



Pierre-Louise Pierson, Virginia Oldoini, Countess of Castiglione, c.1863/66

by Federica Barrios Carbonell

What does a self-portrait represent? What does it mean when an artist chooses to perform themselves through their artistic medium, and how do these various performances of self function? Portraiture has played an extensive role throughout the history of art. Before photography was invented, portraiture through sculpture, painting, or drawing was simply a tool to record a person's likeness. Today it entails so much more. Various styles of self-portraiture have developed alongside artistic movements but also in line with the careers of particularly innovative and influential artists, such as Gerhard Richter, Virginia Oldoini, Vivian Maier, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Jo Spence. Through these artists' experimentation with self-portraiture, we can see how the purpose and evolution of photography as an artform is reflected in the artistic act of self-reference.

The self-portrait is inherently self-revelatory. In the 15th century, artists began using the self-portrait as an essential part of their artistic process and self-expression, and in doing so, created a form of self-representation in terms of their subjective relationship to themselves, as opposed to others' common external perception of them. Externally perceived reality is not a necessary aspect of the image. Instead, the portrait speaks for how the artist sees themselves, how they might wish to be seen by others, or in terms of the subjective reality of their interior emotional experience. Thus, the curation of a self-portrait for public reception is a highly vulnerable and profound practice, a fact we see reflected in the photography of the Countess de Castiglione, Virginia Oldoini. In the 19th century, Oldoini used her photographic practice to challenge the structures imposed upon her by political authorities. Her most celebrated self-portrait portrays her in a rebellious light that reflects just this sort of challenge. *Scherzo di Follia* (circa 1863) shows Oldoini looking directly at the camera. However, a rectangle covers her face, symbolically concealing her true identity, and all we see is her seducing eye. This visual play alludes to the notion of a will towards a narrow intimacy that is ultimately subverted by the context of subterfuge that defined her political life. Using her femininity as a political weapon in the elite court of France for the benefit of her home, the countess's task was to discreetly promote Napoleon III's unification with Italy rather than Austria, and she was thereby forced to lead a double life. Thus, her self-portrait renders her empowered womanhood, as well as her internal conflict wrought by how it came to be deployed.

Vivian Maier's self-portraiture tackles a similar tension of identity, but in a wholly different context. In *Self-Portrait* (1955), Maier portrays herself before a storefront's window. She is in the midst of her day job as a nanny, one can imagine, running errands or commuting, and catching her own reflection along the way, a still moment in a city that does not stop moving. This moment of stillness thereby exists as a momentary escape from her quotidian professional life. She ruptures the monotony with this creative act, exploring the expressive side of her that runs deeper than her superficially ordinary experience. Again, we see the tension between reality and appearance, and through the photographic self-portrait, she is able to capture and display this tension that characterizes her identity and life.

For Jo Spence, photography and self-portraiture became a space to grapple with the uncertainty of her health during her battle with breast cancer. *A Picture of Health: How Do I Begin?* (1982-1983) presents Spence in a deeply melancholy state. Her face shows no emotion, and her stance is upright, yet sluggish,

evoking exhaustion. Her shoulders are bare, and her breasts are covered by a white sheet, which recalls the hospital gowns in the context of this struggle. A large “X” brands the left side of her chest above where her breast used to be. Thus, self-portraits became her way of honestly representing changes in her body and proudly owning her femininity, even as it shifted and evolved in the face of a devastating illness. For Spence, then, self-portraiture is less about the internal tension of self than it is about the unity of identity and agency in the context of what might otherwise render its destruction.

For German artist Gerhard Richter, self-portraiture served largely as a space for formal experimentation in his artistic practice, where he could blur the line between painting and photography and resist formal classification. In fact, he has famously credited the inception of one of many of his notorious painting styles to his achievement in photographic self-portraiture. Beneath the blurred foreground of *Self-portrait* (1996), a dark monotone background contextualizes the artist, who is depicted in a mundane light. He is looking down, wearing a suit, dress shirt, and tie, with his glasses atop the bridge of his nose—a look that is considered



both ideal and expected of the modern man. The strange style but mundane content here aims to capture the subjective truth of his experience of self, rather than his objective appearance. The work thereby straddles the divide between realism and abstraction, and this resistance to classification would come to characterize much of his artistic career. Richter’s lack of self-categorization in his self-portraiture reflects his personal sense of identity, but it also represents his artistic ambition in conducting deep challenges to the form.

We also see artists such as Lyle Ashton Harris use self-portraiture for greater social projects. In his work, Harris engages with systemic racism and the undeniable fact of the discriminatory disadvantage faced by men of color in the criminal justice system. *Untitled (New York Times Pre-Election Self Portrait Commission)* (2000) depicts the artist in a sepia-tones, standing tall before a black background with rugged edges. Harris glows and proudly faces the camera, yet he is handcuffed. He displays strength in his stance, yet it is in the position of one who is bound. The clear look of concern on his face beautifully evokes the complexity of this singular type of strength in view of its horrid reality. His personal experience fuels his need to artistically explore such social issues, and self-portraiture became just one of the many artistic mediums by which he has been able to do so.

Countless artists choose to work in self-portraiture. Some may use this form of performative self-expression for personal means. They may struggle with identity crises on an inner level or, in many cases, identity issues set forth by the unfair treatment of marginalized groups based on socially constructed stigmas and injustices. Photography’s ability to relay a social message is undeniable, making self-portraiture an exploration of identity that can be much more powerful for its ability to bridge the specific to the general, and the personal to the societal.

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Above: Jo Spence, *A Picture of Health, How do I Begin*; Opposite: Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Distorted Universal Vision*, 2003.
Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. ©Hiroshi Sugimoto



Opposite: Jun Ahn, *Self-Portrait (Seoul)*, 2009; Vivian Maier, *Self-portrait*, February 1955, ©Estate of Vivian Maier, Courtesy Maloof Collection and Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York



Above: Gerhard Richter, *Self-portrait*, 1996. ©Gerhard Richter 2022 (0088); Opposite: Lyle Ashton Harris, *Untitled*, (New York Times Pre-Election Self Portrait Commission), Courtesy of the Artist and Salon 94 © Lyle Ashton Harris.



Rashaad Noonan, *Untitled*, New York Times Pre-Election Self Portrait Commission