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Is a selfportrait a portrait of the self?

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It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.[1]

Who am I? is probably one of the oldest questions of humankind.
Is there one part of me that is my true self? How can I find out who I really am?
Questions about ourselves and our identity are on everyone s mind.
The search for our own self plays a fundamental role on the way to become an individual personality and to reach an inner state of harmony. For most *knowing who they are* contributes to their happiness and the knowledge about their self always enriches an individual s character.

Most people, on their way of finding out more about themselves, enjoy some activity where they feel they *are* themselves and can express their self.
Analysing and reflecting one‘s life can happen in deep thinking and questioning. In writing a diary, for example, most say this is where they can express what they really think — uncensored. Individuals who go in search of their self, go alone. Activities like thinking, writing, studying, doing art or even dancing are ways to explore one s inside and are usually perceived within internal reality.
A general attitude is that such activities are *creative.* Many people think that someone who is *creative* is closer to self-realisation. But the self is not automatically found in creativity. D. W. Winnicott emphasises that the word *creativity* not only means a successful or acclaimed creation, but the meaning of the word refers to a *colouring of the whole attitude to external reality. It is in creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living.*[2]

Creative living does not only only refer to the production of art and the self is not really to be found *in* products made out of body or mind. Winnicott emphasises that *in search for the self, the person concerned may have produced something valuable in terms of art, but a successful artist may be universally acclaimed and yet have failed to find the self that he or she is looking for. If the artist (in whatever way) is searching for the self, then it can be said that in all probability there is already some failure for the artist in the field of general creative living.The finished creation never heals the underlying lack of sense of self.*[3] This claim to live in integral creativity can not easily be achieved but photography can be a way to get closer to a creative life.

A product of creativity may not be mixed up with the automatic expression of the artist‘s self. It is *through* playing, through being and living creatively that the individual can discover the self. Even though *creativity* should be seen as an integral concept to make life worth living, it is through a creative way of playing that the individual actually reflects about himself. One possible way of achieving this can be doing self-portraiture. Through photographic self-portraiture the individual can play creatively and examines the self.

This work examines in how far photographic self-portraiture can be a visual means to find out more or even reveal the self by looking at theoretical accounts relevant

to the topic. The examination concludes with practical examples of three photographers who all do self-portraiture, but in a completely different way: Jo Spence, Alexa Wright and Natacha Merritt. The ambivalence of the question *Is a selfportrait a portrait of the self?* requires a close look at the terms *self* and *self-portraiture*.

What is the *self*?

Looking at spoken language words which are connected with self are very different and opposing. The dictionary lists many words describing the self and self-related states: There is self-abasement and self-glorification, self-command and self-delusion, self-denial and self-assurance, self-esteem, self-examination, self-expression, self-indulgence, self-knowledge and self-realisation, just to give some examples.
Some adjectives show how different the *self* can be:
It can be self-absorbed and self-denying, self-centred, self-conscious and self-less, self-important and self-sacrificing, self-reliant, self-seeking and self-willed.
If all these words refer to the self, the self can obviously not be defined easily.

The way psychoanalytical theory, for example, is looking at the psyche‘s structure and interprets the self has influenced our current cultural thinking so strongly, that this form of analysing can still be seen as dominant.
But psychoanalysis can only give one particular interpretation of how our self is built and structured. Other theories like e.g. sociology and behaviourism give universal explanations, too, but still it seems there is no dominant common definition which is used in (western) culture. Otherwise there would not be so many people discussing it and struggling to find it. The search for the self is something individual and needs to be looked at in an individual way.
This search is closely connected with the discussion of one‘s own identity.
Here, the hope for any simple explanation of what is so important to all of us becomes even more complex. As *the self* seems to be happening almost exclusively inside us, identity can be looked from the outside or from the inside, respectively objectively and subjectively. The concept of *identity* seems to suffer from the same complexity as the concept of *self* and both need to be closely discussed together.
In this work, theories of *self*, *identity* and *representation* will be used to help for a better understanding of the intentions and meanings of photographic self-portraiture.

What is a *selfportrait*?

In photographic terms a selfportrait is a photograph of someone who is photographer and photographed person at the same time. Subject and object are the same and there is no second person influencing the shooting as a photographer does in a portrait session.
Looking closer at the word *selfportrait* it s ambiguity becomes more clear:
Technically, a selfportrait means one single person is setting up the camera and photographs himself, as just mentioned. But does this automatically mean that the person portraits his own self?

Looking at the word *selfportrait* from a different linguistic point of view, it can also be read as *self-portrait* or *portrait of the self*, which would mean a more definite cap-

ture of the photographer‘s self. But can a picture show the self so easily only because it is technically a *selfportrait*? Can a *photographic* selfportrait be a *psychological* portrait of the self?

The significance of photography for selfportraiture?

Before the invention of photography in the 19th century, painted portraits were an expensive privilege for those who were seen as worth being portrayed and preserved for the future. The new technology changed this dramatically. The advantages of the photographic portrait in comparison to the painted picture were soon enjoyed by the masses. The process was also much quicker, significantly cheaper and on top of that the image could be multiplied. This new medium which produced portraiture in mass production flooded the market.
The normal working class person could suddenly afford a portrait of himself and soon the family album culture started. Photography was both domesticated and industrialised when Kodak s first handheld camera was marketed in 1888.
The slogan *You press the button, we do the rest was to form the basis of personal photography for the next century.*[5]
Since then a fundamental urge to use the medium as an instrument of self-discovery has developed. *Since the seventies, artists have been studying, questioning and exploring themselves to such an astonishing extend that one must inquire into the iconographic sources of this development.*[4] Photography has developed as a medium through which individuals confirm and explore their identity.
When the first photographs appeared, people were astonished by its mirror like fidelity and the new medium has been described as *mirror of nature* and *the mirror with a memory.* Although today the ubiquity of photographic imagery has largely lost its awesome, magical aspect, some photographers have remained enthralled. So much *that they have turned their own bodies to the camera and found that, far from being confined to dumb reflections of surface realities, the photograph has offered a means with which to penetrate the deepest recesses of the self.*[6]

Differences between a portrait and a selfportrait

Psychological difference:
What is the difference between a portrait done by another person and a self-portrait? A portrait is the work of two individuals, photographer and sitter, subject and object and any psychological relation between them can not be denied.
Both individuals impose some form of interpretation onto each other (in the process of a two-person portrait shooting) which results in an image including two subjective points of view: The view / interpretation of the object by the photographer and vice versa.
The psychological relation within a portrait shooting is of prime importance in comparison to self-portraiture where there is no such relation. A portrait shooting is heavily influenced by the atmosphere between both subject and object. Their interpretation of each other depends on the atmosphere, the chemistry between them and results in the finished photograph which has then become a visual representation of this mutual interpretation.
Until twentieth century psychoanalysis, taking someone s portrait meant showing

the likeness of a subject, representing his personality by (mostly) representing the sitters facial characteristics. A portrait was the attempt to *catch* the person, his facial characteristics, and it was believed that a portrait catches the person‘s identity and individual character automatically by representing the external appearance.
In some native african tribes, photography is even seen as a terrifying concept: people believe that talking a picture captures their soul and takes it away.

But the photographer can never hide his feelings about the person he takes pictures of and these feelings are automatically translated into his visual language.
Jo Spence, known for her Photography Therapy self-portraits, realised in her early years of working in a studio that she had difficulties portraying nude women because of her own ideological problems of looking and fears about her own desires. She realised *the importance of the photogapher‘s own taboos and had a great number of problems photographing women with no clothes on*.[7]
Today, a portrait is no longer believed to automatically reveal someone‘s self. Intense work of photographic self-portraiture within the last decades has shown how serious photographers are struggling to find *their own image* and that identity, character and individuality can hardly be captured in one single image.
Because photography is not objective it can only be seen as visual re-presentation of the mutual relationship of photographer and photographed. Taking a portrait is like a discussion where both participants are opposed to each other. This opposition is even more enhanced by the camera, which separates both participants physically and psychologically. So what happens if the photographed becomes the photographer and faces only himself?

Technical difference:
Presupposed the subject has the necessary technical skills and the problem of perspective is considered, the photograph will undergo only one subjective interpretation: oneself‘s interpretation of the own self. Technically, the camera stays as subjective as the person who sets it up. If the medium was not as subjective as the person dealing with it, there would not be any discussions about the likes and dislikes of images and the long search for the self in images. Joanna Woodall, in her book *Portraiture - Facing the Subject*, writes that *portraits could either be theorised as exact literal re-creation of someone‘s external appearance, or as truthful account of the artists special insight into the sitters inner or ideal self*.[8]
But not every portraying artist has the special insight into the sitter‘s self — the possibility to look inside oneself is less disturbed within the process of selfportraiture when the sitter and the person who looks are the same.
Within self-portraiture the individual self-representation remains more consistent, because light, exposure, aperture, setting and pose have all been chosen by the same person. Therefore, less possibilities for misunderstanding, misinterpretation or misrecognisation occur because the individual actually takes over the powerful position of the photographer and controls his own image and re-creates the own self independently.
In self-portraiture, there is no psychological boundary to overcome and more freedom to show or not to show. But, re-creating and interpreting the own self does, of course, not automatically mean that the artist finds and reveals his *true* self. A self-portrait does not show *the* truth, but maybe parts of it in some particular moment.

The question of authorship:
How does the viewer know a photograph is a self-portrait (in case one cannot see the camera in the photographers hand pointing at himself)?
Some self-portraits need a written explanation — others don‘t. A photograph - at first sight - does not have such a strong (technical) significance as a painter’s painting technique. The way artists use self-portraiture differs in two main streams: those who make regular work around the idea of self-portraiture, like for example Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence (her photo therapy work) and those who‘s work is not dominated by self-reflection, but make occasional use of self-portraiture like Nan Goldin, for example. Self-portraits always show an especially conscious use of the medium, but the emphasis within artists works differ. The intention to use self-portraiture can vary from intense self-reflection and explicit work on the personal identity to occasional use within another context — self-portraiture can be a way to reveal almost nothing of oneself and almost everything.
As soon as the viewer knows a photograph is a self-portrait, the meaning of that picture changes. The view shifts from looking at a person represented by someone else, to looking at a person who deliberately presents himself — and suddenly new questions occur. This work is focused on the work of artists who mainly use self-portraiture in their work.

Theory concerning self-portraiture

The Self

I want people to be able to see my soul, and that comes out better in my own photographs than in others.[9] (August Strindberg 1849 -1912)

The selfportrait is generally considered as an act of introspection, a search for the truth of the self. It became an indispensable tool in facing oneself as well as society. Because so many artists examined their self using the photographic selfportrait, which has now become a genre by itself, the view about photography‘s truthfulness changed.
The belief photography would be an objective recording of outward appearances and a revelation of someone‘s true nature disappeared. To the twentieth century mind, the idea that some reflection of a psychological truth may be recognised in a person‘s bodily form seems problematic. There has been a fundamental shift in the belief of a photographic portrait‘s objectivity. *Objectivity is no longer held to be a sure criterion of knowledge; mechanical recording is considered a dubious procedure, which leaves great scope for every possible imaginary distortion. There is no longer a truth of the self, but — to use Lacan‘s term — only its imaginary.*[10]
According to D.W. Winnicott, the concept of the self, which is *unseperable from anatomy, physiology and biology mostly belongs to what is meant by mental health of a human being.* He also imagines a personal identity which potentially exists at the beginning of an infants life. A primary central self develops later on to what is also called a potentially true self. Winnicott concludes about the concept of the true self: *For me, the self (and not the I) is the person I am, the one that only I am; It‘s unity is based on the completion of a process of development. At the same time the self consists of different parts, it is even built out of these single parts. (...) Only*

the self and living it gives sense to our lives and behaviour.[11]
Shooting a photographic series of self-portraits is, for most photographer‘s, a process of conscious development. The experience of a self-portrait shooting can contribute to the photographer‘s completion of a process of development concerning his self, because he is examining his self and *lives* it in his own way.

In narratives, the mirror is often used as metaphor for truth. Photography, as mentioned above, is often described as mirror of nature and mirror with a memory.
But does a mirror show the truth? The mixture of right and left raises doubt whether the mirror really reflects and shows the true likeness of a person. A photograph on the other hand shows the subject the right way around: this is why many do not recognise themselves in pictures at first instant, because the image does not exactly resemble what one usually sees in the mirror.
Furthermore, our own reflection never stays the same, but changes if we look in different mirrors, see our face distorted on water or in another person s eyes. The connection between mirror reflection and objectivity is no longer evident.

The concept of the mirror phase, introduced by Freud, takes a main part in Jaques Lacan s theories: Between it«s first 6 and 18 months, an infant makes the first experiences of perceiving it«s body as unity, separated from it«s mother, by seeing an image of itself in the mirror. *Then the subject discovers that it has a body even when it is not reflected in the mirror and it knows what it looks like, because it can now imagine its own form. To test the identity of its likeness and itself, it moves and grimaces and discovers that the reflection in the mirror imitates everything.*[12]
The process of gaining and creating a sense of self and an identity has started: The inner, mental experience of the self and the outer visual appearance are combined and the child starts to form its own sense of unity and individuality, but it also experiences its objectification, which means that it realises that others can see it the same way as it can see others.
Lacan has developed further Freud«s theories of the mirror phase by adding that the effect of language is vital for the creation of the child‘s self, its individualisation and socialisation. *It is not only verbal language which structures the child‘s perception; gestures, the voice of the mother and other persons contribute to this influence, too (...).*[13] What we see is structured and influenced by how we name it. *With the verbalisation which turns the visual into inner images, fantasies and dreams, the child faces the miracle of its own existence even stronger than before. The own reflection in the mirror does not give him the security about itself anymore.*[14]

In a time where advertisements, trademarks and fashion *images* rule in the media, the insecurity about the formation of the own self and (adult) individual identity is even more relevant than ever before. Not only that (western) society is organised around consumption of commodities through which individuals gain identity and prestige, new technologies question and challenge the definition of the own *self* much more profoundly and photography plays a vital role as a representative of those images.
Through new discoveries, for example, in brain research, genetic- and bio-technology and most evidently through the possibility of online identities the problem of identity and the self has drastically increased. Being confronted and surrounded by

fake, multiple and manipulated identities, the new search for the own self in a society dominated by images concerns everyone. Not only children (and of course their parents who have to pay) have to face new methods of aggressive advertisement dictating fashionable *in* toys; every age-group is divided in target groups and directly addressed by marketing and advertisement. The information and media market‘s concerns are most significantly expressed through images which are supposed to manipulate the customer to buy and even to identify with the product. Being constantly surrounded by those *images*, it is easier to mix up one‘s attempt to identify with *them* than going on an individual and inner search for one s *true* and *own* self.

C.G. Jung defines that the self *is not only the centre, but also the range which includes consciousness and unconsciousness; it is the centre of this totality, like the I is the centre of consciousness. In life, the self claims to be recognised, integrated and realised, but one can not hope to gain more than a fraction of this huge totality within the limited range of human consciousness. Therefore the relation between the I and the self is a never ending process.*[15]
The life-long interaction between the I and the self is expressed throughout the individual‘s life. According to Jung, a primary or initial self already exists at the beginning of life. This primary self includes all innate, archetypal potentials which can be expressed in the child‘s later life. The self is not determined. It is a process which accompanies all stages in live: growing up, leaning, discovering and developing. Therefore there can not be a generalisation about everyone s self, only an individual attempt where different theories can help.
Because pictures, images and photographs are so dominant in the present time of media-technology, people also use these new mediums (e.g. digital photography and video combined with montages, morphing effects or 3D effects) to explore and express their self (before the digital computer revolution, the only medium was writing and typing — and more than 2000 years ago even Socrates thought writing was a bad influence for the youth). The closest attempt to get nearer to the own self can only be done by the person himself and photography is just *one* medium.
Apart from different theories about the self, it has become evident, that neither the self, is fixed, nor the term *self* itself. What is experienced as the self is in life long motion.

Narcissism

Photography is the mirror, more faithful than any actual mirror, in which we witness at every age, our own age, our own aging. The actual mirror accompanies us through time, thoughtfully and treacherously; it changes with us, so that we appear not to change. (Dubois in *L‘acte photographicque*, p.89)

Is a photographer who takes pictures of himself automatically a narcissistic person? The term narcissism is mostly used in a derogatory way in colloquial language which describes a person who is seen to be too much in love with himself.
The term is taken from the greek legend of Narcissus who rejected the love of the nymph Echo and therefore has been punished with falling in love with his own reflection. Finally he has been consumed by insatiable love and has been turned into the flower named after him.

Every self-portrait draws attention — one‘s own or another‘s — to oneself. It is not a commissioned work, but *a moment of truth, for the artist does not have to make any concessions to anyone. If he does depict a pleasantly idealised version of himself, then he does so intentionally, challenging reality, i.e. truth. Every selfportrait is a dialogue with the ego.*[16]
Examining oneself through visualising the own body and appearance does not automatically mean the artist has fallen too much in love with himself. If that was the only reason any further reflection about self-portraiture would be meaningless. Especially because the process of creating self-portraits has so much to do with extreme self-analysis and honesty, every viewer can get something out for himself, too, because not everyone is able to expose his own weaknesses and desires so openly like it is done in self-portraiture.

Freud sees two forms of narcissism: a primary and a secondary one. In one of his very last writings he states: *It is hard to say anything of the behaviour of the libido in the id and in the super-ego. All we know about it relates to the ego, in which at first the whole available quota of libido is stored up. We call this state the absolute primary narcissism.*[17] At the very beginning the id sends part of this libido out into erotic object-cathexes, whereupon the ego, now grown stronger, tries to get hold of this object-libido and to force itself on the id as love-object. *The narcissism of the ego is thus a secondary one, which has been withdrawn from objects.*[18] By this object love Freud means any desire orientated towards what is not the ego itself. For Freud, primary narcissism is a self-love, the self s desire for itself or the desire of and for the ego, which precedes the ability to have relationships and to love others. Secondary narcissism is the shift from the whole world of objects into the self and also the lack of knowing about the division between the self and objects. By today many psychoanalyst believe that narcissism exists throughout life and that it is more relevant to see whether it has a positive / healthy or negative / unhealthy shade.

Narcissism is a a psycho-pathological expression and mostly used incorrectly describing healthy psychic activities. In his work, C.G. Jung concentrates on showing how falsely the term is usually used. *Meditation and contemplation, for example, are definitely not narcissistic(...).* Photography can be regarded as one form of visual contemplation. Against the accusation that artist are generally narcissistic, Jung said: *Everyone who follows his own ideas and ideals as much as possible is a narciss.*[19] In the development of a *healthy* sense of self, and a *healthy* narcissism, *the individual has a clear sense of self, a satisfactory stable level of self-esteem, takes pride in accomplishments, and is aware of and responsive to the needs of others while responding to his or her own needs.*
Sometimes the viewer is rash in his judgment with a photograph and calls the artist egocentric or narcissistic just because *some* self-esteem is expressed. In the — pathological — narcissistic personality, there is *a disturbance in the sense of self, a vulnerability to blows to self-esteem, a need for the admiration of others, and a lack of empathy with the feelings and needs of others.* The narcissistic personality has *a grandiose sense of self-importance and is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success and power.*[20]
A person suffering from negative narcissism would therefore be so convinced of himself that he would use the world around him to practice his sense of over-esti-

mation and show his greatness and assumed success without allowing criticism. Undoubtedly, there are individuals who use photography to enhance their sense of greatness. But, looking at self-portraiture history, it has not been a superficial way of looking at the own self, but a very existential art which continued the long history of self-portraiture — and photography enriched this genre. *Since the invention of the camera it* (self-portraiture)*, has become a leitmotiv of both painting and photography and it carries more weight today than ever before.*[21]
The self-portrait frequently functions as kind of refuge that allows the artist to sort out things for himself. Since the 15th century painters like D rer, Goya, Rubens, or V lasquez experimented with self-portraiture. However, Rembrandt is still the one exception with his recurring attempts to come to terms with himself by means of self-portrait. But it was not until the 19th century that the study of one s own image became a continuous commitment. See Gustav Courbet, Lovis Corinth, Max Beckmann, K the Kollwitz and Otto Dix. Otto Dix who painted himself throughout his life, wrote: *By reproducing the external form one also captures the inner gestalt.(...) Self-portraits are confessions of an inner state (...) There is no objectivity, only ceaseless transformation; a human being has so many facets. The self-portrait is the best means of studying them.*[22]
Many painters and photographers studied themselves in an effort to grasp the totality of their being in the sum of their images (and hardly in one single image).
It is a matter of consciousness during the work process which has the power to load the image with signs and meaning and each viewer can get something out of the artist‘s intense work of self-exploration. Everyone discovering the self does so individually, so can hardly be judged objectively.

As mentioned above, there is a healthy and an unhealthy form of narcissism — but how easy is it for the viewer to judge *objectively* what type of images he is looking at? The critic Paul Cook has described Natacha Merritt‘s work as a strangely sterile document of abstract narcissism, but can he really know how much this extreme form of self-documentation and exploration enriched her personality? Even though Merritt‘s work can be seen as provocative exhibitionism, one cannot really know how consciously she reflected herself and what effect her work had on her life unless she tells.
Objectivity is hard to be found when dealing with images and what they might tell about the photographer s self. Objectivity might be about technical facts, but the viewer‘s likes and dislikes depend on how it communicates between the viewer himself and the photograph. Creating photographs is always an examination of — the own — inside and outside. Even though someone might take pictures only of himself, he always reflects the world he lives in. Consuming photographs, on the other hand, can also hardly be a one-way process. Every viewer interacts with and reflects what he sees. Photographs invite to mutual exchange.

Identity

Can self-portraits reveal identity and do artist automatically identify with their self-portrait?
Identity can be looked at and seen from many different angles:
there is personal and social identity, national, ethnic and feminist identity, just to

give some examples. The question about identity is closely connected to the search for the self and representation. Especially today, living in a western multi media society, identifying one‘s self and knowing one‘s identity has become much more different, than living in a society where people identify more with religion or the state.
Identity can be displaced; it can be hybrid or multiple. It can be constituted through community: family, region, the nationstate (...) but identities are not free-floating; they are limited by borders and boundaries.[23] There are many theories which define identity as something determined, for example sociology and ideology. In most theories, institutions play a vital role: the family, the school, the place of work and, increasingly the media.
The historical analysis of society developed by Karl Marx, for example, assumes *personal identity to be neither autonomous nor true to the way things actually are. The Marxist‘s self does not exist immutably, outside history, but is related to the changing socio-economic arrangements in which it lives (feudalism, capitalism or revolution for instance).*[24]
Psychoanalysis involves complex models of identity. The Freudian concept of the unconscious, for example, locates the driving force of identity in repressed sexual instincts and experiences. Freud distinguishes two types of identification:
In the first type, *identification is the earliest and original form of emotional tie with an object* and in the second *it* (the object) *becomes a substitute, in a regressive way, for a libidinal object-tie, as it were by means of, introjection of, the object into the ego.*[25] Freud s disciple Lacan reconciled this sexualised self with Marx‘s socially produced identity *by emphasising the role of language in the constitution of identity. For Lacan, the young child‘s entrance into speech produces subjectivity by structuring his or her libidinous energy like a language* and it is through the entry into language that the child is constituted as a subject.[26]

In the chapter *Identity and the Unconscious,* Madan Sarup uses Jaque Lacan‘s psychoanalytical account of the construction of identity, which primarily takes place in the child‘s mirror phase, to argue that our sense of self and our individual identity is often based on misrecognition. The mirror reflection (mirror is not to be taken literally) does not automatically show the true identity. Lacan understands desire, articulated in the gaze, to play a constitutive role in the formation of sexual and social identity. He argues, that the patient‘s unconscious reveals a fragmented subject of shifting and uncertain identity. For Lacan, the unitary subject is a myth. He is antagonistic to all forms of ego-psychology and always emphasises the importance, positive affirmative value of the unconscious, but continually asserts that *the I of the cognito, or the unitary rational subject, is illusory.* Lacan sees the infant‘s identification with its mirror image in the mirror phase as misrecognition, because this identification is based on an illusion. *There is a split between a glimpse of perfect unity and the infant‘s actual state of fragility*. For Lacan, self-reflection is always a mirror-like reflection associated with the mirror stage.
Self-reflection is said to be a symmetry that subsumes all difference within a delusion of a unified and homogeneous individual identity. In this view, self-reflection would be the illusion of a consciousness transparent to itself. Sarup argues further that we often misapprehend, misrecognise our own history and our own identity. This is because the unconscious is the subject unknown to the self and the self is

usually misrecognised by the ego. Madan exemplifies the difficulty to identify identity by quoting Lacan s definition of a fool: *A fool is somebody who believes in his immediate identity with himself, somebody who is not capable of a dialectically mediated distance towards himself.*[27] Jo Spence's photo therapy work shows how powerful self-portraiture work enables the user or the patient to get dialectical distance to oneself which can help to clarify and (re)create one's sense of identity.

In western society, there has been a shift from the dominance of state-ideology or religion to mass media culture. Today, ideologies — and even politics — are mainly articulated and represented through the media. The presence of many new digital media, intruding every household, has changed the way society communicates. Images are dominant and today a huge amount of information is mediated more through images and less through text.
The accessibility to information is quick, saves time and conveys the illusion one could *know* a subject within minutes. Time is the decisive characteristic in information society in which identities are expressed through *images*. And even worse: *Images* are mixed up with identities. Individual identity, today, is quite often perceived with the motto show me what label (mobile phone / car) you wear and I tell you who you are . The superficial way identities are perceived in daily life is generally ruled by someone's visual, external appearance.
There is no doubt that identity-construction is increasingly dependent on images.
In this context, both meanings of the word *image* are applicable: *Image* in the sense of the impression someone wants to give concerning his character or personality and also the pictures which contribute to the formation of a possible identity. (An example for such images would be the photographs in fashion magazines which dictate not only the *in*-labels plus equivalent lifestyle, but most damaging especially to (young) women a capitalist and very unhealthy form of self-perception.)
Sarup further: *I want to stress that our identities are not entirely determined: there are counter identities at work as well. I want to argue that we do not have a homogeneous identity but that instead we have several contradictory selves. Moreover, I believe that two important features of the human subject are perpetual: mobility and incompletion. (...) In a sense, identity is a process, it is heterogeneous.*[28]
It is the still dominant believe in society, someone's external appearance would tell about the individual's identity which is criticised in Alexa Wright's work. Prejudices against people with different skin colour and physically disability are a social phenomenon which is based on this restrictive misbelieve. Through digitally transforming her (healthy) body into a damaged and disabled body, Wright provokes not only the dominant sense of beauty, but especially the way identities are believed to be constructed.

Madan Sarup was born in India but his cultural background is almost entirely English. Searching for his identity he wonders how he is supposed to call himself and what expression he could identify with: Indian intellectual maybe? He can not identify with Great Britain, so does not like to be called Black British or maybe Indian British. He starts looking for clues about his identity in his three passports. The passport refers to his nationality so that he can be recognised in a bureaucratic society. It shows a photograph of him plus a few statements of what he *is*; his height, colour of eyes and hair, time and place of birth and profession. But of

course, he *is* more than what his ID tells about him. Identity can not be defined on paper. In the relation to photographs, identity today, is much less objective than before, but dependent on the subject s inner feelings of identification. *Even if a passport is supposed to be proof of your nationality, it says nothing about you as person. I want to suggest that identity is to do with more than one‘s passport, more than one‘s appearance; that it is to do with who one thinks one is, what one believes and what one does.*[29]
Communication is the key point to get to know someone‘s identity. People need to talk and get to know each other‘s feelings and thoughts. If one‘s identity was determined from birth on or would stop developing at some point in life, life would be determined as well and all examining and searching the self superfluous.
The process of human development makes it nearly impossible to categorise an individual. Neither the self is fixed nor is identity. Looking at the passport picture exemplifies how few information one single image can carry, if one puts oneself into this position: Looking at the own passport picture shows the gap between what one thinks one *is* and what the image can reveal. Not very much. Today, *identity* is an individual and (relatively) free feeling of *what one is* and identifies with. Be it certain characteristics, friends, activities, spiritualism — or shopping. How free we really are to choose our objects or subjects of and for identification is another very important matter relevant to the construction of identities, but unfortunately too big to include in this work.
Human discourse can by definition never be entirely in agreement with itself, entirely identical to its knowledge of itself. It is because of the existence of the unconscious that we can never have an absolute knowledge of identity.[30] Individual identity wants to be discovered and develops in a life-long process. It changes and grows and sometimes it falls apart. Like the self, identity is not fixed but characterises the multiplicity of life. Self-portraiture is one way of playing with and discovering one‘s own identity.

Visual Representation

Identity finds its outer expression in many different forms of self-representation. Identities are never finished products so their representation is an ongoing an changing process, too. *Identities are stitched together out of discontinuous forms and practices. (...) Identity is articulated in multiple modalities — the moment of experience, the mode of writing or representation (for example, in fiction or film) and the theoretical modality.*[31]
Do these different forms of representation reveal someone«s *true* identity automatically? The difficulty to define a steady *self* and *identity* has become clear. The individual notion about the own self and identification underlies a constant change — sometimes more or less obvious — so the way one presents oneself to the external world, changes, too.
Representing oneself can be seen as performance. And performance can be a play. No matter whether the medium used is text, photography or a speech.
When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take serious the impression he presents before them. But the truthfulness photography conveys and that someone wants to express by his performance is quite similar: Both can not be seen as *true* reliable representation. Erving Goffman, in his book *The*

Representation of Self in everyday Life, emphasises that for finding out more about someone‘s self-representation, not the observer should be asked about his believes in a performance, but one should look at the *individual‘s own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself.* Goffman sees two extremes: At one extreme*, the performer can be fully taken by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. (...)* At the other extreme*, we find the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine (...)* and has no belief in his own act.[32] When the audience is convinced by the show he puts on, then there will hardly be any doubts about the realness which is presented. So, re-presentation does not automatically mean, showing one‘s *true identity,* but more the attempt to convey an image of oneself with which one would like to be associated.

In the media, for example, many jobs have to do with representing a company‘s *image.* Media companies, like advertisement agencies or TV companies, sell products representing its *image* directly addressing the target group with usually only one aim — to earn money. This successful re-presentation of *images* has not very much to do with a *true* character behind such an *image* — otherwise one could believe advertisement uncritically.
To reinforce his argument that life takes place more in roles than in a constant presence of someone‘s true self, Goffman quotes Robert Park: *It is no mere historical accident that the word person in its first meaning, is mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role. It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.*[32]

The act of taking a photograph is often associated with putting on a mask when people start smiling artificially and behave unnaturally in front of someone else‘s camera. Quite often this reaction is understood as some form of psychological protection. The grimace functions as protective mask. Park further: *In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves — the role we are striving to live up to — this is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integrated part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character and become persons.*[33]
To some extend, every individual examines and internalises the roles represented around him. Be it social roles taking place in the family or, again, represented in the daily media culture. The challenging difficulties for everyone lie in the separation between *true* and *false* representations of identities — his own and those around him. Being *happy* with what one *has* and re-presents differs from being happy with what one *is* when living the own self — and not a copied self.
How much of a mask someone puts on when playing certain (social) roles is hard to decipher (and usually the work of psychologists and sociologists). It is again, only through the process of life, that one can discover more realities and truths about one‘s own and about other‘s representation of self and identity. In self-portraiture, this mask for defence is not necessary and one can play with those roles. This play has to do with masking and un-masking the self-conception.

Dealing with photography practice

Many photographers use self-portraiture to explicitly play with these different roles, Cindy Sherman for example. Preoccupation with women‘s roles is the main aspect of her well known work. Sherman plays with and reconstructs her own appearance through and across the representation of a huge variety of possible feminine and female identities.
As Judith Williamson suggests, Sherman *succeeds in being both all and none of these representations — we search in vain to locate her definitely somewhere in the maze of mirrors she constructs. The more she pictures herself, the more the idea of the real Cindy Sherman recedes like a mirage, in precise inverse proportion to the multiplication of her image. Sherman herself has stated that her photographs are not self-portraits.*[34] Even though they - technically - are. Compared to Spence, Wright and Merritt, the characters Sherman presents in her pictures reveal the least of her personality.
Sherman uses the technique of self-portraiture to deconstruct the traditional view a portrait would represent a *real* femininity. It is not by accident that she uses the genre of self-portraiture, because it is exactly the relation between subjectivity and representation which she scrutinises in her 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.*[35] Switching roles is Cindy Sherman‘s way of discovering different identities and expressing her form of social critique.

In his posthumously published book *Camera Lucida*, the French critic and semiotitcian Roland Barthes describes his desperate search for a photograph of his recently deceased mother which catches the essence of her being. He is searching for a *just image* and not *just an image* of her.[36]
In the image, Barthes is looking for, he searches for an authentic encounter with his mother. *His demand for realism is a demand, if not to have her back, then to know she was here. (...) The trauma of Barthes‘s mother‘s death throws Barthes back on a sense of loss which produces in him a longing for a pre-linguistic certainty and unity — a nostalgic and regressive fantasy, transcending loss, on which he found his idea of photographic realism: To make present what is absent, or, more exactly, to make it retrospectively real — a poignant reality one can no longer touch.*[37]

Throughout the book he describes photographs of his mother and his feelings and associations released by them. Barthes is unable to find a picture of her which shows her in her last years of life, but finally *sees her* in a photograph when she was a child. He points out very significantly that the feelings a viewer can gain from a photograph are entirely subjective. The trigger which enables to viewer to have very strong emotions can be a very small detail in the picture — and it varies from viewer to viewer. Barthes calls this trigger *punctum.* For Barthes *the only part of a photograph which entails the feeling of an off-frame space is what he calls the punctum, the point of sudden, strong emotion, of small trauma; it can be a tiny detail. This punctum depends more on the reader than on the photograph itself, and the corresponding off-frame it calls up is also generally subjective; (...).*[38]
Reading an image depends on the unique combination of reader and photograph. For the photographer, the *punctum*, which entails emotions can be something

completely different in his own work, than for an outsider. Because of this individual meaning of pictures, Barthes did not publish any photograph he was discussing, not even the final one in which he found his mother.

The concepts of photographers using self-portraiture to investigate and articulate their point can be totally different. Self-portraiture does not automatically reveal someone‘s *true* and *inner self*, nor does it show someone‘s *real* identity only because someone photographed himself, nor is it automatically narcissistic.
In this sense, a — technical — self-portrait does not portrait a — psychological — self. But it can be a process on the way of discovering the own self.
If the word *self-portraiture* would already imply a definite visualisation of the self, would it not be too easy to find it?
To exemplify how different the intentions for photographic self-portraiture are, this work will conclude with the practical examples of Jo Spence, Alexa Wright and Natacha Merritt.

Practical examples
Passport photograph, Self-documentation, Self-exploration and Self-transformation

Photographing oneself *implicitly acknowledges the division, the difference between one‘s own self-perception and an external self perceived by others. It brings into play the consciousness of self as other — not I, not first person, but second or even third.*[39]
When the person photographed also controls the camera, converting it into an instrument of self-projection, an image is created that presents the self in its own terms, as it would like to be seen and as it would like to affect others.
As women are customarily the object of the male look — especially in photography — female self-portraiture redoubles the implications of this relation through the camera of the self to the self and to the outside world.
In the following three examples, each woman took over the predominant male look and created her own self. The woman who photographs herself is in a position to marshal all resources of self-presentation (dress, setting, pose) and to ally them with the power of active looking. Each photographer reclaims her own body as an icon of her own experience rather than as a ground for projection. There should not be a particular emphasis on female-feminist work, using exclusively female photographers as example, but the emphasis should be drawn to their radical differences towards each other.
To see the different intentions, their forms of *self-portraiture* have been divided into different groups: self-exploration, self-transformation and self-documentation.

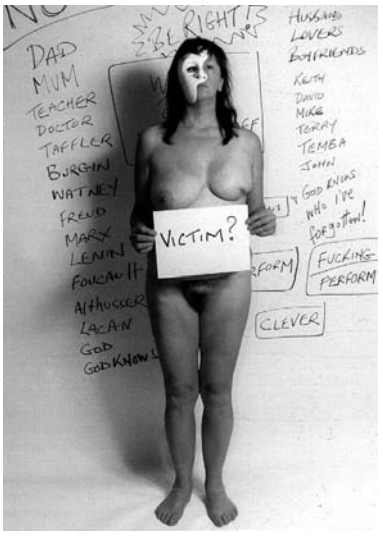
Passport photographs
Like the state, the camera is never neutral. The representations it produces are highly coded and the power it wields is never it‘s own.[40]
Passport pictures seem to be the coldest equivalent for the re-creation of some-

one‘s external appearance. They represent the features of a citizen‘s face together mostly shot in an automatic machine — but can this automatic, though self-triggered picture be called self-portrait?
John Tagg argues that the meaning of photographs depends on and is constructed by ideology. The institutions and agents define it and set it to work and it is their ideology which convinces the public of the naturalness of photographs. Especially the social context in which photographs appear influence the way the are read and understood.
Tagg emphasises that it is *not the power of the camera but the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register or truth. (...) Photographs are never evidence of history; they are themselves the historical.*[41]
It would be necessary to deal with the meaning of self-portraying passport machines more extensively in relation to social representation and state control, but this would extend the size of this work and is not the subject.

Having the chapters about the construction of self and identity in mind, an automatic passport picture can therefore not be seen as real *self*-portrait, simply because its technical and creative possibilities are far too restricted. A powerful self-portrait can only be achieved when the photographer has full — technical and psychological — authority and freedom to construct the picture(s) within an ongoing process of self-analysis.

Selfexploration: Jo Spence — Dealing with cancer

As we view the images and witness their mutability it becomes apparent that truth is a construct, and that identity is fragmented across many truths. An understand



ing of this frees up the individual from the constant search for the fixity of an ideal self and allows an enjoyment of self as process and becoming.[42]
The work of photographer and writer Jo Spence shed new light on the construction of complex identities. In *Remodelling Photo History*, at the beginning of the 1980s, she attempted to look closely and clearly at the way photographs work in society

and influence the individual. She went on to explore her childhood experience in her own photographic work and later re-staged possible family pictures in a dramatic performance of concealed relationships and submerged emotions.
In *Phototherapy* she visualised old traumatic situations of her childhood or her marriage which enabled her to overcome psychic traumas.
Clearly if psychoanalysis is the talking cure then phototherapy could conceivably be the seeing cure. Photographs can make psychic realities visible, because they offer the possibility to objectify and see a separate part of ourself. Self-portraiture can visualise different parts or sub-personalities of our subjectivity which enables the photographer to explore different positions within the own personality.
In phototherapy work we are often trying to represent what has hithero been conceived of as unrepresentable. (...) Whilst this work clearly does not change the outside world, once our inner or psychic reality begins to change we feel less powerless and can act differently.[44] Engaging in phototherapeutical work on identity can help to redefine oneself because it can bring up repressed feelings from the unconscious.
Her most striking images represent her struggles with illness when she has been diagnosed breast cancer and had to face an operation in the mid 1980s.

The camera became her companion to deal with the illness until her death. Being a photographer, she began to ask herself questions about the way disease and health are represented in society. Given that women are expected to be the object of the male gaze and to beautify themselves in order to become loveable, they are still fighting for basic rights over their own bodies. It seems to Jo Spence, that her breast cancer could be seen as metaphor for women‘s struggles.[45]

Jo Spence photographed herself during examination, on the way to the operating theatre, after operation, in the hospital and later on she documented her regime of alternative treatment she chose for rebalancing her whole body and her psychic life. When it was not possible to photograph herself, she convinced the radiographer to take a picture while a mammogram was being done, or a ward doctor during the time of her operation.
She always asserted her right to define her own body. Her photographs don‘t claim technical and aesthetic perfection, but it is indeed the unvarnished directness which makes her photoghraphs so radically honest. For Jo Spence, the camera was a visual means to explore and help herself — and not to create pleasing pictures.

She used the camera as third eye, almost as part of her which was ever watchful: analytical and critical, yet remaining attached to the emotional and frightening experiences she was undergoing. Her series *Pictures of Health?* is a very powerful form of political and therapeutical personal storytelling.
Jo Spence's work is provoking, because it is radical. Radically honest and consequent in the representation of a wounded self which is struggling for a new identity. She fought for becoming a subject of her own history rather than the object of somebody else's. Through photographing herself, Spence managed to lift herself from hopeless suffering and passivity to active reflection of her illness.
This gave her power to become more at peace with her perception of the process of aging, illness and finally dying. Four years before she died of cancer, she wrote: *I can't say in all this that I ever expected to save my life, but rather to learn to live with myself and to be ready for my eventual death.*[46]

Selftransformation: Alexa Wright — Questioning Beauty

The photographer Alexa Wright has created a series of eight large-scale, computer generated, colour photographs which aim to challenge attitudes towards physical disability and question the boundaries of what is considered a beautiful or acceptable human body .

In the series *I*, which was produced in 1998, she digitally combined characteristics of her own body with those of people with disabilities and placed the new persons in an ornate historical setting which gave them status and historical association.

This work was originally developed in an effort to confront people with their own prejudices and fears on seeing a congenitally disabled, or different body. (...)
By superimposing each disability onto one single identity the intention is to permit the gaze of the spectator, but also to interrogate.[47]
The trouble these images cause it not simply by the disability which they show, but they provoke and question the traditional sense of beauty which is dominant in our culture. Writing about *I*, Mark Cousins emphasises that our culture's sense of beauty is still massively reinforced by christian tradition: *We inherit a philosophical trinity of the Beautiful, the Good and the True. After two hundred years of critical thought, in which this trinity has been questioned, it still remains a stubborn prejudice that these categories belong together, that Beauty is Truth, and that together they*

must signify what is Good.[48] In this perspective, he argues, that the still dominant belief in this trinity has an insidious effect: We already group the negative of these terms and know what is ugly — it is the opposite of beauty.
Beauty has always been defined as totality, as a whole, a completeness.

Truth must be a totality in order to represent what is real; it must not be partial. (...) The ugly fails to achieve the totality.[49]
Alexa Wright s images represent a new totality: her images consist of different elements: Figures which are constructed from parts of different bodies. Wright questions exactly this sense of beauty, accusing or challenging the spectator through transforming her own body. She photographed herself, but does not call these pictures self-portraits. She called the work *I as distinct from me — to suggest an objective observation of the self.*

When asked how much of her self there was in her pictures and what she identifies with, she answered: *When I was first making them I felt there was a lot of me in them, but the more they are shown, the less I identify with them and the more the women in the images are like my children . In looking at them I do, of course, identify with them to a degree... but I always remember the photo shoots being very cold...* The pictures *are not really about revealing anything about me as subject.* Does she feel she has created a new person or a new self? *Yes absolutely — they are almost like an offspring of myself and the people I collaborated with.*

In terms of the still traditional visual dictation of beauty, Wright has transformed her own body into something less beautiful — even shocking. But only using her own body gave such power to the pictures, showing that beauty is a (visual) construct. One of Wright‘s main intentions is *to suggest that there is no (social) distinction between people whose bodies are considered normal (hers?) and those who are not (her models). None of us is perfect, and beauty does not only reside in the normal or the average.*[50]

Selfdocumentation: Natacha Merritt — A document of sterile Narcissicm?

The most obvious reason to do a documentation of oneself seems similar to the general purpose of documentary photography: To keep a realistic record, but also

to explore a theme by documenting it. Since there is no particular definition of the terms self-documentation and self-exploration, in this context, the work of Natacha Merritt should be regarded as self-documentation, because she first documents her interaction with herself and others and later, through editing and looking at the pictures, explores herself.
Jo Spence, on the other hand, uses photography as an instant help, a conscious form of working through her problems and exploring her feelings through the process of taking pictures of herself.

Born 1974, Natacha Merritt takes self-documentation to a new extreme: Her book *Digital Diaries*, was published in 2000, consists of intimate digital snaps in which she photographed herself naked — alone or with friends having sex. *My camera always goes to bed with me. (...) My photo needs and my sexual needs are one and the same.*[51]
Most pictures are shot at arms length which creates a very intimate and close atmosphere. *She fits the medium — new, young, spontaneous, yet with thought behind every move. It‘s her inexperience that is so alluring,* writes Erik Kroll who is a fetish photographer himself, discovered her work on the internet and helped to publish it. She has no technical knowledge about photography and does not even know the difference between an f-stop and a bus stop. *Digital Photography fits my personality. It‘s easy to do. I don‘t even know anything about conventional photography, she says.*
Merritt s favourite motif is herself, her goal is *self-exploration for the new millennium*. And not taking the most attractive picture of herself or creating a thoughtful reaction to her photo. She says: *I really don‘t try to shock. I explore things looking for something beautiful, interesting arousing.* And *It has to be real*. She means the encounter and the intimate sexual atmosphere between her and her models. *She«d find a location, bring the people into the room, wait for something sexual to happen, then photograph it.* Her lovers have to sign a model release before they have sex.

The way her pictures are produced leaves the classic tradition of pin-up and fetish photography far behind — the extraordinary intimacy in her images resides in the shared experience of Merritt herself and her models, when they are both equally vulnerable and exposed to the camera. Unlike in pin-up photography, which is staged, Merritt makes her private sexuality public.
Some decades ago, *Digital Diaries* would have been censored. Today, Kroll himself

does not see her work as pornography, whereas he does not like his own pictures which lack Merritt‘s elegant, inviting and enticing style. Compared to Merritt‘s photographs, Kroll finds his own images pornographic. *She takes photographs to understand her universe or herself in her universe of ultra-slick hotels. Here she is at peace. (...) As long as there are mirrors.*[52]

Because her work is so extremely self-focused and consequently revealing the most intimate parts one can reveal, the question occurs what else is being communicated in *Digital Diaries* than Merritt‘s private sexual experimentations and explorations.

It seems she does not primarily use her camera to search for her self (even though some pictures are called *self search*) but maybe the camera contributes to form her identity — the identity of a young woman which has a strong drive to play and experiment with herself and to find her self.
Paul Cook, who reviewed *Digital Diaries* on the Taschen web-site called her work *a sterile document of extreme narcissism.* The book *suffers from the kind of directionlessness most people in their twenties feel (...) and as such seems to reflect the only world Ms.Merritt truly knows: the world she sees reflected in her mirror.*[53]
Digital Diaries has *no narrative thread,* but is just another document *stemming from the narcissism of the 1990s.* There is not much more beyond the exhibitionism in Merritt‘s images, so in the end, they *just* seem indulgent, they rarely transcend the merely salacious. Though the photographs are quite artfully done, especially their repetitive character does not seem to satisfy much more than a voyeuristic desire: To watch a good looking young women photographing herself naked. How much interest would the viewer have in such pictures, if the author was an unattractive person?
Nevertheless, Natacha Merritt‘s pictures about sex are also pictures about love — *love makes the best images,* she writes. *Taking images is a way to replace love, exhibit love, engage, a reason to explore and a safe way to experiment.*[54]

A *healthy* form of self-love can free everyone to start the journey towards self-knowledge. Photographic self-portraiture can be like a visual diary, a visual form of self-exploration which expresses the internal dialogue. Since nobody can look at himself objectively from the outside, one can still only discover oneself through images and reflections.

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Total word count dissertation text: 10 735

Online Interview Alexa Wright — Questions by Nabiha Dahhan

From: alexa <alexa@dircon.co.uk> Save Address - Block Sender
To: "Celestine D'Amano" <nabiha21@hotmail.com> Save Address
Subject: Re: Nabiha/Wmin/Interview "I"
Date: Thu, 8 Feb 2001 18:52:46 +0000

Dear Nabiha,

I'm afraid i dont have a lot of time to answer your questions, but I will give you some quick answers:
Yes in a way my work is self portraiture and self-exploration, but that is not the primary aim of it - the subject is primarily the audience - using the work as a mirror to reflect peoples values back at them.

Online Interview questionst:
? What made you do this project?

I will paste a statement which I hope answers this question:
The initial idea for these images arose as I was working with people with amputations to produce the series 'After Image' in 1997. As I developed this work I realised that people whose bodies are different to the conventional 'norm' are still often considered, and treated, as problematic: as less than human.

This work was originally developed in an effort to confront people with their own prejudices and fears on seeing a congenitally disabled, or different, body. As the project evolved I realised that these images are also about our relationship with ourselves: in a metaphorical sense this work represents the feelings of abjection or 'foreignness' everyone experiences at some time in relation to their own body. By superimposing each disability onto one single identity the intention is to permit the gaze of the spectator, but also to interrogate this gaze.The figure(s) look directly out of the image: accusing or challenging the spectator. They are placed in an ornate historical setting which gives them status and historical association.

? Why did you shoot selfportraits and call the series I , even though they consist of strong digital manipulations of you / your body?

I called the work 'I' as distinct from 'me' - to suggest an objective observation of the self. (oneself)

?How did you explain the models you were taking pictures of what you would do with their pictures and how did they react?

I had to explain my ideas over & over again, so my means of explanation changed a lot during this process - but I simply told people what I was trying to do,which was to try to confront the audience and to ask them to

readdress their preconceptions and prejudices around the disabled body, which to the people I photographed seemed a generally useful thing to do. I held a one day seminar on the public image of disabiltiy as part of the exhibition when it was shown in edinburgh (where I made the work), and two of my models spoke at this, otheres were in the audience. It gave everyone a chance to air their views both positive and negative in relation to the work, I saw this seminar as part of the work.

? How much of your self is in your pictures and what do you identify with if you look at them?

When I was first making them I felt there was a lot of me in them, but the more they are shown the less I identify with them and the more the women in the images are like my 'children'! In looking at them of course I do identify with them to a degree, but I always remember the photo shoots being very cold... all those things you have to endure, and that strange and special place I used as a setting. One of the main intentions of the work is to suggest that there is no (social) distinction between people whose bodies are considered 'normal' (mine?) and those whose are not (my models). None of us is perfect, and beauty does not only reside in the 'normal' or the average.

? Do you feel you have created a new person or a new self ?

Yes, absolutely - they are almsot like the 'offspring' of myself and the people I collaborated with.

?Do you feel more vulnerable or stronger (through or in your pictures)?

Not sure what you mean by this - but they are definately about the vulnerability in all of us and, of course, my vulnerability.

? How much of a person s self and identity, do you think, can a (photographic) selfportrait reveal?

I am not sure I can answer that one, and anyway they are not really about revelaing anything about me as a subject.

? How did the public and the models react to your work?

With suspicion when I was trying to explain what I was going to do, but as soon as I had some visuals to show people they could begin to understand what I was doing - the power of the image to communicate what cannot be explained in words!

Best wihses with your dissertation, I hope that is some use,

Alexa