



AUTO FOCUS

THE SELF-PORTRAIT
IN CONTEMPORARY
PHOTOGRAPHY

SUSAN BRIGHT

New School Library

The Monacelli Press



the connection between the self and the body has preoccupied modern philosophy, from Descartes – whose idea that the mind and the body ‘although ontologically entirely distinct, somehow are united in the human person’² – to Kant, as well as psychoanalysis – specifically Freud’s link between the ego and the body³ – and the body is generally understood as a vessel through which the conscious self is presented. The body in self-portraiture has long fascinated artists and photographers, from classical renderings of the nude form to the use of the body to question what is human in a highly critical and political way. Since the mid-twentieth century the body has become an expressive tool with which questions of identity, from the very personal to the highly abstract and philosophical, have been played out. Postmodern thinking led to a radical shift in the way the body was presented and understood, and it was through examinations of the body that the idea of an authentic, solitary self has most profoundly been discredited. Within postmodernism the body was used for striking exercises in shape,

composition and form, while the Postmodern body was a difficult thing, for intellectual enquiry rather than passive contemplation. This exploratory process in art mirrored developments in medicine, anthropology, psychoanalysis and philosophy.

The fear of death and ageing is an area ripe for photographers to examine because it cuts deep into the core of human existence. In 1984 John Coplans (1920–2003) began taking large black and white photographs of his nude body, examining in detail the result of the ageing process upon his entire body, although maintaining a classical ‘everyman’ approach by never photographing his face. Anne Noggle (1922–2005), who like Coplans started to practise photography late in life, documented her own ageing process with liveliness and a sense of humour about the stereotypes of female beauty, calling a facelift in her fifties an ‘exercise in futility’, but photographing her recovery process with honest directness. Her work is a welcome breath of fresh air compared to the many artworks that present ageing with fear and loathing and a sense of nihilistic inevitability. Depictions of ageing might also touch on the abject, as society is so conditioned to associating beauty with youth.

Sordid or decrepit depictions of the body as seen in the self-portraits of artists such as Diana Thorneycroft (b. 1956), Lynn Herschman Leeson, Gilbert and George, Cindy Sherman, Joel-Peter Witkin (b. 1939), Jo Spence (1934–92), Dieter Appelt (b. 1935) and Paul McCarthy (b. 1945), concentrate on the transgression of boundaries and of social norms, ageing and death. A fascination with body parts, and dismantling and abstracting the body through intense examination, is an inevitable part of the genre. It is the most obvious way of making the body appear as ‘other’, alien, removed and strange. In the 1960s and 1970s, as the body became an increasingly politicized site, Ulrich Görlich (b. 1952), Bruce Nauman (b. 1941) and Vito Acconci (b. 1940) explored their

Page 60: Malerie Marder, *Nine # 7*, 2006.

Above: John Coplans, *Back With Arms Above*, 1984.

Before turning to photography in his sixties, Coplans had been a curator, museum director and critic, with a sophisticated understanding of the history of art and the politics of representation. This knowledge was evident in his self-portraits, which often raise questions about the male body. Coplans does not flatter or disguise his ageing flesh, but instead turns it into the main subject, twisting his body into abstracted shapes and forms, and using close cropping to highlight his imperfections.

bodies’ landscapes, taking the camera to the remotest parts of their anatomies and asking what these locations meant in terms of human boundaries. In 1970 Nauman produced a series of closely cropped images showing the artist pulling at his lips, cheeks and neck to distort his face. There seems to be no apparent reason for these absurd actions beyond narcissism and an obsession with the body and solitary human activity, which he continued to explore in his videos of the time. Earlier in the century similar investigations had been carried out by the Surrealists and European Modernists, who used montage, double exposure, splicing, anamorphic lenses and blurred focus to open up a metaphorical displacement and display of self.

Issues of gender identity and sexuality are most obviously played out through the body, and more specifically through the naked body. Nudity, which has traditionally suggested passivity, has given way to far more complex concepts. In depicting the female nude, however, it remains difficult to sidestep the history of subjugation by an objectifying male gaze: feminist artists Helen Chadwick (1953–96), Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke were strongly criticized for appearing nude in their work, which was not initially understood to subvert male objectification in the way that the artists intended. These artists – and feminist discourse of the 1970s – understood the nude body to be liberating, freeing women from negative attitudes towards their own bodies. By the 1980s this approach was criticized as interrogating the body as something culturally coded and mapped. Representations of the male nude body remain even more of a taboo, and as a result can be pushed further. Such images still have the ability to shock, and can often be daring and ambiguous with regard to gender and sexuality, as is clearly demonstrated in the work of Pierre Molinier (1900–76), John O’Reilly (b. 1930), Arnulf Rainer (b. 1929), Jürgen Klauke (b. 1943), Carlos Leppe (b. 1952) and Urs Luthi (b. 1947).

The idea of boundaries, where a body starts and ends, has always fascinated photographers, who early on began to experiment with technology to distort appearances. Louis Ducos du Hauron (1837–1920), a French inventor who developed an early colour photography process, created a series of self-portraits in the late nineteenth century that used re-photographing of negatives to comically elongate or compress his face, as if in a hall of mirrors. The interest in body distortion



has come full circle, and the allure of technology to push the body beyond its commonly accepted limits still remains crucial. However, contemporary approaches to body alterations more directly question the idea of self, and use technological means to alter the characteristics of artists’ bodies in literal, physical ways. Extreme shape shifters and transgressive body artists, such as Stelarc (b. 1946) and French chameleon Orlan (b. 1947), use prosthetics, robotics and surgery to attempt to transcend the human body. Through the use of their bodies, both artists constantly question what it means to be human. Interestingly (and perhaps ironically) as they pursue their explorations into the malleability of the body their selves become all the more apparent. No matter how endlessly the body is used as a vehicle to question what is human and to interrogate the location of the self, the location remains stubbornly within the borders of the human body.

Lucas Samaras, *Photo-Transformation*, September 9, 1976, 1976.

In this dynamic push and pull Samaras (b. 1936) appears to be in conflict with two opposing sides of himself. It is not clear if he is struggling with a mirror or with some kind of barricade. Perhaps it is both? Samaras used Polaroid film for his *Photo-Transformation* series, which he worked on throughout the 1970s. The malleable nature of the process allowed him to manipulate the surface emulsions of the photograph creating an expressionistic effect.



THOMAS FLORSCHUETZ

German artist Florschuetz began using his body in his artwork in the mid-1980s when he was focused on performance work. Over time he has developed a distinctive style by composing powerful and precise images out of rearranged photographic fragments of his body. The compositions are at first confusing and difficult to read, due to Florschuetz's use of juxtaposition, repetition, extreme cropping, magnification, tight focus and the dissociation of body parts from their function. His rendering of the body into visceral realms of abstract and sometimes unidentifiable flesh is disjoined, but the images are not altogether incoherent; the de-contextualized pieces are obviously human and male, even if their exact relationship to one another is unclear. Certain fetishized body parts, such as hair and feet, are simultaneously repellent and intoxicating. There is a cohesive beauty in the portraits, which are unified by the backdrops that appear to support the body fragments, suspending them on the photographic surface.

These works are exhibited as very large-scale prints, which is another way of removing and alienating the manipulated components from Florschuetz's actual body. Florschuetz's working process involves various stages over a number of years. He often returns years later to complete a work, and a single self-portrait generally has two dates: the first when the photograph was taken, and the second when the actual composition was created and printed.



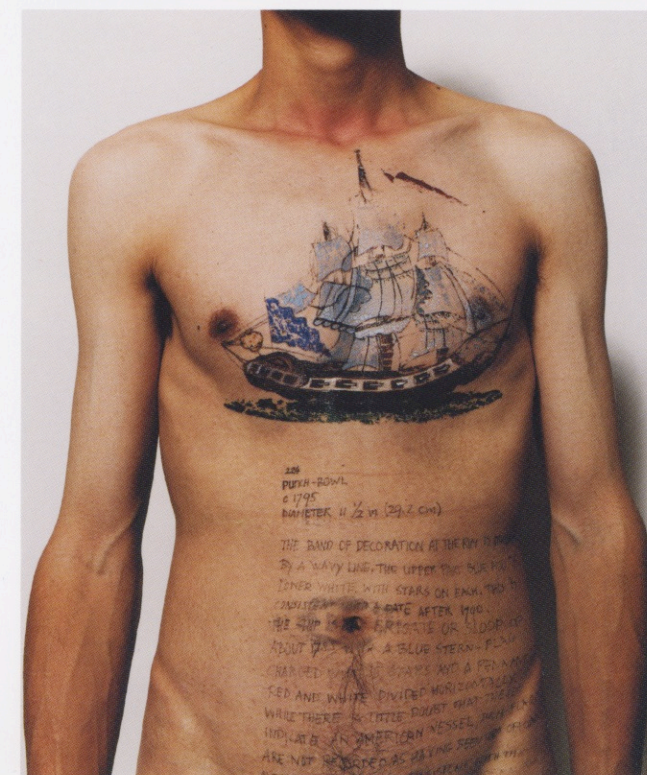
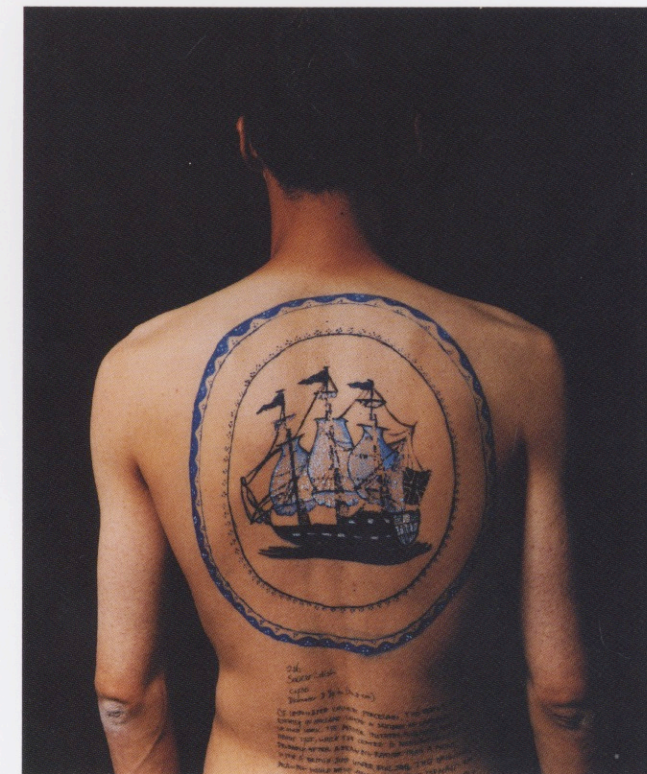
Opposite: Thomas Florschuetz, *Fallweise*, 2003–04.
Right: Thomas Florschuetz, *Twist 02*, 1986.



NI HAIFENG

In the series *Self-Portrait as a Part of the Porcelain Export History* (1999–2001), Ni fragments and objectifies his body, showing that the artist is part of the production of Chinese exports to the West. He equates himself with the Western craze for Chinese porcelain that came into fashion in the sixteenth century. By using his body, Ni demonstrates that the human form can be part of the discussion about globalization, and examines how the use of the body can be seen as a form of emancipation. Yet for Ni this perceived emancipation is nothing other than a repetition of colonial patterns and structures that favour the dominant West. He has said of the painting on his body, 'There are two sources to the patterns: on the one hand the indigenous traditional Chinese porcelain design, and on the other the porcelain patterns of the *Chine de Commande* designed in the West during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, but manufactured in China. So you have a history that comprises two texts, a history of both the politics and the economics of export and import, which reappear on the body of a contemporary individual. As though we still live in the present moment of a past, and the past always comes to haunt the present.'

'The inscriptions I used are not actual tattoos, but paint that can be washed off and put on again and again. They show the body as a palimpsest. They're not there to expose the pain caused by colonization, but to reclaim the lost body in order to name it again, in order to redefine who you are. I always think of history as a kind of writing. It is constantly being erased and rewritten. In this piece I rewrote history through my own body. It echoes the stereotypical images of "the Chinese". It is a kind of parody, a self mockery.'



Opposite and right: Ni Haifeng, *Self-Portrait as a Part of the Porcelain Export History*, 1999–2001.



CATHERINE OPIE

In each of these three self-portraits, taken over ten years, Opie uses her body as a canvas to aggressively confront conservative attitudes towards homosexuality and alternative lifestyles. The photographs are surprisingly traditional in format, as Opie has used a formal style of studio portraiture in which her body – set against richly patterned fabric backdrops reminiscent of seventeenth-century paintings – is framed in the centre of each photograph.

In *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) Opie has scratched a traditional family scene onto her back, yet both partners are female. Her raw, bleeding skin contrasts with the naïve, childlike illustration and sets up a dynamic opposition between the subject matter and the manner in which she treats her own flesh. As the design is on Opie's back it could also be read as a metaphorical turning of her back on traditional relationships. In *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) Opie uses cutting to make a personal statement about how she is seen by the mainstream: by carving the slur 'Pervert' in elaborate handwriting across her chest she reclaims the word and wears it with pride, fully aware of the shocking nature of her self-portrait. At the same time she hides her face under a black leather mask, obscuring her identity. This mask – associated with a sadomasochistic leather subculture – and the extreme piercing of her arms, show her affiliation with the fringe groups that she has photographed in the last two decades. In *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004) Opie adopts a typical pose of the Madonna and child in Christian iconography as she breastfeeds her young son. The word Pervert, although still visible across Opie's chest, has faded into a white scar, perhaps mirroring a gradual mellowing as she literally becomes more comfortable in her own skin.

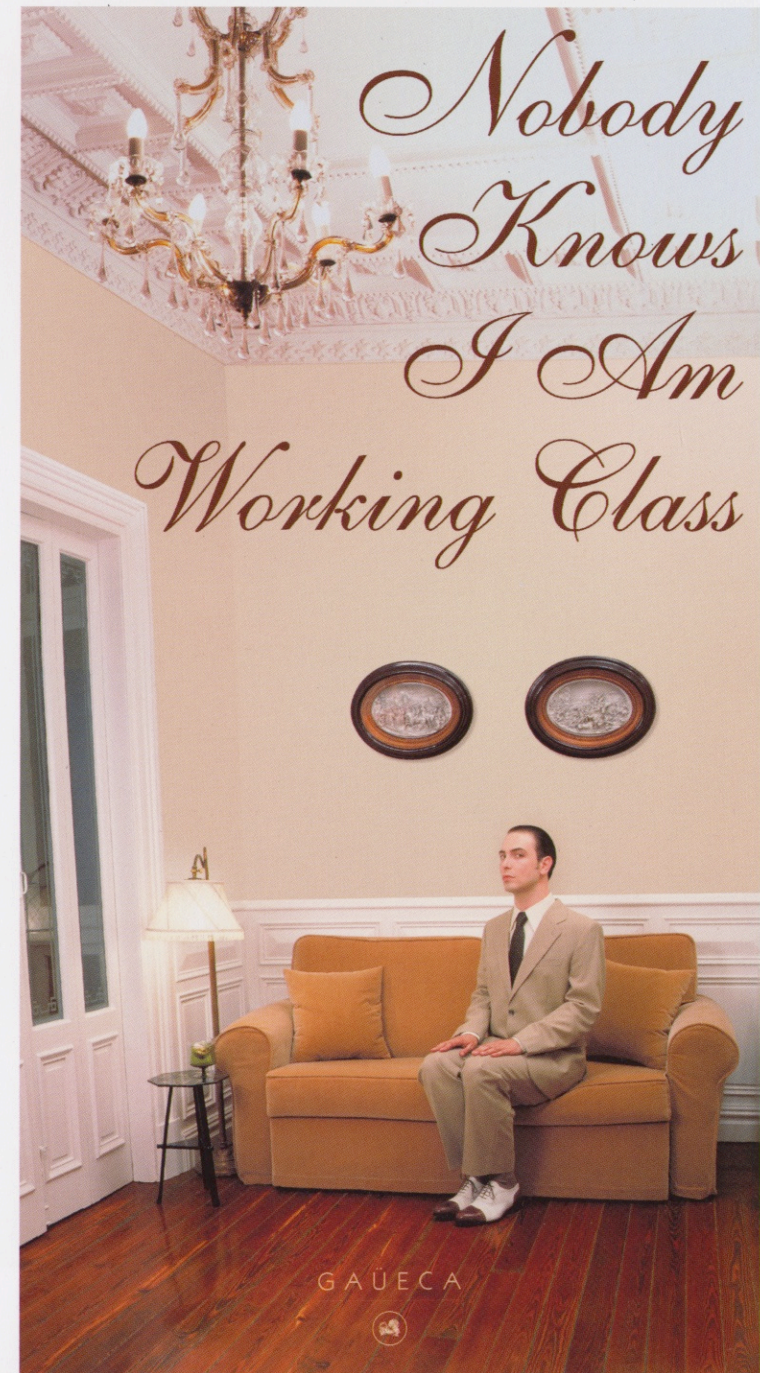


Opposite: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004.
Right above: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994.
Right: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993.



GAÜECA

In the series *Me, Myself and I* (2002–04), Spanish artist Gaüeca mocks the hierarchies and clichés of art history and the commercial art market. He assumes the roles of people involved in the often elitist and snobbish art world, including artists, curators, dealers and collectors. The photographs serve as a comment on the subtle manners and behaviour that can seem extraordinarily bewildering to those on the outside of that environment. The project reveals the insecurities that thrive in the unstable world of taste and fashion, and which often dominate the business side of art, commodifying the work and turning it into a cultural product. When Gaüeca places text within some of the images, it reads like the thought bubbles of narcissistic and complacent characters who wish to reinvent themselves in order to fit in; 'Nobody Knows I Am Working Class' one image reveals, while another divulges 'Nobody Knows My Dad Died Yesterday'. In a complex layering of identity Gaüeca is pretending to be a person who is in turn pretending to be somebody else, and through this multitude of identities he asks who places value upon artistic creation and why. In terms of style and composition, the portraits are elegant and meticulously crafted, and Gaüeca mimics the visual language of advertising as well as famous works of art, from seventeenth-century paintings by Dutch artist Jan Vermeer to contemporary works by Bruce Nauman. He uses deadpan humour to shatter the aura that surrounds the making and selling of fine art, and manages to sidestep childish mockery due to his intimate knowledge of the conventions and codes of art history and the art world.



Opposite: Gaüeca, *Nobody Knows Vermeer Told Me This*, 2004.
 Right: Gaüeca, *Untitled*, 2002.
 Pages 132: Gaüeca, *Nobody Knows My Dad Died Yesterday*, 2002.
 Page 133: Gaüeca, *Untitled*, 2003.



Nobody Knows My Dad Died Yesterday. ☿ GAÜECA



*"Nobody Knows
I Am Soil"*
Gaiëca



KIMIKO YOSHIDA

‘Transformation is, it seems to me, the ultimate value of the work. Art has become a space of shifting metamorphosis. My self-portraits, or what go by that name, provide only the place and the formula for the mutation.’

Yoshida’s ongoing series of self-portraits revolves around the idea of the bride through different cultures and historical periods. Her investigations take her into the past and into the future, and she has transformed herself into a cyborg, a mythological Babylonian and an exotic Baroque creation. Yoshida is not interested in portraying a particular culture’s traditional style of wedding gowns; instead in order to arrive at an appropriate costume, she researches national costumes and stereotypical notions of what certain races – particularly non-Western groups – wear. The photographs are careful, mannered constructions with subtle white tones playing off one another, beautiful but at the same time cold. Yoshida is completely inaccessible; a veil always obscures her face and there is none of the excitement and glow that is associated with brides at their weddings. She generally paints her face with heavy white makeup as a distancing technique, or wears a mask as part of her complex, layered disguise, as if to question where the real Yoshida might be found. It seems impossible to get past the surface of these portraits, the physical and symbolic veil keeping any clues as to her appearance hidden. In the role of the bride the artist is in a state of limbo or transition: when the veil is lifted during the wedding ceremony the groom symbolically takes possession of his wife, and her identity shifts from that of bride to wife, from single to conjoined. The veil covering her face represents the idea of an unstable feminine persona, malleable and easily changed depending on circumstances and, in this case, defined by a relationship to a man.



Opposite top left: Kimiko Yoshida, *The Saigon Bride*, Self-Portrait, 2008.

Opposite top right: Kimiko Yoshida, *The Shinto Bride*, Self-Portrait, 2002.

Opposite bottom left: Kimiko Yoshida, *The Bride with the Mask of Herself*, Self-Portrait, 2002.

Opposite bottom right: Kimiko Yoshida, *The Baroque Bride*, Self-Portrait, 2001.

Above right: Kimiko Yoshida, *The Divine Bride Praying*, Self-Portrait, 2003.



SIAN BONNELL

Health and Safety (2007) is British artist Bonnell's first venture into self-portraiture, and the photographs in this series are darker than her previous bodies of work, which have tended to be overtly absurd. The portraits, although humorous in a straight-faced and sardonic manner, lack the lightness of touch so apparent in the earlier work, which was created outside the confines of the studio. For this project, Bonnell worked within a self-imposed set of parameters, dependent on a studio setting, and this shift in location gives the images a strong visual charge. She is obviously ill at ease in the studio and visibly intimidated by the space, where she poses with a trepidation manifested physically in one portrait in which she has a clenched fist. Far removed from the familiarity of her home, where she is most comfortable working, Bonnell brings everyday props associated with cleaning and cooking into the empty studio. Over the course of nine self-portraits, she appears to morph from a woman on the edge into a demented automaton; in the final photograph Bonnell has become the opposite of a 'domestic goddess', an archetype that has gained a higher profile through the recent explosion of reality television programmes devoted to homemaking. Although Bonnell wears pink, a clichéd signifier of femininity, there are no mixed messages about domesticity and womanhood. Her choice of a boiler suit, which conceals her female body, is an act of defiance and an appropriation of male working attire, and creates an interesting tension when paired with her overtly feminine shoes.



Opposite and right: Sian Bonnell, *Health and Safety*, 2007.

HEWLOCKE

'I am literally putting myself inside my sculptures, inside a world of my own creating: I become my work ... We live in a whirlwind of change and insecurity. The figures are born out of this chaos, and they often have a feeling of decay and perversion. You can feel the power of these characters and at the same time feel their impotence – like many tyrants, they contain the seeds of their own destruction.'

British-Guyanese artist Locke is best known for his complex sculptures and extravagant installations composed of a wide-ranging collection of mass-produced objects and recycled junk. In the series of studio photographs *How Do You Want Me?* (2007), he surrounds and enrobes himself with his characteristic materials to create an intense gallery of foreboding characters loosely based upon historical figures and archetypes. The references that inform each photograph are multi-layered and perspicacious. In *Tyger Tyger* Locke's uniform is derived from the red coats worn by the British army during the Napoleonic Wars. The title of the piece refers to the 1794 poem 'The Tyger' by William Blake (1757–1827), as well as to a painted wooden organ in the Victoria & Albert Museum's collection, *Tipu's Tiger* (c. 1790). The organ, which depicts a struggling British officer in a red coat being devoured by a tiger, was created for Tipu Sultan, the 'Tiger of Mysore', an Indian general who challenged British rule in India. Overlaid are references to the so-called Black Jacobins – such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian slave revolution, who, influenced by the French Revolution, abolished slavery in Haiti in 1797 – and engravings of nineteenth century heroes found in newspapers such as the *Illustrated London News*.

Locke has described his inspiration for the 'composition of a figure face-on in front of a backdrop' as deriving not only from 'African studio photography but the video statements we have become familiar with from hostage-takers and terrorists/insurgents'. The photographs are exhibited as overwhelming life-sized prints, echoing the aristocratic paintings found in British country houses.

Opposite: Hew Locke, *Tyger Tyger*, 2007.

Page 152: Hew Locke, *Saturn*, 2007.

Page 153: Hew Locke, *Serpent of the Nile*, 2007.





JULIEPOCHRON

'Images of "woman" bombard us – sexy women, pouty women, rich women, fulfilled women. My innermost desire runs parallel to these, persuading me to buy what they sell, to become what they are. But my muse recognizes the mirage and saves me. She digests these apparitions and reforms them, leaving icons of solid strength and beauty in their place.'

For over twenty years Pochron has been making self-portraits in her studio in New York that tackle serious issues of feminine representation with a ribald sense of humour. For the photographs that make up the *Umami* series (umami is considered the fifth sense of taste after sweet, sour, salty and bitter, and is linked to savoury foods), Pochron appropriates commercial photographic styles associated with fashion and food photography. She combines these two recognizable aesthetics to create fanciful, large-format photographs that are seductive and at the same time rather grotesque. The works have feminist and satirizing undercurrents and reference slang or offensive expressions that compare women to sugary foods, pieces of meat or, quite crudely, fish. For example, Pochron exposes the ridiculous nature of the demeaning clichés that associate women with cake or chocolate as signifiers of feminine sweetness and delicacy. The portraits use direct sexual allusions to subvert and undermine these stereotypes, as in the amusing *Vanilla Cream Cake* (2004), in which her red lacquered toenails hover above the cream frosting like the cherry on the cake. The prints are made meticulously by hand and without any digital technology, using Polaroid film and collage techniques. After many hours of cutting and taping tests images together, Pochron exposes several photographs on one sheet of film to achieve unexpected shifts in scale and surreal juxtapositions. As a result the laborious and physically sensual process has links with the physical handling of food when cooking, and desire and fetish work hand in hand.



Left: Julie Pochron, *Beet*, 2004.

Opposite: Julie Pochron, *Vanilla Cream Cake*, 2004.

Page 164: Julie Pochron, *Whitefish Steak*, 2007.

Page 165: Julie Pochron, *Chicken Foot*, 2006.







I love acting. It is so much more real than life.
Oscar Wilde¹

In photography the term 'performance' is most commonly associated with the documentation of performance art, which came into prominence during the 1960s and 1970s. In this context photography has played a vital role, serving as evidence of events and happenings that were experienced live and in real time. The photograph is often all that remains from such ephemeral events and, as such, has gained a significance far removed from its utilitarian function as a record. Photographic stills of famous performances by artists such as Carolee Schneemann (b. 1939), Vito Acconci and Marina Abramovic (b. 1946), are crucial to an understanding of their work. They have become iconic within the artist's oeuvre, standing as a replacement for the actual performances, which may have slipped into obscurity, been misremembered, inaccurately translated or, in retrospect, seen as less relevant than the remaining photograph. Since it is usually the only tangible relic of a performance, the photograph has over time come to be understood as a stand-alone self-portrait of the artist in the performative role. The grainy black and white aesthetic has taken on a melancholy beauty as a trace of a vibrant, and at times radical, moment.



With the continued development of performance art in the 1990s and the 2000s, documentation has become much more professional, due in part to a growing interest in collecting photography generally and photographic documents of events in particular. Performance photographs are now much more 'artful' and posed than their earlier counterparts. Although performance art continues to be captured and recorded on film and video, that is not the focus of the artists discussed in this book. This chapter concentrates on artists who stage

Page 180: Jemima Stehli, *Strip, No.3; Critic*, 1999.

Above: Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 5*, 1997.

This extraordinary image is a still from Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002), a series of five epic and experimental films that considers myth and ritual in a swirling odyssey of lush, fantastical visuals. The films repeatedly return to moments of early development when identity and sexuality are still in formation. The elaborate characters Barney adopts, such as this half-man half-animal creature, can therefore be interpreted as fragments of a self that has yet to be formed. The photograph's composition is traditional, even if the subject matter is not: Barney is placed squarely in the middle of a studio with a flamboyant background reminiscent of dramatic Baroque painting.

performances in order to create a subject for their work, rather than those who happen to photograph their central performance art. These are important distinctions, and the former results in intentional self-portraits and reflections on the self.

Artists have become acutely aware of the presence of the camera and how to act for it, and the resulting performance photographs are often produced as editioned prints. This has affected the way some artists conduct performances, so that the performances themselves are more photogenic or incorporate self-conscious actions for the benefit of the camera. Zhu Ming's (b. 1972) performances are in no way less extreme than those by earlier performance artists, but there is often a sense that Ming incorporates opportunities to get remarkable pictures into the events, and he records them with an awareness of a commercial audience for this documentation. The most explicit example of an artist creating choreographed performance photography is Matthew Barney (b. 1967), whose epic films and accompanying still photographs feature the artist playing a range of characters.

Still photographs also come from films or videos and can become stand-alone self-portraits. There are many reasons, including financial, why artists would create stills of their films. The sale prices of video and film art might be much higher than those for photography in the fine art market, but the audience and collector base is much smaller. Producing still photographs spreads the work to a wider audience, makes it more accessible and also allows it to take on a different conceptual life. In the case of Shannon Plumb's (b. 1970) *Olympics* project, from 2005, the artist created a film and associated photographs in which she played every role in the slapstick performance. The film relies heavily on sound for meaning, while the resulting photographs are successful as static, intriguing self-portraits that depict the artist as myriad characters. These photographs are not film stills per se, as they are carefully edited, sequenced and editioned independently of the film, and as such have an important place in the understanding of the range of contemporary self-portraiture.

In art photography, as in life, performance involves movement or narrative. Certain performances are understood to be narratives created by the artist, but not necessarily intended to be performed for an audience. This can be seen in the work of artists such as Hannah Wilke, Jürgen Klauke, the Blumes

(Bernhard b. 1937 and Anna b. 1937) and Dennis Oppenheim (b. 1938). In the case of Oppenheim's *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn* (1970), the performance is time-based, as it uses a five-hour 'exposure time' for the sun to burn an image on the artist's body, captured in a photographic diptych that compares before and after. Other photographs of narrative performance works are intended to be shown in sequence and understood as a film in terms of the progression of the story. Duane Michals (b. 1932) has based his career on such cinematic strategies, concentrating primarily on serial self-portraits that blend text and images in an idiosyncratic way and undermine the photograph's role as a conveyor of 'truth'.

The expression 'performed photography' has increasingly emerged in art criticism as more and more artists develop the idea of documenting performances and investigate the camera's role in that process. The term was first coined by Jennifer Blessing, curator of photography at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, for the 1997 exhibition 'Rose is a Rose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography', which examined photography resulting from performance for the camera. Performed photography is an inter-disciplinary genre where the camera does not merely document a performance but becomes a vital part of it. It is often based on the ideas of psychogeography promoted by the mid-twentieth-century Situationists, which propose that environment, space and time affect an individual's behaviour. Essentially, within performed photography an event with a set agenda happens in real time; the taking of a photograph is fundamental to the performance, although the photographer has no foresight of how the photograph will turn out. The performance might include members of the public engaging with the artist, as in the work of Nanna Saarello (b. 1977) in her series *Sleep With Me* (2007), or take place privately, as with Paul+a's (b. 1964) *Life is Perfect* (2004).

Jürgen Klauke, *Physiognomien*, 1972–73.

Throughout his career Klauke has repeatedly used the camera to explore his sexual identity. In the eight photographs of *Physiognomien* he appears to be in a state of flux, in the process of transforming from male to female, and a sequence of images is necessary to tell the whole story. The resulting identity is polymorphous, indefinable and transgendered. The title is used ironically, as physiognomy was a pseudo-science used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to determine inherent character and personality traits from a static face.



What both these bodies of work demonstrate is that there is an element of risk involved, and room for unexpected 'happy' accidents to affect the photograph and perhaps change the artist's original intention. The artist can never be quite sure if the performance will be successful or not, or indeed if the resulting photographs will be interesting visually. It is often the case that the end product is not the most important aspect of the performance – what matters more is the process of taking the photograph rather than whether the photograph is 'successful'. Performances may yield fewer photographs that can be presented to the public than the artist hoped for, but those few often have a vibrant, experimental character.

In terms of self-portraiture, performed photography combines elements of masquerade, acting, impersonation and feats of human endurance common in performance art, to challenge the idea of a coherent self. It is an important addition to the genre of self-portraiture, as it pushes photography far from the traditions that have dominated the medium. These different approaches highlight the artistic impulse to perform. It is crucial to all aspects of portraiture in some way, and is a human instinct by which we cope with everyday life. When applied to the art of self-portraiture, these strategies reveal what lies at the heart of identity, and highlight the power of the camera to capture who we pretend to be, who we are conditioned to be, or who we think we are.

NIKKI S. LEE

Korean-born Lee's self-portraits in the *Layers* (2007–08) series address race and identity, themes that run like a rich seam through her work to date. These photographs, although less flamboyant than her famous *Projects* (1997–2001, see p.11), which show her slipping and sliding into the identity of others, also explore the idea of identity as a fluid concept. Additionally, they highlight the role an individual's environment and the people surrounding him or her play in the layered construction of the self. In order to compose these portraits, Lee posed for many different street artists around the world, from New York to Bangkok, asking each one to sketch her likeness on a piece of translucent paper that she provided. She then layered a group of drawings from artists in a single city one on top of another over a light box, and photographed the arrangement to arrive at the final self-portrait. What is interesting to observe is how different Lee looks in each of the portraits. Collected together by geography, what results is a snapshot of how different nations view 'Asianness' and, in turn, represent it visually. The artist's individuality disappears in the layers, and a generic young Asian woman replaces her. Lee has said about the work that before 'thinking about "who I am", I first started thinking about "where I am". I recognize the difference between the "I" that I perceive and the "I" that others perceive. I think I am shy but others think I am outgoing. So who am I? How do I understand this gap? To understand others sincerely might mean to understand this gap.'

Right: Nikki S. Lee, *Layers*, Rome 2, 2007.

Opposite left: Nikki S. Lee, *Layers*, Madrid 3, 2007.

Opposite right: Nikki S. Lee, *Layers*, New York 1, 2007.



'I am interested in identity as it is affected or changed through social contexts, cultural categories or personal relationships. This interest began through personal experience. I realized that I changed between my surroundings in New York and Seoul, depending on whether I was with my family or friends.'