified subject. (And, surely, it is no accident that the practitioners of such dramatically self-performed images are all women, not aligned with Euro-U.S. whiteness, and/or otherwise queer-identified in some way;¹ Cahun was a lesbian.)

These performative images are still “self-portraits” in the sense that they convey to the viewer the very subject who was responsible for staging the image (though, as in the case of the Countess de Castiglione or

¹ By *queer-identified* I mean that they functioned outside the norms of sexual subjectivity established in the culture at large and, in particular, in art discourse. While the art world is in one sense a haven for “queers”—a kind of discursive and sometimes institutional Bohemia—it is also, as many have pointed out, a deeply sexist, racist, and heterosexist site that demands, for public consumption at least, that its geniuses be straight, white, and male. Since the impact of the rights movements in the 1960s and beyond, this, of course, has changed in some ways, but lingering effects remain deeply embedded. See Jennifer Brody’s brilliant ruminations about the veiled bigotry in the art world in “Fear and Loathing in New York: An Impolite Anecdote about the Interface of Homophobia and Misogyny” (in press).

Kusama, not always for actually “taking” the picture),² and yet—through their very exaggeration of the performative dimension of the self (its openness to otherness and, especially clearly in representation, its contingency on the one who views or engages with it)—clearly they profoundly shift our conception of what a self-portrait *is*. The point of this essay is to engage with such images—in particular, the more contemporary work of Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Laura Aguilar—in such a way as to open out the question of how subjectivity is established and how meaning is made in relation to *all* representations of the human body. In her poignant and incisive book *Mourning Sex*, Peggy Phelan cuts into the heart of what I am concerned with in this essay, writing of “the deep relationship between bodies and holes, and between performance and the phantasmatical” (1997, 3).

I propose here to make use of these works that draw on strategies established by artists such as Cahun in order to flesh out Phelan’s idea, which gets at the core of how the subject relates to—and is established via—representation.³ The structure of exaggerated self-performance set up in the works I discuss here points to the profound duality of the photographic representation of the body. In these works, the subject performs herself or himself within the purview of an apparatus of perspectival looking that freezes the body *as* representation and so—as absence, as always already dead—in intimate relation to lack and loss. The photograph, after all, is a death-dealing apparatus in its capacity to fetishize and congeal time. At the same time, in their exaggerated theatricality, these works foreground the fact that the self-portrait photograph is eminently performative and so life giving. As Phelan’s model suggests, this duality is not resolvable in either direction; the two poles activated in the representation of the human body inevitably coexist (thus she points, as we have seen, to “the deep relationship between bodies and holes”).

² For a brilliant discussion of the images of the countess, nominally taken by the nineteenth-century Parisian firm Mayer & Pierson but clearly choreographed by the countess herself, see Solomon-Godeau 1986.

³ Phelan’s argument is applied to representation in general, and some of her examples are paintings. However, Phelan’s exploration of the relationship between representations of bodies and what Maurice Merleau-Ponty would call the *flesh of the world*, between the surface of images and the profound “holes” and “depths” of bodies, is highly compelling as applied to the exaggerated case of performative photographic self-portraits. Phelan’s model allows us to go beyond postmodern arguments that pose reiterative, theatrical representations of bodies as simply false or simulated (arguments that have dominated the discussion of Sherman’s works), offering a way of understanding the deep, chiasmic links between representations of bodies and fleshed subjects.

Exaggerating their own performances of themselves, these artists, then, explore the capacity of the self-portrait photograph to foreground the “I” as other to itself, the artistic subject as “taking place” in the future through interpretive acts that bring her or him back to life via memory and desire (the “I,” I am arguing, is *always* other to itself; these practices merely foreground this structure of subjectification).⁴ This exploration of the process by which we constitute ourselves in relation to others pivots for these artists around the mobilization of technologies of representation: by performing the self through photographic means, artists like Cahun play out the instabilities of human existence and identity in a highly technologized and rapidly changing environment. The self-portrait photograph, then, becomes a kind of *technology of embodiment*, and yet one that paradoxically points to our tenuousness and incoherence as living, embodied subjects.

Ultimately this argument will foreground the fact that, as Katherine Hayles has recently put it, “the overlay between . . . enacted and represented bodies is . . . a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject” (1999, xiii). The self-portrait photograph is an example, if relatively “low tech” compared to the flashy interactivities engendered by video installations and Web art, of this way in which technology not only *mediates* but *produces* subjectivities in the contemporary world. By using these exaggerated examples of theatrical, photographic self-production, I hope to explore how all images work reciprocally (though surely in different ways and to different degrees) to construct bodies and selves across the interpretive bridges that connect them.

My argument will draw on several well-known theoretical constructs—the screen, the fetish, the gaze, reiteration, the pose, the *punctum*, the chiasm—each of which will highlight a different aspect of the reciprocal engagement that establishes us in relation to such images. Ultimately, as Phelan and Hayles suggest, such a query casts us back into

⁴ This is not at all the same as saying that the photograph somehow immortalizes the subject of the portrait but rather, as I discuss at greater length below, that the photograph reiterates the subject (restates her or him such that she/he can be engaged by future interpreters) in some sense beyond the moment of the picture’s taking and, potentially, after the subject’s literal death. This reiteration can never establish the “truth” of the subject but merely suggests at aspects of the subject that can be encountered by future viewers. Obviously, many of the original signifieds attached to the codes in the image will be lost to these future readers, who will establish new meanings based on their own contexts of understanding.

questions of lack and loss, pointing to our incoherence, to the fact that we exist always and only in relation to images and/or others.

Finally, before engaging the images, a brief digression on the basic terms of this analysis—*portrait*, *self-portrait*, *photographic self-portrait*—will be useful in establishing the terrain. In the portrait image of any kind, a subject is apparently revealed and documented. In the self-portrait, this subject is the artist herself or himself, and the promise of the artwork to deliver the artist in some capacity to the viewer, a promise central to our attraction to images, is seemingly fulfilled.⁵ In the photograph, an indexical image of the “real” is supposedly presented through the technological means of mechanical reproduction, tempting the viewer to turn to it as a document of the truth of what Roland Barthes terms the “that-has-been” before the lens (1981, 77).

Precisely because of its basis in mechanically facilitated reproduction and its presentation of a human body, the photographic self-portrait, then, partakes of all of these dimensions of meaning making. But clearly the works to be discussed here to some degree subvert these assumptions. Through an exaggerated performativity, which makes it clear that we can never “know” the subject behind or in the image, these works expose the apparently seamless conflation of intentionality with meaningful visible appearance in the self-portrait as an illusion. The point of focusing on such images, rather than on more traditional self-portraits (Edward Steichen’s romanticizing 1901 photographic *Self-Portrait* springs to mind), is precisely that they complicate the belief in the self-portrait image as incontrovertibly delivering the “true” artistic subject to the viewer—a belief central to modernist discourses of art and photography.⁶

⁵ On this attraction, and our tendency to conflate the artist with the work, see Donald Preziosi’s 1989 groundbreaking critique of the discipline of art history.

⁶ Originally published in 1903 in *Camerawork*, Alfred Stieglitz’s pioneering photography magazine, Edward Steichen’s *Self-Portrait* is reproduced in Margolis 1978, 4. On discourses of art photography, see Allan Sekula’s “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning” ([1974] 1984). Sekula’s essay is a brilliant critique of the tendency of modernist discourses of photography to collapse the meaning of any photograph into the photographer’s supposed inner thoughts or intentions—an act of mystification that obscures the social context in which the image was made and originally displayed. Sekula’s essay, written in 1974, just as semiotic theory was emerging in art discourse, insists on “cultural definition” (i.e., the importance of understanding meaning as embedded in cultural constructs, that is, in ideologies and institutions). In this very different moment, I am submerging the cultural into the act of individual interpretation. I want to stress, via this citation of Sekula, that I am by no means thereby throwing out cultural, social, political, or economic context (I agree completely with Sekula that meaning is historically and culturally contingent). Rather, I am strategically

While modernist discourses and practices had a huge stake in veiling or disavowing the contingency of the subject (the fact that, in this example, Steichen's "genius" takes place *as a performance in representation* and is not inherent to his being or to the photograph), the artists discussed here take their cue from certain disruptive practices within modernism to push further in the direction of unveiling the openness of the self (in representation) on its others (those who interpret or engage it). With the photographic self-portraits I explore here, the truth value of the self-portrait photograph is mitigated: the artist performs her body reiteratively such that the artistic subject (who is both author of the image and the figure *in* the image) is overtly enacted *as* representation.⁷

Given this argument, it is crucial to stress that all of my readings here are overtly performative themselves and offered in the spirit of intervention, not closure. I offer a model for throwing a monkey wrench into the overwhelming and neurosis-producing image culture that threatens to engulf us; I want to counter the dominant, repressive modes of visual interpretation that privilege closure over productive instability in relation to both subjectivity (of the artist, of ourselves) and meaning. Such acts of closure are motivated by our desire to defend ourselves against incoherence by projecting otherness outward. I want to offer a new way of reading pictures, then, that involves deliciously relinquishing our power as viewing subjects and reveling in our own otherness.

These readings are explicitly not, therefore, proffered as definitive; like the images they engage, they want to open their subjects (including myself) to the vicissitudes of otherness and thus engender a kind of subjectivity that is productively open and unstable. As Kaja Silverman articulates in her recent argument for an ethics of viewing, this new subjectivity would radicalize interpersonal relations and, by extension, the global social scene by embracing the "otherness of the desired self, and the familiarity of the despised other" and by attempting "to grasp the objectivity of the *moi*, and to recognize him- or herself precisely within those others to whom he or she would otherwise respond with revulsion and avoidance" (1996, 170). The object, then, is to promote an ethical and politicized way of

arguing that these pressures, whether "original," as affecting the artist, or "interpretive," informing the reader's approach, are active in the very moment of individual engagement. At this moment, it seems to me, this is where the politics of cultural critique and visual analysis must lie.

⁷ As Ernst Van Alphen has noted, in Cindy Sherman's work "the standard relation between subject and representation is now reversed. We don't see a transparent representation of a 'full' subjectivity, instead we see a photograph of a subject which is constructed in the image of representation" (1997, 244).

reading that encourages an embrace of otherness both within and without the self.

Photography as death? Performing meaning

Cindy Sherman's self-portrait untitled film stills from around 1980, in their aggressive flirtation with simulation and lack, clearly play on the structure of the gaze and its capacity to fetishize (to freeze or project as object) what lies in its purview. The photographic image of the woman's body—here Sherman—is a double fetish: it functions as a fetishistic replacement for the woman's "lacking" genitals, assuaging the masculine viewer's fear of castration; as photograph, it acts as a replacement for the lost body it depicts. As film theorist Christian Metz has argued, the photograph is a technology of abduction and violent bodily dismemberment: "an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time. . . . [The photographic take] is immediate and definitive, like death and like the constitution of the fetish in the unconscious, fixed by a glance in childhood, unchanged and always active later. *Photography is a cut inside the referent*, it cuts off a piece of it, a fragment, a part object, for a long immobile travel of no return" (1985, 84; emphasis added). The photograph thus "castrates" the real, freezing the body depicted as an object of a viewing desire that is always already masculine if not necessarily male.

This fetishizing aspect of photography is, as Metz notes, linked definitively to *death*. Thus, in spite of its obvious promise of delivering an unmediated, indexical image of the real or of the deep emotional thoughts and feelings of its maker (these two dimensions, again, being conflated in the self-portrait photograph), it is also an inexorable sign of loss and absence (a "cut inside the referent"). As Phelan argues, "what is preserved in the still image . . . is the compression of the present and the resistance to releasing the moment into the past without securing its return" (1997, 157).⁸ While the taking of the photograph was surely motivated by the desire to retrieve or maintain the past in the present (and, in the case of the female nude, to freeze the female body as reassuring fetish), the photograph will always fail at this task. Instead of delivering to us an image of Sherman as she "really is" or "was"—confirming our unmediated access

⁸ This quotation, from Phelan's brilliant and moving essay on representation and death, "Infected Eyes: Dying Man with a Movie Camera, Silverlake Life: The View from Here," continues in a Metzian vein: "The unconscious functions in a similar but less literal way" (1997, 157).

not only to the authentic meaning of the performance before the camera but to Sherman, as artistic subject, herself—the photograph of/by Sherman, rather, testifies to the impossibility of our attaining such access.⁹

The photograph is a sign of the passing of time, of the fact that what we see in the shiny surface of the photographic print no longer exists as we see it: it is a sign, again, of our inexorable mortality. Particularly in the portrait image, Roland Barthes, in his lyrical meditation on photographic meaning, *Camera Lucida*, argues “I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death . . . I am truly becoming a specter” (1981, 14).¹⁰ The photographic portrait in one sense, then, is a death mask, a coffin, a lifeless screen stifling all breath and sensation and movement.¹¹

To this end, let’s look at two bodies performed as already dead: in Sherman’s 1985 *Untitled #153* (fig. 2) and Wilke’s *Untitled* image from her *Intra-Venus* series (fig. 3), each artist arrays herself over the photographic field as a corpse, a point emphasized by Wilke’s play on the classic Renaissance painting of a foreshortened dead Christ by Andrea Mantegna,

⁹ Another piece that clearly points to this impossibility is Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose’s proposed video installation work, *The Viewing* (proposal dated 1995). As I discuss at greater length in my book *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998, 237–39), the piece was to consist of a live video feed from Flanagan’s coffin (he had cystic fibrosis, and his death was imminent), which would be connected to a monitor in a public gallery. The visitor to the gallery (the “Viewer,” as designated by the piece) would be apprised that, upon pressing the “on” button, an image of Flanagan’s decaying corpse would appear on the monitor. Clearly, Flanagan and Rose, his collaborator, who was to actualize the piece (Flanagan died before they could raise the grant money), were pushing the envelope of our belief in representation to secure presence. If the piece had been actualized it would have forced the viewer to acknowledge her or his desire to reconstitute Flanagan’s flesh through the video image, a desire that would have been harshly refuted by the image of decay that would have been delivered on the video screen.

¹⁰ Barthes notes further along, “by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive . . . but by shifting this reality to the past (‘this-has-been’), the photograph suggests that it is already dead” (1981, 79).

¹¹ In relation to the photographic portrait in particular, it is worth noting that the death mask was one of the modes of representation out of which modern portraiture developed, confirming the link between photography and death or, more specifically, the desire to forestall the oblivion of death through visual commemoration. See Berger 1994, 90. Cathy Davidson has also explored the link between the photographic portrait and death, citing period advertisements aimed at the newly bereaved in noting the common nineteenth-century practice of paying a modest fee to memorialize a lost one in a photograph (1990, 678). See also the general study by Jay Ruby (1995) in which Ruby examines historical precedents to these photographic memorials to the dead as well as providing a social analysis of memorial photography.



Figure 2 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #153* (1985). Color photograph, 57 1/4 × 49 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.

from around 1466 (fig. 4). Wilke, with her own cancer-ridden form, reverses the placement of Christ's body, placing her head at the forefront of our field of vision, her feet extending outward. Rather than grasping the humanity of a god, as we are encouraged to do through Mantegna's obtrusive placement of Christ's soiled and nail-punctured feet in our face, we are plunged, with the thinning chemo-treated hair and hospital robes thrust forward, into this diseased body's sordid humanness, its immanent demise. Rather than the transcendence of man through his link to the humanity of God's son, it is the inexorability of the human subject's ultimate absence and fundamental instability that the image is now purveying.

In this way, these pictures suggest that it is through the pose (and thus through representation, which necessarily predicates a freezing of bodily motion) that the death of the subject dealt by the photographic shot—its fetishizing power—is enacted. As Barthes notes, the seizure of motion in photography encourages us to project immobility on the past, and “it is this arrest which constitutes the pose” (1981, 78).¹² Perhaps, given the

¹² The seizure of motion in photography, Barthes argues, began “as an art of the Person:

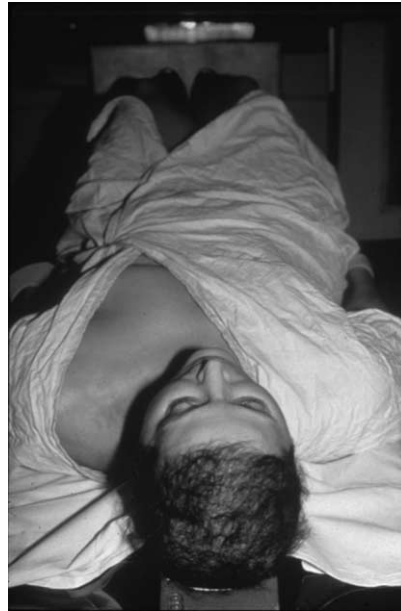


Figure 3 Hannah Wilke, *Untitled*, from *Intra-Venus Series* (1991–92). Chromagenic super-gloss print, performalist self-portrait produced with Donald Goddard’s assistance, 71 1/2 × 47 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

resonance of Wilke’s form with that of the dead Christ, this immobility *can*, after all, be transformed into a sign of eternal life through a certain kind of spectatorial engagement. This is a different kind of “life,” however, than idealistic or conventionally metaphysical readings of photographs or subjects would promise to deliver. This is a life sustained via deferral through the other. To return to Derrida’s words cited at the beginning of this essay (aggressively moving us beyond the metaphysical connections of Mantegna’s painting), the subject “has no relation to him[/her]self that is not forced to defer itself by passing through the other in the form . . . of the eternal return” ([1982] 1985, 88).

Screening the subject

The interrelation between the death-dealing pose and the life-giving spectatorial engagement of interpretation marks the contradictory process by

of identity, of civil status, of what we might call . . . the body’s formality” (1981, 79). In my essay “Body” (in press), I discuss Hippolyte Bayard’s *Self-Portrait of a Drowned Man* (1840) as exemplifying the paradoxical death-dealing capacity of the photographic pose; see also the “Introduction” in Lingwood 1986, 7.



Figure 4 Mantegna, *Dead Christ* (1501). Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

which the subject takes place in and as representation, especially in relationship to the technologized and indexical field of the photographic print. This process is usefully understood in relation to Jacques Lacan's notion of the *screen*, as articulated in his 1964 essay, "What Is a Picture?" ([1964] 1981). *Screen* is a crucial term in Lacan's model of how subjects reciprocally define and negotiate one another in the visible. As in Sherman's work, such as *Untitled #357* (2000) (fig. 5), one of her new series of self-portraits in which she masquerades as Hollywood doyennes in various states of seedy and disreputable disrepair, seems to announce, it is the *screen*—the site where gaze meets subject of representation—that is, in Lacan's words, the "locus of mediation" where the human subject "maps himself in the imaginary capture" of the gaze. For Lacan, the subject is always already *photo-graphed* in the purview of the gaze; the photograph is a screen, the site where subject and object, self and other, intertwine to produce intersubjective meaning ([1964] 1981, 107).¹³

The screen defines the process through which we perform ourselves simultaneously as subjects and objects of looking; the photographic por-

¹³ Here, Lacan also notes, the subject "breaks up . . . between its being and its semblance, between itself and that paper tiger it shows to the other. . . . What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. . . . I am *photo-graphed*" (Lacan [1964] 1981, 106–7).



Figure 5 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #357* (2000). Color print, 30 × 20 inches. Courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.

trait can thus be viewed as a screen across and through which complex processes of identification and projection take place in an ongoing dynamic of subject formation or *subjectification*. The screen is also a mask. In the self-display that constitutes our enactment of what we call our “individuality,” the subject, Lacan argues, “gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin”—the screen ([1964] 1981, 107).

We have begun to see that, because it presents not only *a* subject but the subject of making, the photographic self-portrait plays out this dynamic of the screen in a particularly heightened way. It points to the paradoxical “death” and “life” of the photographic image and thus, by

extension, to the simultaneity of absence and presence—the inexorable passage of time rendering all seeming presence as absence—giving shape to the profound paradox of being human.

Exaggeratedly theatrical practices such as Sherman's enact this process overtly, enabling an understanding of the processes by which all image making and viewing produce meaning between and among subjects (including the meaning of the subjects themselves). Who we are in relation to Sherman's parodically rendered harridans, then, remains an open question. As I attach to them, they make me wince in my implicitly constituted superiority vis-à-vis their excessive, glued-on, prosthetic mixed metaphors of glamour gone awry. I connect to Sherman only obliquely and with some shame, imagining her sneakily placing herself on a plane above those she performs through this particular rhetoric of flamboyantly pathetic posing and attire. But of course, she "is" or "was" those she performs, at least at the moment of posing—such a splitting exhibits on yet another register the complexity of subject formation.

These women are definitively "dead" types, masks for the "real" Sherman who nonetheless continually eludes us through her reiterative falseness across these and other self-portrait series. Everything here is dead, even me, as I fail to find myself comfortably lodged in these scenes of feminine subjectivity. And yet, still palpating, we breathe life into one another—I, by way of first projection (my insecurities and anxieties become intertwined with those I imagine to be Sherman's/her character's), then writing, and they, by way of insinuation (I cannot get the image of that heavenward-glancing, blasting yellow blond out of my mind).

Through the pose, then, and this is where the productive tension of self-portrait photography resides, the embodied subject is exposed as being a mask or screen, a site of projection and identification. It is thus through the pose, via the screen, that the subject *opens into performativity and becomes animated*. Sherman's endless self-reiterations, in this case rendered so dramatically as "other," make this animation manifest (we can never stop or fix her in one or another of the poses). Theorist Craig Owens has noted that the subject (in the self-portrait, the artist herself or himself) assumes a mask in order to become photographable—in order to be *seen*—and in this way, the subject "poses as an object *in order to be a subject*" ([1985] 1992, 212, 215).

The question of who the "subject" even is in the first place, of course, is never answered but endlessly deferred through the object—this is the great paradox Derrida identifies. Expanding on Owens's observation, then, Sherman's reiterative self-portrait images seem to confirm that, *while*

mask and screen both appear on first glance to imply the photograph as a site of stasis, they are in practice passages where subjectification takes place as a process via an “eternal return” through the other.

Reciprocal subjects: Connection through the punctum

In this way, we move into the performative arena as the apparently static object (the person depicted, frozen, fetishized in the photograph) becomes a subject, a dynamic that is particularly charged in relation to the self-portrait, where the object is, indeed, the subject of making. While the photographic portrait in general has historically been mobilized as a way of solidifying the making and viewing subject (the centered, Cartesian, Western “individual”)—as in portraits of leaders and celebrities, which pretend to deliver them to us—it can only do this, as more recent practices have seemed to stress, by *passing through the object*.¹⁴ By exacerbating this reciprocity, artists such as Sherman, Wilke, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Laura Aguilar point to the way in which it forever precludes the success of the male gaze in constituting a coherent, heterosexual, masculine subject of viewing in relation to a passive feminine object, a singular, colonizing white gaze in relation to a colonized body-of-color.

There are many ways of exploring this reciprocity and of further opening out the incoherence of the gaze, breaking down its reliance on the supposed object for its own performance of coherence. Via Wilke’s and Sherman’s insistent portrayals of the mask of femininity across their performative self-portraits, we can see reiteration itself as an effective strategy: the equation woman = fetish, or “dead” object of the male gaze is so insistently reiterated that it becomes unhinged.¹⁵ In the two images noted above, Wilke’s *Intra-Venus* picture and Sherman’s *Untitled #153*, Wilke and Sherman conflate the pinup with the corpse. Explicitly connecting the photographic self-portrait to death and loss, they also fatally cross the wires that conventionally power the male gaze, confusing the domains of spectatorial desire and authorial/female self-assertion and so short-circuiting its effects.

¹⁴ On the historical development of portrait photography as a mode of recording the status and stability of the bourgeois subject, see Tagg 1988, 34–59.

¹⁵ As Celia Lury argues specifically in relation to Sherman’s work, “the viewer, prompted by the framing which makes self-conscious each photograph’s interruption of the stories of melodrama in which the woman’s gestures belong, is [encouraged] . . . to acknowledge his or her complicity in the invention of a *mise-en-scène*, and thus in the constitution of femininity as a response, as that which is done to, as something to be ‘taken’”(1998, 104). Lury actually uses the word *required* where I have substituted *encouraged* in order to stress that no image can “require” any reading, as my discussion of the punctum makes clear.

Another way of digging into the deep structures of reciprocity that condition our relationship to images (as well as to other subjects and to ourselves and our gods) is to focus on detail. If the image is a kind of memory screen, the photographic self-portrait is thus a site of reciprocal exchange where the “past” subject (the artist) comes alive through the “present” memories of the viewer, who responds in particular ways to the artist’s self-performance as captured in the image via a face conveyed through a conglomeration of telling details. Focusing on the emotional and psychological effect of the detail, Barthes’s conception of the punctum allows us to understand how this reciprocal process of projection might take place. As Christian Metz notes, the punctum, which is the part of the photograph that entails the somewhat uncanny feeling of off-frame space, “depends more on the reader than on the photograph itself” (1985, 87).¹⁶ The punctum is that detail in the image that opens it to the depths of our fully embodied subjectivity by pricking our memory: “a ‘detail’ attracts me,” Barthes notes, continuing, “this ‘detail’ is the *punctum*.” The punctum, Barthes writes, is a “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (1981, 42, 47).

How might the punctum play out in relation to these self-portrait images, to Sherman’s in particular? Well, the punctum specifically, Barthes insists, disturbs the conventional references of what he calls the *studium* of the image: in the film stills, the studium is clearly linked to the conventions of Hollywood cinema and the mass media fetishization of women’s bodies in the marketing of consumer culture. *Untitled Film Still #30* (fig. 6) thus enacts the cliché of the abused woman, framed claustrophobically in a Hitchcockian visual style: this is its *studium*. My punctum (for every viewer’s would be unique) is the gleam of the lip—not of the eye, that’s too “obvious” (looks made up, like a fake wound). The gleam of the lip, for me, is that detail that pricks me; like a hole, it opens inward, both sucking me into the depths of the image and allowing me to penetrate Sherman’s pictured face via my projective, desiring gaze.

This detail sends me into an abyss of remembering (literally, remembering Sherman’s body via my own phantasmagoric bank of past thoughts and images, made “present” through this image moment). Fruity kisses

¹⁶ Derrida defines the *punctum* as “a point of singularity which punctures the surface of the reproduction—and even the production—of analogies, likenesses and codes. . . . it is the Referent which, through its own image, I can no longer suspend, while its ‘presence’ forever escapes me, having already receded into the past. . . . It addresses itself to me” (1988, 264).



Figure 6 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #30* (1979). Black-and-white photograph, 30 × 40 inches. Courtesy of Metro Pictures, New York.

and the smell of “Tabu,” my mother’s perfumed lipstick, glowing glossily above me before her night out. In that gleam is the promise of both sexual excitement and loss (my mother’s sexual excitement that, due to the opposition of motherhood and sexuality in our culture, was felt to be my loss). For me, Sherman’s gleam opens into her own promiscuous self-display, her (and my?) own desire to be both powerful (a term not conventionally aligned with femininity) and desirable at once.

The punctum, then, brings the image into the present via my act of remembering and projection—both of which are fully embodied processes (emanating from my desiring body, they, in turn, “form” the subject “Sherman”). At the same time, the punctum renews my memories as “now,” expressing them as and in relation to Sherman’s act of self-performance: the image re-forms me, then, as I rework its meaning through interpretation. The punctum is the “wound” that binds me to Sherman as an object of my desire, its opening offered by Sherman’s pose, setting, clothing, and attitude.¹⁷

¹⁷ As Lury argues, Sherman’s images are predicated on an anticipation of the viewer’s response, an anticipation the effect of which is to produce a moment of hesitation for the viewer, in which “the sighting/siting of femininity is acknowledged as a risky business, a matter of life and death” (1998, 104).

Because it proffers the face and/or body of an other, the photographic portrait encourages us to attach to it via our own psychic past; it calls out for us to bring embodied experiences from our own past (whether repressed and “forgotten” or easily called to mind) into dialogue with it in order to give this “new” subject meaning within our own worldview. To engage with a photographic portrait, to pass through its fleshy mask or screen, is to remember or, in Kaja Silverman’s words, “to bring images from the past into an ever new and dynamic relation to those through which we experience the present, and in the process ceaselessly to shift the contours and significance not only of the past, but also of the present” (1996, 189).

The photographic self-portrait is a special case. By imaging herself or himself, the artist solicits the kinds of engagements Silverman proposes but also opens up a range of critical possibilities in terms of the circuits of making and viewing that constitute visibility itself. As the maker but also the object of the work, the artist’s dual role casts into doubt the inexorability of the gap that normative subjectivity manufactures in order to produce the subject as definitively separate from the object. *Our* role, in viewing the artist’s self-portrait photograph, becomes one of projection and identification via our own psychic past but becomes further complicated by the artist’s having performed herself or himself actively as the object of our desire. In a sense, through processes of remembering, we project ourselves into the screen, *becoming* the person (fully embodied in our imaginary) whose image we engage or making her over in our own (or our own mother’s) image.

Reiteration, otherness, and the reciprocity of the gaze

Through reiteration, by preconfiguring over and over again the route of the supposedly “male” gaze, Sherman and Wilke also mark the so-called object of the gaze (in each case the artist herself) as a site of endless negotiation: a *screen* where subject and object meet. In so doing, of course, these artists point to the gaze itself as reciprocal rather than unilateral in its effects. The presumed heterosexual white male who gazes (who projects his insufficiency outward onto the fetishized female and/or colored body) is thus exposed as defining himself through this very otherness he attempts to expel from himself. Through reiteration, not only images of women and nonwhites but the structure of fetishism itself is shown to be not about the insufficiency of femininity but about the ongoing machinations of the male gaze, which operates to mask and disavow heterosexual male lack by projecting it onto the bodies of others.



Figure 7 Lyle Ashton Harris, *Queen, Alias, & Id: The Child* (1994). Unique polaroid, 24 × 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Reiteration, then, returns us to performativity. Wilke's and Sherman's multiplicitous enactments of themselves are, indeed, continual reiterations of femininity (or, as noted above, masculinity, depending on how you look at it). And reiteration is, as Judith Butler notes, the "performativ[e] . . . citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names," the means by which bodies take on gendered (and I would add sexual, racial, class, etc.) identities through the "regulatory norms" of heterosexuality (and, again, I would add masculinity, whiteness, etc.)—norms that work, precisely, performatively across and through the body (1993, 2). While white, heterosexual femininity is reiteratively performed by Sherman and Wilke (at least in its woundedness if not in its normativity), the pictures do not, as I have suggested, cohere into a stable narrative of "woman-as-object," nor do they relinquish themselves to an inexorably empowered heterosexual male gaze. Rather, the performative reiteration points to what

Butler calls the “failure of . . . performativity to finally and fully establish the identity to which it refers,” and the tendency, noted above, for the reiterated performance of the feminine to turn into an enactment of the *lack* that constitutes masculinity (1993, 188).¹⁸

As the work of Laura Aguilar and Lyle Ashton Harris makes perhaps even more clear than that of Sherman or Wilke (who, after all, are forced to sustain the illusory visibility of their whiteness and femininity and so a certain conventionality to their objectification), the performative posing of the self, whether photographically documented or “live,” is always already a performance of the other. We have seen that the screen of the photographic self-portrait is marked clearly as a site of exchange where the two intersect in a chiasmic structure of desire that produces or at least *fleshes out* embodied subjects.

Harris’s crossing over of the masculine and the feminine; his performance of himself as “mother” (with the statuesque artist Renée Cox posing as “father”) in *Queen, Alias, & Id: The Child* (1994) (fig. 7) or, in *Constructs #12* (1989) (fig. 8), as homoerotic odalisque; and his resolute sexualization—one might say feminization—of his body and face via posing, clothing, and makeup, solicit a certain kind of hungry gaze.¹⁹ At the same time, Harris *demand*s a surfacing of the particularity, the variously identified embodied and embodying projections, of this gaze via the *specificity* of his chosen attributes and attitudes.²⁰

¹⁸ With the notion of iteration and performativity, Butler is drawing on the work of J. L. Austin (1955) and of Derrida (1982). Derrida mobilizes iterability in order to understand how language, and representation in general, function. Thus, as Derrida notes, it is iterability that allows language to be understood beyond the presence of the author, for “all writing . . . must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general” (1982, 316); further, iterability is that consensually determined thread of meaning that links subjects and objects of making.

¹⁹ It has been argued that any self-display or masquerade is by definition feminizing, most famously by Lacan, who noted that, “by virtue of the fact of the *Verdrängung* inherent in the phallic mark of desire, [the mask or masquerade] has the curious consequence of making virile display in the human being itself appear feminine” ([1958] 1977, 291).

²⁰ José Esteban Muñoz argues that Harris’s images and use of whiteface (as in some of the images in the *Constructs* series) are “an almost *too literal* photo negative reversal,” a too “straightforward counteridentification” as compared to what he views as the more complex “disidentificatory” strategies of performance artist Vaginal Davis (1999, 109). I would argue, however, that Muñoz is viewing Harris’s works too simplistically; in my view, they, too, interlink sexuality, gender, and race in their performance of Harris’s feminized, highly eroticized, whitened yet apparently still “black” body. Nonetheless, Muñoz’s overall theoretical model of disidentification—a “performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology . . . a reformatting of self within the social . . . a third term that resists



Figure 8 Lyle Ashton Harris, *Constructs #12* (1989). Photomural, 6 × 3 feet. Courtesy of the artist.

If Wilke's, Sherman's, Aguilar's, and Harris's photographic self-portraits are brought to life through my engagement of them—if they become as much

the binary of identification and counteridentification" (1999, 97)—is very useful, although I would argue for the expansion of this model to implicate more thoroughly the viewer as a participant in the ultimate meanings of the performative images and actions (after all, the "disidentification" always already takes place in relation to others).

about *me* as they are about each subject depicted—then I would have to say that Harris’s body (which, perhaps because I know him personally as well, cries out to me melodramatically as the sometimes diva “Lyle”) draws out my own sense of sexual and racial normativity but marks it, making it strange. By soliciting my gaze through exaggeratedly performed signifiers of bodily difference (a gaze, it must be emphasized, that is predicated on the desires of a fully embodied subject), Harris establishes my normativity *as otherness*. If, in a telescoping abyss of *signifiante*, my readings as you receive them are as much about *you* as about me, then you will negotiate—perhaps cling to, perhaps reject, perhaps consume—my otherness in turn, making it your own.

The screen/the intertwining

As the apparatus of the camera is said to unfurl a viselike mechanically rendered grip toward the things it depicts—things that are thus violently captured in the triangular trap of the camera eye’s perspectival gaze—so the notion of the screen might seem to entail a violent disempowerment of the subject depicted. The term *screen* itself might seem to imply a model of subjectification that operates in a shallow, or even two-dimensional, plane producing superficial (skin-deep) pictures of people rather than fully embodied subjects. This is apparent both in the word *screen*, which implies a relation of two-dimensionality, and in Lacan’s famous diagram illustrating the trajectory between the gaze and the subject of representation: each is designated as a point projecting a triangle, and the two triangles intersect in a line labeled *image/screen* ([1964] 1981, 106).

The more resolutely embodied theories of Lacan’s colleague Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the photographic self-portraits of Laura Aguilar, however, offer a way of opening the screen and, by extension, the technological rendering of the subject in photography itself, into a much needed depth. Via Aguilar’s insistent plunges into the abyss of the image—say, in her 1996 *Nature Self-Portrait* series of nudes—I insist that the photograph itself, like the subjects it depicts, is best understood as a screen that displays corporeality-as-surface but also entails its own, and the embodied subject’s, tangibility and extension in three dimensions through deep space. To this end, the photograph is like the *skin* that envelops our corporeality in that it indicates or presupposes interiority. The photographic portrait is only apparently skin-deep; its implications are more profound, the intersubjective engagements it puts in motion vibrating with the moist, pulsating organicism of the body’s innermost core, itself leading, through

metaphor as well as neurotransmitters, to the cognitive and emotive “depths” of the subject.²¹

Among other things, as I have already suggested, the photographed face or body takes on depth through the displacements, identifications, and projections of the interpretive relationship, which enlivens and enfleshes by tapping into embodied memories.²² Aguilar’s body, splayed (in *Nature Self-Portrait/No. 4*, 1996) (fig. 9) across a strange landscape, mirroring her outstretched body in a large puddle of glassy black water, becomes a palimpsest for my projections. She is, to my art historical mind, an odalisque, a Pictorialist play on the nature/woman conflation (à la Annie Bridgman, the early twentieth-century Pictorialist photographer who, with exaggerated lyricism, placed her lithe, white nude body in misty landscapes that look more like film sets than anything located in the harsh outside [see Margolis 1978, 105]). And yet, Aguilar’s brown fleshiness, the bulging and dimpled contours of her rotund form, sings a different tune, or a tune of difference: but again, the fact that I experience her in terms of difference simply serves to highlight the fact that my normativity (white, thin, nervous, queer in attitude but heterosexual in practice) is *otherness* in relation to Aguilar’s apparent identifications.²³

²¹ My argument vis-à-vis the portrait image is in strong contrast to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of the face as limited, two-dimensional surface in their essay “Year Zero: Faciality” ([1980] 1987).

²² British artist Helen Chadwick has explored this depth of the photograph in relation to the body in her work and writing. It is worth quoting her at some length: “Photography is my skin. As membrane separating this from that, it fixes the point between, establishing my limit, the envelope in which I am. My skin is image, surface, medium of recognition. [The photograph that is] disclosing me within its virtual space [evokes] the tension of me for other. In parabolas, complementary functions of inside-outside, I plot the amplitude of difference, criss-crossing through this *permeable screen*. [While the eye] reads these signals in the cool far retinal distance, . . . *they occurred and are still in the knowing realm of touch*. Intimate events of the moment of contact, happening once, are continually secured in place . . . [through] tactile photography, the very sensitising of surface itself. The vital interface is here, where substance quickens to sensation in the eros of the moment. I graze the emulsion and by a process of interpenetration am dynamically returned” ([1982–84] 2000, 281; emphases added). In the long, dissertation version of her work on masochistic body art, Kathy O’Dell theorizes the photographic document of the performance as a link between the body of the performer and the body of the viewer: “Flesh-and-(sometimes)-blood images . . . automatically mandate a viewer’s consideration of identificatory questions of similarity/difference, closeness/alienation, empathy/disregard, etc., between the artist and the viewer by virtue of the viewer having an obvious share in the material aspects of those images” (1992, 243–44).

²³ The more I get to know Aguilar and her work, the more I experience what I initially experienced as her difference as highlighting my own awkward aspects of otherness; my



Figure 9 Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait/No. 4* (1996). Black-and-white photograph, 16 × 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles.

Dangling in the gap rendered through this difference, I cannot quite imagine myself “as” her but only pose, self-consciously, as the gaze that seizes the odalisque, fixing it in its radical difference as the object of my wants and needs, whether sexual, colonial, or (inevitably) both. With a single image, Aguilar sums up what is “wrong” with the history of Western image making and yet, sneakily, what is also so appealing, so pruriently “right” about its seductions. Aguilar “sees” me in *my* difference as she produces herself in this way, presupposing, it would seem, a thin, WASP feminist art historical gaze.

nervousness and anxiety, for example, I begin to see is not other to Aguilar’s apparent calm but another less melancholy version of what she exhibits, and explores in her video work, as depression. I discuss her video piece *The Body/Depression* (1996; available from Susanna Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles) at length elsewhere (Jones 1998, 222–23). Furthermore, from our conversations (and this, of course, is a completely other kind of engagement), I have learned that we both share having Irish grandfathers, although hers married into a Latino family, mine into a Swedish-American one. The point here is not that I now see there is no difference between us or that I embrace her work as universal in some sense but, rather, that beneath the superficial differences of appearance lie a complex network of shared feelings, experiences, perhaps even (in our case) cultural or potentially genetic connections. These claimed moments of congruence serve, as in all relationships, to cement two subjects but also to throw their differences into relief. The visual experience of Aguilar, too, sets up a network relation that is always open to expansion and transformation depending on the information I have gleaned and the desires I continue to bring to the image.

Stressing the way in which all seeing presupposes the embodiment of the seer as well as the seen (and the fact that the seer is always also seen), Merleau-Ponty notes: “My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visibles with it. There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other. . . . [O]nce again we must . . . eschew the thinking by planes and perspectives” ([1964] 1968, 138). In this way, Merleau-Ponty insistently returns the *body* to the otherwise disembodied theories of vision and experience developing out of Cartesianism.²⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, vision is resolutely embodied: “Every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space”; this tangible space of vision is the chiasm, the “double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible” ([1964] 1968, 134).

The photograph of the body, then, is not just a simulacrum or a two-dimensional screen but a fleshlike screen, one that presupposes the depth and materiality of the body as subject. The visible presupposing the tangible, the photograph is what Merleau-Ponty would call *flesh of the world* ([1964] 1968, 143–44). This aspect of the photograph stems from our inextricable embeddedness in its visual field, which is simultaneously a corporeal field: as Merleau-Ponty notes, we cannot see (“possess the visible”) unless we are “possessed by it, unless [we are] . . . of it” ([1964] 1968, 133–34). Vision, Merleau-Ponty argues, and Aguilar insists with her self-imaging, is incarnated, de-abstracted from the linear—or at best, planar—compulsion of the gaze as it is commonly articulated via models derived from Lacan.

We understand our relationship to the photograph of another subject’s body (Aguilar’s, for example) through what Merleau-Ponty calls *intercorporeity*: the “coiling over of the visible upon the visible” that animates other bodies besides our own; we understand that the screen is profound, that “what is proper to the visible is . . . to be the surface of an inexhaustible depth” ([1964] 1968, 140–41, 143). It is our being looked at by the photograph-as-flesh that makes us fully corporeal subjects in vision; this being looked at also substantiates the subjectivity of the person in the picture, but *always already in relation to us, those it “views.”*

It is in this way that Aguilar, Wilke, Sherman, and Ashton Harris pass through me but also open into performativity. This is yet another way of

²⁴ While Lacan had worked closely with Merleau-Ponty’s models, referring to them in some of his essays, he tended to theorize subjectivity much more abstractly. To a certain extent, then, Lacan and, especially, U.S. and British visual theorists who made use of his work in the 1970s and 1980s sustained this tendency to disembody the subject.

saying that the performance of the self is not self-sustaining or coherent within itself, not a pure, unidirectional show of individual agency (as Steichen might have wanted to have it), but always contingent on otherness. To this end, Merleau-Ponty stresses that the reciprocity of the gaze and the transitivity of embodiment in general has the capacity to make the viewer acknowledge his or her own objectification. As soon as I am able to “see other seers” beyond myself, he argues, the “limits of [my] factual vision” are brought out and the “solipsistic illusion” of individualism is exposed: “For the first time . . . I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes. . . . [F]or the first time, through the other body, I see that, in its coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives, adding to the world that I see the treasure necessary for what the other body sees. For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension” ([1964] 1968, 143–44). My body, then, serves as visual “treasure” for the other to see; my body “clasps” this other body rather than only “coupling itself up with the world” or placing itself, singularly, as seeing subject in command of or in dialogue with the world. My body exists *as* a body (fleshy and contoured in its weight and meaningfulness) through desire in relation to this other body; the clasping makes us, almost, one (though the intermingled sweat of our moist embrace marks the *reversibility* of our relation rather than its equivalence or our conflation into one).

Finally, confirming the limitations of visibility and of the indexical image proffered by the photographic self-portrait, Merleau-Ponty observes that the reversibility that defines the flesh (the subject in a relation of intercorporeity) is “capable of weaving relations between bodies that . . . will not only enlarge, but will pass definitively beyond the circle of the visible” ([1964] 1968, 144). Subjectivity ultimately passes beyond visibility; it may be partially accessed through the visible realm, but this visible realm is always already a tangible, corporeal realm, and one in which the self always refers in bodily ways to others, and vice versa. In this way we can understand the fact that with its visible rendering of the subject on a two-dimensional plane, the technology of photography *embodies* the subject (both in and outside the image).

It is for this reason that the threat of the other is so acute: as Sherman, Wilke, Ashton Harris, and Aguilar insistently display, their images are bodies, and their “death” in the pose points to our own. But it is also for this reason that the importance of our opening ourselves to otherness is made most acute. Paradoxically, by closing ourselves to the other (attempting to seal off the borders of our own seeing flesh in order to project

ourselves through the apparatus of photography or otherwise as immortal), the loss, absence, and mortality indicated by the other whips back on us, marking *us* as “dead.”

It is only by embracing the other in her incoherence and lack that we can bring her fully back to life and, in so doing, revive our own chances for continuing on in a relevant way. Plunging into the depths of the image—feeling the flesh of the other as our own, immanently mortal, corporeal skin—is to free ourselves (at least momentarily) in a potentially radically politicizing way from both prejudice and fear.

Coming to an ending

Cahun’s blinged-out face in the c. 1939 self-portrait is a face of internalized pleasure made visible to others. This is the paradox of photographic self-portraiture. It simultaneously, tantalizingly, both gives and takes the subject from us. In this essay I have argued, in a highly utopian way, to be sure, for a mode of engagement that accepts this give and take, a mode that will also promote an acceptance of the inevitability of death that underlies our every anxious attempt to project otherness outward.

In Wilke’s *Intra-Venus* pictures, such as the image of her naked body punctured by tubes (fig. 10) or, legs spread, reclining in a bathtub (fig. 11) (this time, cunt and feet to the camera, a clearly feminine bodily echo of Mantegna’s dead Christ [fig. 4], her body is scraped and penetrated in an attempted “cure” for cancer that we know to have been a failure [she died in 1993]). With our hindsight, we want to cry out and tell her not to bother mangling that otherwise glorious flesh. It is always already gone; it is at the same time forever memorialized (but as always already contingent on its interpreters) in the image.

Correlatively, the photographic portrait of any kind marks the fact of the aging and inevitable death of the subject depicted whether or not she or he is still alive at the time of viewing.²⁵ Knowing of Wilke’s demise

²⁵ There are several amazing recent works that explore these stubborn and wounding issues in relation to portrait imagery in photographic media. In particular, Laura Aguilar’s unpublished late-1990s series of portraits of her friend (or, more accurately, her friend’s corpse—how would one properly describe him/it?) just moments after he died of complications related to AIDS, and Gillian Wearing’s deeply moving *Prelude* (2000), a video piece in which she reworks a simple film loop of a street alcoholic named Lindsey, whose ghostly, grainy, slow-speed talking head is accompanied by the angry, grieving voice of her twin sister discussing her agony at Lindsey’s alcohol-related early death. At one point, the sister implies that she would have killed herself out of grief but “I just don’t have death in me.” It is as if her mortality has been siphoned off into/onto the image/body of her now-dead sister in



Figure 10 Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus Series No. 1, June 15, 1992/ January 30, 1992* (1992). Chromagenic supergloss print, performalist self-portrait produced with Donald Goddard's assistance, 71 1/2 × 47 1/2 inch panel (detail of diptych). Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

(and having met her “in the flesh” just before this sad ending to the breathing body), the slick surface of the photograph—this particular photographic screen—reads to me like its own kind of tomb. And yet, if you are willing or able to buy my projections (both literal and psychic) of her body/self on this art historical screen, Wilke is “alive” again here today.

Phelan acknowledges this powerful duality (the simultaneous “life” and “death” of the portrait image) when she notes that the perspectively rendered portrait or picture of a person can reveal the limits of the body in representation, as in Caravaggio's c. 1600 *Incredulity of Thomas* (fig. 12), where Thomas pokes his finger into Christ's fleshy post-Crucifixion wound (a vivid punctum if ever there was one). While it is death defying to the extent that it memorializes her body for posterity (for the prying eyes of later viewers such as myself), Wilke's self-projection into the scene of representation is also, like Caravaggio's, one of loss and fragmentation. Her mutilated and (soon to be) dead body is, like the bodies of Christ

a most dramatic case of reciprocity that approaches a radical self-other confusion (this kind of confusion is apparently common in identical-twin relationships). Wearing's piece was screened at Regan Projects, Los Angeles, December 2000–January 2001.



Figure 11 Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus Series No. 3, August 17, 1992/ February 15, 1992/ August 9, 1992* (1992). Chromagenic supergloss print, performatist self-portrait produced with Donald Goddard's assistance, 71 1/2 × 47 1/2 inch panel (detail of triptych). Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

and Thomas, “amputated, castrated, by the drama in which [it finds itself], caught between the living and the dead, captured between the flat surface of the [image] and the ‘depth’ of the body’s interiority” (Phelan 1997, 33).²⁶

While our mortality is inexorable—we are, in a sense, always already dead—we are also always already *other* to ourselves, and so our death is, in a sense, forever forestalled; this, even after our body (like Wilke’s) “makes worms meat,” as Mercutio so eloquently puts it in *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare [1595] 1974, 1076). Certainly Shakespeare, his characters, and his contemporaries seem to have been motivated to grapple every day with this paradox of the coextensivity of presence and absence. With the so-called advances of the Enlightenment, including the photographic capacity to document with excruciating detail the “truth” of the visible world, we may have repressed it too well. The illusion of knowing has blinded us to the

²⁶ Needless to say, the cultural chasm that divides Caravaggio’s picture from Wilke’s self-portraits is vast. It is also crucial to emphasize the structural differences between the two media and modes of practice, the Caravaggio being neither a self-portrait nor a photograph (see n. 3 above).

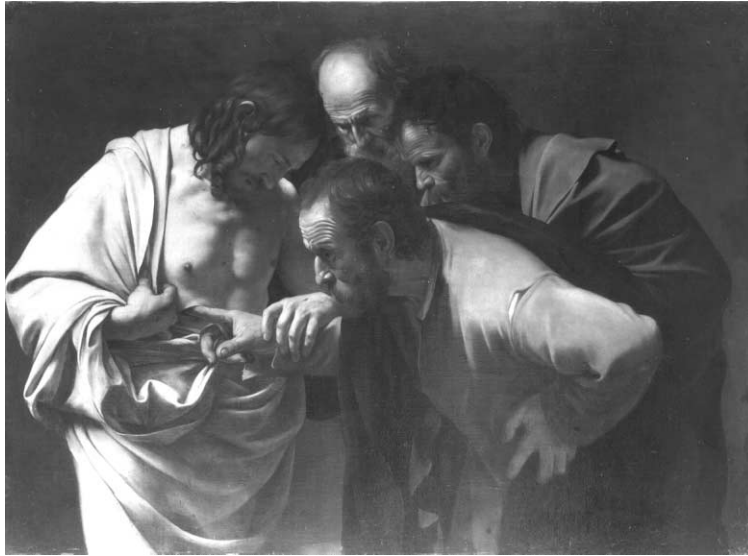


Figure 12 Caravaggio, *Incredulity of Thomas* (c. 1600). Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg.

fantastic pain and pleasure of acknowledging that we may know nothing after all. We may, for all intents and purposes, be already dead or, perhaps more accurately, caught in the endless feedback loop of eternal return that Derrida so eloquently describes.

The photographic self-portrait is particularly revealing in terms of these profound questions. Due to its status as representation, it opens the photographed subject—as well as the viewing subject—to otherness and so to an ongoing “life” in later worlds of interpretation. The photographic self-portrait is like history or the memory that forms it: it never stands still but, rather, takes its meaning from an infinite stream of future engagements wherein new desires and fascinations produce new contours for the subject depicted. These engagements can be radicalizing when understood as performative. The works I examine here insistently enact the photograph’s capacity to mark the death of the subject; in so doing, they paradoxically open this subject to the “life” of memory and the interpretive exchange, marking selfhood as otherness in a potentially productively destabilizing way.

Finally, as Kaja Silverman has argued, by performing open-ended readings such as I have offered here (securing, thereby, my own tenuous “existence” for posterity) we might *activate* rather than disavow or repress the processes of displacement, projection, and identification through

which all intersubjective engagements take place. In so doing, the past can be freed from fixity (as symbolized by the fetishization or death of the photographic cut) and the “having been” tense of the photograph transferred into the “not yet” of future possibilities (Silverman 2000).²⁷ Wilke is “not yet” dead; Sherman, Harris, and Aguilar are “not yet” murdered by the fetishizing imperialist and heterosexist gaze that dominates our culture. Through the “not yet,” anything is made possible, even an acknowledgment of the inexorability of the eternal return and the mortality it presupposes.

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²⁷ Silverman (2000) is here echoing ideas she fleshed out in more thorough, but earlier, form in *Threshold of the Visible World*.

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