

## Hybridisation of the Contemporary Self-Portrait

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**Abstract:** Contemporary self-portraiture proposes a transposition of the self while pursuing new trends, concepts and theories, which is why the current stage of my research is oriented towards the idea of corroborating the concept of self with the new technologies of the contemporary world. Thus, contemporary self-portraiture trends seek a dialogue between the individual and new means of communication, where the self-portrait becomes a document, *a selfie*, an anti-self-portrait or a form of hybridised self-portraiture. At the same time, the contemporary individual's dependence on certain technologies today is revealed in art forms that are themselves dependent on technology in order to exist and function. The process of hybridisation is not limited to traditional artistic techniques, but also makes use of quasi-medical approaches, biological knowledge, and even processes of digitising art, all with the aim of creating an artistic form that is not only self-representative but also self-referential. All of these address the concept of self and identity, emphasising the role and the relevance of exploring them in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** portraiture, self-portraiture, interdisciplinarity, contemporary art, self-documentation, biotechnology.

### Trends in contemporary self-portraiture

The self-portraits presented below propose as a common form a process of self-documentation of various aspects related to the artist's self and identity. However, the approaches stand out not necessarily through the realism and physical resemblance of some faces, but through the uniqueness of their approaches.



Fig. 1 Laura Swanson, *Coat*, 2005

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### Self-portrait as document

Despite the view that a document is traditionally constituted only by physical/digitised text or any other graphic, document theory demonstrates that an object, image or performance can also constitute forms of documentation and documents. In Suzanne Briet's 1951 manifesto, "Qu'est-ce que la documentation?"<sup>1</sup> she illustrates her theory by associating an animal with a document, namely that a living animal in its environment remains just a wild animal, while its remains brought into an institution such as a museum are considered evidence, information, and therefore a documentary object, and she calls this form a "self-document" because it informs about nothing other than itself. Compared to a text that can inform about anything, the object in question informs only about itself, through itself. Through this, we can emphasise that any form of self-portrait is a form of self-documentation and any self-documentation is a self-portrait.



Fig. 2 Ai Weiwei, *Ai Weiwei in the Elevator When Taken into Custody by the Police* 2009, 2017, Brooklyn Museum, New York

### Self-portrait as a selfie

As for self-portraits as *selfies*, this practice brings together aspects of digital, artistic and socio-cultural technology. The acceptance of selfies as a form of art is still debated, with similarities and differences between a *selfie* and a self-portrait being established. Its importance is evident in the relevance of the practice in the contemporary era, being dubbed the second nature of contemporary man<sup>2</sup>. Self-portraiture through *selfies* offers, in addition to traditional self-portraiture, a process of mirroring through the camera built into the phone, so that self-portraiture becomes a form of posthuman portraiture, achieved through the perspective of the digital. The avatarisation of the artist and the transposition into the digital and virtual world are also aspects explored in

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Buckland (2017). *Document Theory*, in "ISKO Encyclopaedia of Knowledge Organisation", Vol. 45, No. 5, pp. 425-436.

<sup>2</sup> Brooke Wendt (2014). *The Allure of the Selfie. Instagram and the New Self-Portrait*, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, p. 40.

this artistic space. Today, the selfie ultimately constitutes an expressive and effective form of artistic documentation of the self.

From the point of view of contemporary man's dependence on current technology, I emphasise how a *selfie*, a practice so ubiquitous in an individual's daily life, cannot exist without the use of a mobile phone and therefore social networks. The practice of the selfie is also a primary form of self-documentation.

### Anti-self-portrait

An interesting term associated with the research topic would be “anti-portrait”<sup>3</sup>, or “anti-self-portrait”. These can be understood as a representation that is contrary to the standard portrait or an extension of it, a complement or an alternative. If any form of expression can represent a self-portrait and any form of art can propose a form of documentation, the recording and archiving of



Fig. 3 Laura Swanson, *White*, 2007

various aspects of the self can take place through a multitude of representations.

The best example for introducing the term “anti-self-portrait” is the artist who coined the term in a series of photographs, anti-self-portraits, where Laura Swanson intentionally hides her face. The psychological game that takes place between her, the camera and the audience, targets various personal and sociological aspects.

At the same time, she seeks to show the audience the difficulties encountered by a person with dwarfism, but also to reverse the context in which she often finds herself, namely the target of uncomfortable and intense stares from the people around her. In her photographs, Swanson seeks to put the audience in her place and induce that state of unease, of being watched. The lack of a face is the main reason why they are called *anti*-self-portraits.

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<sup>3</sup> Fiona Johnstone and Kirstie Imber (2020). *Anti-Portraiture. Challenging the Limits of the Portrait*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, London, p. 24.



Fig. 4 Tracey Emin, (*Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*), 1995

Returning to the previous idea of forms of self-documentation that take on the characteristics of a self-portrait, Emin Tracey creates, through her tent installation “Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995”, a collection of names documenting all the people with whom she has shared a bed, including romantic partners, family members, and friends. This form of self-documentation has a strong self-referential value, which makes the installation a self-portrait.

### **Interdisciplinary research**

An important trend in the artistic field today is the process of inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary research. Through these, artists have the opportunity and advantage of transcending the boundaries of conventional art. These are characterised by a process of hybridisation of art with other disciplines, where there is an exchange of ideas and concepts and a diverse borrowing of methods and technologies. The subject of this research is artists who have approached a variant of self-portraiture that uses biological elements belonging to their own bodies, medical documents and even elements that literally make up, or were part of, the artist's body.

<sup>4</sup>Interdisciplinary art achieves multiple types of transfer between disciplines, crossing into other fields in order to borrow from their technology, science and concepts. The result is a form of art that can also be characterised by other forms of research, psychology, engineering, medicine, etc., and therefore challenges the rules of conventional art. Contemporary art today seems to be trying to include non-artistic fields, which only enriches the artistic field and expands creative freedom.

Robert Frodeman describes the phenomenon of interdisciplinarity as transcending the boundaries of a field, an exploration of otherness that can adopt new ways of thinking. However, among the characteristics attributed to the term

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<sup>4</sup> Adrian Stoleriu (2019). *Interferențe vizual-artistice. Artă și sacralitate în contemporaneitate* [Visual-Artistic Interferences. Art and Sacredness in Contemporary Times], Editura Artes, Iași, pp. 56-57.

is also the lack of clarity regarding the target audience, an observation that attests to its complexity and, at the same time, the difficulty of defining interdisciplinarity<sup>5</sup>. Given the accelerated pace at which new questions arise, interdisciplinary research offers the advantage of responding quickly precisely because it involves collaboration with several disciplines at the same time. Artists and researchers in this field therefore enjoy an expansion of the artistic field. Interdisciplinarity, like transdisciplinary and multi-disciplinarity, provides a close connection between disciplines and, as Basarab Nicolescu explains, can also give rise to new disciplines and subcategories<sup>6</sup>.

### Robert Morris

One of the first such interdisciplinary artists is Robert Morris, who proposes an original self-portrait, appropriating a medical document as his representation. Using the bioelectric activity of his own brain, he offers a self-portrait. The process of introspection manifests itself through thought, which is in turn recorded by electroencephalogram technology. The resulting medical document symbolically represents a graph of the artist's thoughts, created by connecting electrodes. Brian Winkenweder interprets Morris's art as follows: “A mind-driven e drawing is like a private language that must be driven by a grammatical structure”<sup>7</sup>, which implies that the graph only reveals the presence of the artist's thoughts, like a secret language, where his thoughts remain unknown.

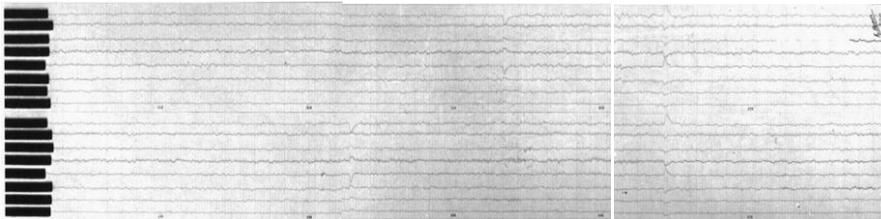


Fig. 5 Robert Morris, *Self-Portrait (E.E.G)*, 1963, electroencephalogram, artist's collection

Michael Newman, describing Morris's work, recalls how he created a graph with a length equal to his height, and the fact that Morris thought about himself while recording his neural activity increasingly transforms the work into a self-portrait – “the portrait therefore parodies the idea of inner thought, which

<sup>5</sup> Robert Frodeman (2014). *Sustainable Knowledge. A Theory of Interdisciplinarity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 35-36.

<sup>6</sup> Basarab Nicolescu (2007). *Transdisciplinaritatea. Manifest* [Transdisciplinarity. Manifesto], Editura Junimea, Iași, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Winkenweder (2015). *Picturing Texts: Robert Morris “Beetle in a Box”*, in “Investigations: The Expanded Field of Writing in the Works of Robert Morris”, Katia Schneller and Noura Wedell (Eds.), ENS Éditions, Lyon, DOI:10.4000/books.enseditions.3826.

becomes a purely external recording of brain activity”<sup>8</sup>. The self-portrait emerges here from the artist's psychological and medical representation, physical, but especially in the form of a conceptual interpretation.

Works such as this propose fragments of the artist's existence and presence, despite the fact that they do not reveal representative elements of their physical appearance or physiognomy, the anti-portrait proposing a variant of the usual anti-portrait or an alternative to it, explains Newman. Therefore, such approaches seek to break with the conventions of standard portraiture and self-portraiture, adding uniqueness and diversity to the artistic field.

### Susan Aldworth

Artist Susan Aldworth follows a similar line of thinking, with works that draw on the fields of psychology and medicine. Julia Beaumont-Jones describes how exposing patients to images showing the inside of their bodies can have a negative effect. These ultrasounds, recordings and scans of bones, organs or images of moments showing the middle of various operations, injuries, etc., can all greatly disturb the viewer. This awareness is expressed in the form of introspection and self-reflection by Aldworth. In a work such as “Reassembling the Self 7”, she brings together various ultrasounds and scans of the inside of her body, images that are both medical and intimate. As the title suggests, the work proposes an anatomical composition of herself, using these scans, but also a drawing of a nervous system that brings them all together.

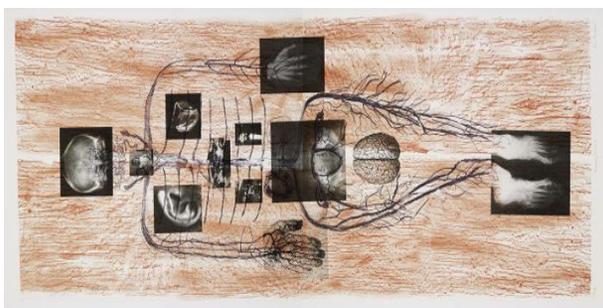


Fig. 6 Susan Aldworth, *Reassembling the Self 7*, 2012, London, Tag Fine Arts

### BIO-ART

Next, a term necessary for this article is “bio-art”, first introduced by Eduardo Kac in a manifesto, but the term has been used by him since 1997. Kac argues: “Bio Art is art that literally works in the continuity of biomateriality,

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<sup>8</sup> Fiona Johnstone and Kirstie Imber (2020). *Anti-Portraiture. Challenging the Limits of the Portrait*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, London, p. 55. [My own translation from English: “the portrait thus parodies the idea of interior thought, which becomes a purely external record of brain activity”].

from DNA, proteins, and cells to whole organisms”<sup>9</sup>. What Eduardo Kac sought to discover and develop is interdisciplinary research between art and science, where biological materials and even living organisms can be involved.



Fig. 7 Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey, *Photosynthesis Portraits*, 2022, Sydney Biennale

Glesni Trefor Williams mentions that, although Kac contributed to the emergence and use of the term “bio-art,” he did not initiate the practice. Therefore, the practice of bio art existed long before him, dating back to the research of Alexander Fleming, who, in the process of studying penicillin, created small paintings using bacteria<sup>10</sup>. Bio art “plays” with natural and artificial elements, with the human and the non-human, all of which lie between art and science.

### Marc Quinn

Arriving at the main interdisciplinary artist of the article, Marc Quinn, we already understand the capacity of interdisciplinary research to offer self-portraiture originality and freedom of expression. We have seen how contemporary artists have the freedom to engage in a complex process of introspection in order to formulate a unique form of self-reference, but also how, through various forms of doubling, artists can create something more than just representative.



Fig. 8 Marc Quinn, *Self*, 1991, sculpture

<sup>9</sup> Eduardo Kac. *What Bio Art Is: A Manifesto*, available at [https://ekac.org/manifesto\\_whatbioartis.html](https://ekac.org/manifesto_whatbioartis.html), accessed on 15 November 2024. [Author’s translation from English: “Bio Art is art that literally works in the continuum of biomateriality, from DNA, proteins, and cells to full organisms.”].

<sup>10</sup> Glesni Trefor Williams (2022). *Bioart. The Discipline of Straddling Art and Science*, available at <https://www.soundoflife.com/blogs/design/bioart-art-science-bioartists>, accessed on 15 November 2024.

Marc Quinn approaches a new form of self-portraiture, producing, once every few years, a sculpture made from the artist's own blood. From 1991 to the present, his series of sculptures offers a unique approach to contemporary portraiture, straddling the boundaries between technology, installation, sculpture, conceptual art, and so on. To create a sculpture, the artist needs approximately 5.7 litres of blood. Due to the need for blood collection, Matthew Wilson calls the process of creating the sculpture “quasi-medical.” Quinn's procedure is as follows: the artist's blood is collected, and a mould of his skull, filled with blood, is used to create a sculpture of his face. The only way it can be exhibited is in a box that keeps the sculpture frozen at a temperature below zero degrees Celsius. Wilson compares this dependence of sculpture on contemporary technologies with man's dependence on contemporary medicine and the relationship between the two<sup>11</sup>.

Wilson also describes how Quinn's methods of self-portrayal date back to Roman antiquity, when the Romans used these moulds to capture facial features, called funeral masks. The appearance of Quinn's sculptures fits the term funeral mask as it portrays the artist with his eyes closed and looking peaceful, as if in eternal sleep. Every detail of the artist's face is captured, from his eyelashes to his wrinkles and skin texture, compared to Morris and Aldworth, who used medical-type materials, Quinn used a unique material, his own blood, his own DNA.



Fig. 9 Marc Quinn, *Self*, 2011, sculpture

His sculptures shock and induce a state of unease in the viewer, denoting a strong determination on his part. The complexity of his works touches on numerous fields of research, from artistic to technical and medical, and thematically he explores the compelling relationship between life and death, technique and concept, etc.

The self-documentary value of the artist's works is also evident in their seriality: 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011 are the years in which Marc Quinn

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew Wilson (2020). *A-level: Marc Quinn, Self*, available at <https://smarthistory.org/a-level-marc-quinn-self/>, accessed on 10 November 2024.

created this type of sculpture, through which traces, records the passage of time on his face<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, this article seeks to briefly present some of the trends in contemporary art that use interdisciplinary research and have an impressive self-documentary character. The hybridisation of the self-portrait proposes art forms such as the digitisation and avatarisation of the self through *selfies*, self-documentary installations, anti-self-portraiture, bio-art and the inclusion of medical documents or even one's own DNA within self-portraits, intersections and connections that lend originality to the final artistic result.

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<sup>12</sup> Artist's website: <http://marcquinn.com/>

*Writing in the Works of Robert Morris*, ENS Éditions, Lyon,  
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