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Artifice and Observation: Truth, Automatism, and the Performative Self-Portrait

By

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Abstract

If art and artists are complicit in the transfer of information, then photographers are charged, falsely or veritably, with conveying evidence, and by extension, promoting a kind of truth. Since its inception, the camera has been used as an instrument of documentation, creating still recordings of what it sees. Cameras were pointed with seemingly nonprejudicial focus at individuals, the self, and the dead. Pioneering photographers were viewed not as artists, but skilled technicians and observant operators, and thus tasked with the burden of proof.

The “truth claim” is the prevalent belief that traditional photography accurately depicts reality. While the use of a film or digital camera (a mechanistic, device-driven means of picture making), alludes to documentation and veracity, what is the nature of that truth? And what is the relationship of the subject and photographer to it? Even in our digital age of mass image-manipulation and alternative facts, we still want to believe what we see.
Introduction

American philosopher and art critic Susan Sontag writes “A photograph makes real what one is experiencing” (Sontag 9) and, I would argue, in our image-saturated culture, actualizes what one has never experienced. Throughout history, painting was viewed as the standard bearer for beauty, an offshoot of truth. As an observer, I don’t believe in universal truth, but in thin slices of subjective reality. As a viewer, I’m more than willing to be suspended in disbelief; as a human being I’m a passionate purveyor of sincerity; and, as an artist working in photography, I believe in the power of presentation.
Earlier in my art practice I would privately refer to myself as a street photographer. (Fig. 1) At the time street photography appeared counter to the constraints of my day job as a graphic designer. A cadre of perceptive artists with freedom to roam the city captivated me (Fig. 2): Diane Arbus (Fig. 3), Bruce Gilden, and Joel Meyerowitz. Their images revealed a world of urban characters, clothes, social stratification, and light. At the same time fashion photographers like Irving Penn and Richard Avedon presented idealized performers: reality transmogrified into black and white unreality. (Fig. 4). At its extreme, fashion photography has more in common with the surreal than the real.

Figure 2: Eileen Powers. *A Girl Named Summer*  
—digital photograph, 24 x 30 in., 2017

Figure 3: Diane Arbus. *Masked Child with Doll*  
—gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 in., 1961
Advertising, the font of false aspirational worlds constructed for the sole purpose of selling goods to those gullible enough to believe in those worlds (Fig. 5, 6), was the ultimate untruth. As advertising trailblazer David Ogilvy put it, “I do not regard advertising as entertainment or an art form, but as a medium of information” (Ogilvy 7). In advertising, information is concentrated and transferred in a container: a printed page,
television screen or Instagram post. Legendary street photographer Garry Winogrand was very much aware of the space held by the printed image and said of photographs “There is a transformation, you see, when you just put four edges around it. That changes it. A new world is created” (Winogrand). In my work I combine these worlds over and over and place them in the same container. My art is a hybrid of artifice and observation held in a paper or digital frame.

In the fall of 2018 my ideas about art were challenged. When I began cancer treatment in December of that year, the separation between advertising, truth, and artistic agency started shrinking. During chemotherapy I began a self-portrait project called Can you make hair for me? in which I created a series of alternate selves. This paper is my attempt to translate how this project served as a spark for shifts in my thinking about truth, theatricality, automatism, and artistic agency.

The Can you make hair for me? Project

My work as an artist is about the lives of others. The portrait is an intimate medium, a shared choreography between subject and photographer. The photographer’s nature is voyeuristic. As an observer I seek to capture the understated gesture of a hand holding a set of keys, or the curve of a finger twisted around a lock of hair. Gesture is a uniquely human posturing that lends plausibility to images through artists mindful enough to record them. My art practice is built around the pursuit of gestures and finding ways to witness them.

The Can you make hair for me? body of work combines my skills as a portrait photographer: the knowledge of light, facial angles, and posture, with the ingenuity of
others who make hair for me to wear and photograph. The result is a series of multilayered self-portraits influenced by print advertising and publicity photos in which I assume fictional identities in an effort to subvert the loss of my own identity. While the project can be viewed from the angle of self-empowerment, it can be interpreted in myriad ways. In its simplest form, it is an expressive response to life-threatening disease and a record of self-fluidity and serialization.

Figure 7 is an undated publicity photo of musician Bob Geldof discovered after I made the photo in Figure 8, *Untitled: Rubber Bands*, 2020. I was astonished by the similarities between the two images. As an intern at Capitol Records in the late 1980s I saw many publicity photos. These many years later the format still resonates with me. My unconscious memories of these photographs surfaced in my visual experiments with self-resurrection.

![Figure 7: Bob Geldof—undated publicity photo, 8 x 10 in., Columbia Records](image1)

![Figure 8: Eileen Powers. *Untitled Rubberbands*—digital photograph, 15 x 15 in., 2020.](image2)
Identity crisis and hair making

When I lost my hair, I experienced a profound loss of sense of self. In an effort to regain a semblance of self, I asked friends and family to harness their energy and funnel it into a creative project. When a person becomes ill people in the community want to help, but don’t know how. *Can you make hair for me?* offered the community a well-defined way to show support by making hair out of everyday materials and extended an opportunity for makers to participate in the photoshoot. I also participated by making hair. The work unfolded into a series of collaborative photographs in which I wear the handmade “heads” (my word for the pieces), and conjure characters based on my memory of people, advertising, and publicity photos. The experience of performing in costume became the foundation for rebuilding myself as an artist and person. Constructing characters and assigning each a role gave a purpose to the work far deeper than the printed photograph. By impressing other personalities on to my weakened self, I absorbed their characteristics and tried to understand their truths. This role-playing exercise grew into my public persona as an artist. It is a persona that is inextricably related to me during the process of photographing heads, but one that quickly becomes a false construction once the art making ends.

Process and Collaboration

In some scenarios collaborators mailed me basic materials and I created hair, other artists made fully-formed heads, and other pieces are made entirely myself. The
fashions and props were purchased at thrifts stores, or taken from my own closet. The cosmetics were bought at the dollar store. During my convalescence, my sister and mother painted a spare bedroom in my home Benjamin Moore Classic Gray, a light neutral shade that works well as a backdrop. It was used in all of the shots in the series.

As the artist I reserve the right to interpret or alter any piece I receive (Fig. 9). This interpretation is revealed with costumes, props, and the gestural. When a head is ready to be photographed, the camera is adjusted manually and affixed with a Speedlite flash and handed over to my partner Tom. We discuss the art direction, photo angles and fire off some test shots. When all technical considerations are met (and the head is secured), the subject, in this case me, steps in front of the camera. Images are reviewed on the fly as to allow for retakes or new iterations. The shots are processed and culled.

The final digital images are then cropped square for viewing on Instagram and social media platforms. When printed, the photographs are cropped to either a 5 x 7 or 1 x 1 proportion, and often arranged in grids to mimic online image searches. When Googling, the series of images returned is banal and repetitious, but addictive as searches often yield unexpected results.
Self-Portraiture and the Performative

Writing in 2012, critical theorist Dawn Wilson defines the self-portrait as an image in which “we see a genuine likeness of the face or the whole figure of the artist.” (Wilson 56) As an artist currently working in the self-portrait genre, I suggest editing the definition by striking “genuine likeness” and replacing it with “representation.” Authenticity is not the domain of the contemporary self-portrait, in fact, many self-portraits are built upon constructions of the self that have little or nothing to do with truth. As noted by Tate curator Simon Baker even in photography’s nascent days “those taking pictures and those being pictured were fully aware of the performative potential of the new enterprise” (Baker 27). This suggests a representational intentionality on the part of the subject and the photographer, one that was often misconstrued as truth. (Fig. 10)

Figure 10: Claude Cahun. Self-portrait (as a dandy, head and shoulders)—silver gelatin print, 9 5/16 x 5 7/8 in.,1921–22.
Collaboration: Claude Cahun and Gregory Crewdson

Claude Cahun is an example of an artist who used self-portraiture to make images that are free of cultural preconceptions and true to her own sense of identity. Cahun, a lesbian whose real name was Lucy Schwob, changed her name, created gender-fluid identities and placed them before the camera in daring ways.

The physical manifestations of her identities underscore the duality of male vs. female sexuality. Cahun, often portrayed herself as androgynous and/or ambiguous “opening up an entirely new way of thinking about photography and the racially, sexually and gender-identified subject” (Jones 948). Cahun is not immediately recognizable as herself. Her images could easily be mistaken for formalist studio portraits of the era in which a photographer arranged the composition, controlled lighting, and sets, and made all of the artistic choices. Cahun it seems, was quite conscious of the theatricality in her work and had assistance. Scholars recently discovered that Cahun’s romantic partner Marcel Moore (birth name Suzanne Malherbe) “often pressed the button” (Treaster). Critics questioned whether the pictures were still self-portraits as Cahun didn’t exercise full artistic agency. The answer is “yes.” Cahun’s agency takes the form of director, and like a good director she delegated the task of working the camera to Moore engineering a more streamlined workflow as I do in my work.

After creating hair out of electrical tape (Fig. 11.), I uncovered Claude Cahun’s 1927 Autoportrait (Fig. 12), while conducting research for this paper, and was once again amazed by the similarities in the two images.
As an artist I don’t make clear distinctions between portraits and landscapes, all photography is portraiture. A place can be an index of an individual, a person a referent for a place and time, or a combination of both. In contemporary photography, Gregory Crewdson creates entire scapes without shooting any of the pictures himself. In his series Pittsfield, Crewdson enlists the help of his studio assistants, much like a painter of the Renaissance, to create composite images of his hometown, carefully scouting locations and constructing a moment with no “before” and no “after.” The “overwrought images seem like faithful representations” (Lubow) and viewers often mistake them for the actual Pittsfield. Like a human portrait, Crewdson’s images (Fig. 13) show the range of emotion, sexuality and representation that can be derived from a contrived entity. The series is reminiscent of cinema and presents almost as a series of film stills.

Like Cahun and Crewdson, I manufactured numerous representations and relied on my collaborator to click the shutter. But unlike them, my work wasn’t motivated by sexual or geophysical liberation, but actual liberation. I became the characters I wanted to photograph but was prevented from seeking out due to my illness and subsequent
quarantine. By enlisting the assistance of collaborators, I maintained my art practice and created a gallery of alternate others, both male and female, that extend the potentiality of identity. For the shoots I inhabit one persona that exists briefly only for the lens. A manufactured identity that becomes actualized as I perform ritual affectations and gestures, then disappears at the end of the shoot.

**Physical change and *Self-Portrait in Silver***

Alone at home, examining my physical self, a person I no longer recognized, I became obsessed with my hairless head. This disrupted self offered a new space for experimentation and artistic expression. The process of making self-portraits was borne of necessity as there were no other subjects within my limited scope. The choice to make self-portraits was borne out of practicality. In need of a model, I decided to become one.
While making test shots, I remembered Romaine Brooks’ *Self-Portrait*, 1923 (Fig. 14), and borrowed its monochrome palette and flat affect to create *Self-Portrait in Silver*, 2019 (Fig. 15). Brook’s interpretation of her own countenance “confronts the viewer almost like an actor bathed in a spotlight against a gray theatrical backdrop” (Kennicott). Using silver metallic stage make-up for emphasis, I mimic Brooks’ confrontational tone and theatricality. By stripping away all extemporaneous items, my image in effect becomes prop, actor and backdrop. Echoing Avedon, who shot primarily with black and white film, I digitally process the image in black and white. The final monochrome headshot seems free from time in that environment and fashion aren’t present.
By using a desaturated framework and blending the subject with its background, an image emerges that the photographer could never see in reality. It is a referent for the subject that looks like the physical person, but is in fact an outcome that is completely fake. (Fig. 16)

The photographic self-portrait affords the artist the freedom to “make surprising discoveries about her appearance” (Wilson 62) and extend that appearance into all manner of likenesses. The camera “provides ways of viewing the world that are otherwise unavailable to human vision” (Wilson). The self-portrait genre is an alternate way of seeing the commonplace. Working with one’s own body as object forces the artist to separate the self into two distinct identities: the observer and the observed. Over time the
split grows allowing the artist and model more liberty to experiment with new visual interpretations. *Portrait in Silver* was a gateway to more audacious pictures like *Self-Portrait in Window*. (Fig. 17.) “I am the subject who feels he is becoming an object” (Barthes 14) by softening the self, making it plastic, and allowing it space to form and reform.
**Representation and Artistic Agency**

As Dawn Wilson recounts, some theorists still argue that a picture is representational “only if it displays the conscious control of the artistic agent in a way that guides the viewer’s interpretation of that depicted subject” (Wilson 55). As an artist actively making self-portraits, the notion that the artist must display conscious control and guide the viewer is nonsensical and outdated. The veracity in a self-portrait is of course the likeness of the depicted subject to the actual physical being, in this case the artist. The artist begins the self-portrait process by exercising herculean (and quite conscious) artistic agency through the simple act of stepping in front of the camera. This straightforward action sets off a string of complicated interpretations and dualities that, more likely than not, are outside of the artist’s scope of consciousness.

Rembrandt recognized the freedom afforded by the performative in his many, and varied, self-portraits. (Fig. 18) Every self-portrait he painted “convinces the viewer that this is the truth about him” (Cumming 83). Time and again the assumption of truth is
assigned to the realm of the observer, and the question of agency to the realm of the critic.

Wilson goes on to relate the philosophy that the “still image is not handmade by the artist, but rather merely “selected” from a matrix of possibilities that could be automatically generated by the mechanism” (Wilson 61). This is an absurd criticism applied singularly to photography. All visual artists make selections with the aid of tools: from paintbrushes to cameras to computers. The camera is no more of an autonomous device than a mirror or perspective grid. The purpose of these tools is to hone the artist’s “selection” so it forms a refined vision that is contextualized and individual, and a reflection of the culture at that very moment.

All artists use possibility as fodder, and rudimentary and/or technological devices as a means to clarify their vision. The concept that the camera is somehow a changeling device that concocts images on its own by bewitching the photographer into relinquishing agency is nonsense. This scenario resonates like pre-Enlightenment superstition. One only has to compare Nan Goldin’s Self-Portrait Battered in Hotel, Berlin (1984) with her

Figure 18: Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. Self-Portrait at the Age of 34—oil on canvas, 91 x 75 cm., 1640.
photograph *One Month after Being Battered* (1984) to witness not only her agency, but her considerations of posture, form, and presence. (Figs. 19, 20) This is not the sole doing of the camera, but the evidence of the considerations and decisions made on the part of Goldin. When viewed side-by-side, the portraits are a clear demonstration of artistic agency as Goldin is clearly manipulating the viewer through her choices.

During the creative process I am not consciously guiding the audience, but rather creating intuitively. As iconoclast, self-portrait artist Cindy Sherman relates “when I’m working, I’m not aware of what I’m saying until I read what someone says about it” (Lemmon 114). The intuitive process can be defined as “that which exists outside of or beyond words and theories” (Lemmon). Like art itself, it can be indescribable. (Fig. 21)
Neutral backgrounds

My portraits are shot with a flat gray background. Stock neutral backgrounds are a long-standing theatrical tradition in photography. Nineteenth-century, celebrity photographer Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, professionally known as Felix Nadar, shot “a stellar array of Parisian actors and actresses” and called upon them to “reconstitute their roles (with costumes, sets, and casts) for just a few moments before an audience of one lens” (Baker 29). His draped, statuesque subjects posed

Figure 22: Felix Nadar. *Sarah Bernhardt*—gelatin silver print, 7.5 x 9.5 in., 1864.

Figure 23: Edouard Manet. *The Fifer*—oil painting, 160 x 97 cm., 1866.

Figure 24: Richard Avedon. *Truman Capote*—silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 40.64 cm., 1955.
dramatically before the camera in contrast to the smooth, featureless background. Nadar manufactured a composition that was out of the model’s line of sight, and only known to them through the final printed image-object. Nadar photographed the glitterati of Parisian society in a neutral setting that gave the sitter little competition, commanding the viewer’s full attention. (Fig. 22) Unadorned backgrounds act as equalizer exerting soft muscle on the subject, urging them to perform as not to be swallowed up by the neutrality of the setting.

Richard Avedon (Fig. 24) used a neutral or white background in his fashion photography and fine art portraiture to direct the gaze to the couture and the model, similar in spirit to the mottled gray-green background that was rendered by Edouard Manet one-hundred year earlier in his painting *The Fifer*, 1866. (Fig. 23) Bare backgrounds isolate and elevate subjects freeing them from the trappings of time and place. By using a forced focal point, Avedon and Manet valorized their subjects transforming them from mundane to momentous. By separating the subject from a physical environment the artist hoists their social stature, raising it to new heights that hover between royalty and celebrity immortal. In some ways my project acts as an anti-environmental portrait, eschewing the work of artists like Arnold Newman, and fetishizing the odd qualities of the culturally unbeautiful. (Fig. 24)

The neutral background is a direct reference to 1960s and 70s print advertising and the repetitious nature of today’s commercial stock art. By enacting gestures and creating shapes with my body, I create negative spaces within the picture frame. These vacancies can be seen as containers for headlines and body copy not yet realized. As
British art critic John Berger observed
“publicity is the culture of consumer
society” and “in essence nostalgic”
(Berger 139). The project is an attempt to
speak to consumer society through
conventions of its own invention:
advertising, repetition, stereotypes, and
preconceptions about identity. I create a neutral environment in which I am the product. The inspiration for this neutrality can be found in today’s stock photography websites. (Fig. 25) At any given time one can search for the “twelve most popular women on gray backgrounds,” and, depending on the algorithms and the additions to the catalog, the search will return completely different results. In some ways, I view my project like the results of a stock art search.

**Neutral Background and Cancer Limbo**

The intentional use of the plain white/gray background in the work is referent for cancer limbo, the waiting period between treatments and results. It is a space that can’t be filled with anything concrete, only expectations and anxiety. It’s a period of time illustrated lushly by Agnes Varda in the film *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962). In France these are hours when lovers traditionally meet, but in the film, Cleo the female protagonist, dots this timeframe with visits to cafes, cab rides, and shops while waiting for the results of a biopsy.

Like artist Hannah Wilke, who succumbed to lymphoma, I participate in what Wilke coined the “performalist self-portrait.” This is a scenario in which the artist is the subject, but not the “The Operator.” (Barthes 9) As she declined, Wilke became too weak to take the shots herself, and tasked husband Donald Goddard with the operation of the camera. She invented the term as a way to credit his work. (Fig. 26)
The Hospital as a Space of Theatricality

Cancer is all about scheduling and testing and the repetition of those schedules and tests. I attended appointments where I viewed digital images of my insides and listened to an oncologist translate the pixels into facts. I came to interpret my CAT/PET scans as display ads selling me on the idea that I was a cancer patient. I began rebuilding myself into a persona that was in agreement with that diagnosis. I transitioned back and forth between different aliases from Eileen the Photographer to Eileen the Cancer Patient to Eileen the Cancer Survivor to Eileen the Identity Compromised. Through these personas
I remained an artist making choices, an artist with agency over an artificial environment, much like the one used in the project.

Canadian sociologist and psychologist Erving Goffman posits “when an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered.” Goffman goes on to suggest that observers “are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess” (Goffman 17). Over the course of my twenty-plus stays in the hospital a theatricality emerged, and a series of characters. My identity split into myriad selves each calibrated for a range of personas each of whom were me.

A large hospital is like an independent state with rules, rituals and cultures. It is a public place in which the patient is always exposed, even when alone. My room felt like a sitcom set in which a procession of doctors, nurses, and visitors would enter, act out parts, and exit. The lights were cold, brash, and fluorescent as is the light in my work. My room was stocked with props in the manner of gauges, meters, IVs and tubing. The space was blocked for soliloquies, the furniture arranged for intimate dialogs.

The outer glass wall of the room faced downtown Boston, a warren of office buildings, a city of spectators distanced and nonresponsive. In this boxy theatre I began to perform the role of model patient smiling as poison was injected into my veins. I kept in the back of my mind the fantasy that “the happy man would not get the plague” (Illness as Metaphor, Sontag 55). This performance of a cancer patient complemented the physical effects of treatment (weight loss, aging and hair loss) and provided friends and family with an expected mode of behavior, one associated with the disease-stricken. I later used this shape-shifting behavior as the basis for my work.
As the project progressed I began to smudge the lines between advertising, photography, and truth. While hospitalized I had an epiphany: I realized all behavior, every minute of every action performed in our daily lives and art, forms the basis of a presentation we call “ourselves.” A presentation we build and rebuild in the presence of others advertising the information we want to communicate.

Goffman defines performance as “all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (Goffman 22). I agree with Goffman’s concept with one exception: occurrence. As a patient and a person whose sense of self was severely diminished by the physical effects of cancer treatment, performance became an activity I participated in with or without observers, a manufactured truth applied to all situations. I was at all times observer and performer. I recall asking Tom to photograph me in the emergency room. Upon reviewing the image I said “can you retake that, I’m not sure I

look sick enough.” I took Figure 27 while standing over a contact sheet of images of me or taken by me during the various stages of treatment.

**Intentionality**

“The fictive world is an artificially shaped world, shot through with intentionality” (Goldstein 299) and in my world, that intentionality surfaces as role playing. Prior to my diagnosis I also performed the part of photographer. Not only observing, but also acting. When seeking out portrait subjects I dressed in the non-threatening, costume of a tourist. Clad in plaid shorts and flip flops, my approach to people was enthusiastic and quick. I usually say something flattering like “I love the way you look. Can I take your picture? Did you make that necklace?” This act created a connection, a momentary culture between photographer and subject, that ends with the snap of the shutter. It’s as if “to enter fictive enchantment is to feel the walls of the self become so porous that the sense of others’ lives intermingles with one’s own” (Goldstein 299). This porousness was not new to me, it seems I’d been acting a part all along. In *Can you make hair for me?* I simply acted more and photographed less.

As Sontag reminds us “psychologizing seems to provide control over experiences (like grave illness), which people have, in fact, little or no control” (Sontag, 55). Creative expression and performance provide a semblance of control, and assign meaning to routine activities like documenting waiting areas and hospital rooms. I took a cue from Stephen Shore and began photographing my hospital food. When one becomes ill, commonplace objects take on exalted roles: clocks become gods, grilled cheese sandwiches manna. These objects also become the stuff of personal photo essays, pictures
with the intent of commemorating an event for the private me in which I would be the sole audience. Images I chose to represent my reality.

When chemotherapy erased large chunks of my memory these simple iPhone photos became my memories. I amassed thousands of small images that I used to form my public self. In an interview, Shore explained that he wanted to make pictures that were diaristic “that felt as natural as speaking.” I wanted to make pictures that captured basic information, as natural as seeing, but selective as the camera as an apparatus “can neither lie nor tell the truth” (Gunning 42). (Figs. 28, 29)

Behavior vs. Performance

Nearly two years into the Can you make hair for me? project my face has aged and I’ve tempered the performances. Currently, I’m focused on making a black and white
subset of images that omit the collaborative hair element. The pictures are simpler, less overwrought. As the subject, I toggle the thin boundaries between behavior and performance. These later images are concerned with performance transforming over time into behavior with the ultimate goal for the subjects to “blend into a picture” (Wall). The deeper I go into the project, the more I “behave” and less I act. (Fig. 30) Like the neorealists of cinema, I view performance as both fraudulent and real. I recognize that real actions are occurring, in a post-self, post-photographer environment. It matters little who I am as a person. My transformations are a “spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions” (Barthes 119) employing the trappings of the theatricality to make a thin slice of unreality a reality.

Figure 30: Eileen Powers.
In a concurrent project, *Mom and Mike* (Fig. 31), I ask my mother and brother to perform as mother and son, while actually being mother and son. During the course of the photoshoots I take the knowledge I gained as a performer and apply it to situations where there is a clear delineation between subject and photographer. I’ve also moved into using the self-portraits as a basis for digital collages inspired by vintage advertising and second-wave feminism. (Fig. 32)
Conclusion

As artists we are conveyors of information whether using lenses, canvases, or props. Photography is merely a mode of communication, and by extension a form of advertising, as is performance and all behavior. The role of the artist is to be a producer and director of information, a merchant of dizzying spectacle, one that is as real or as false as the observer’s imagination allows. In the end, we are all actors.
Works Cited


