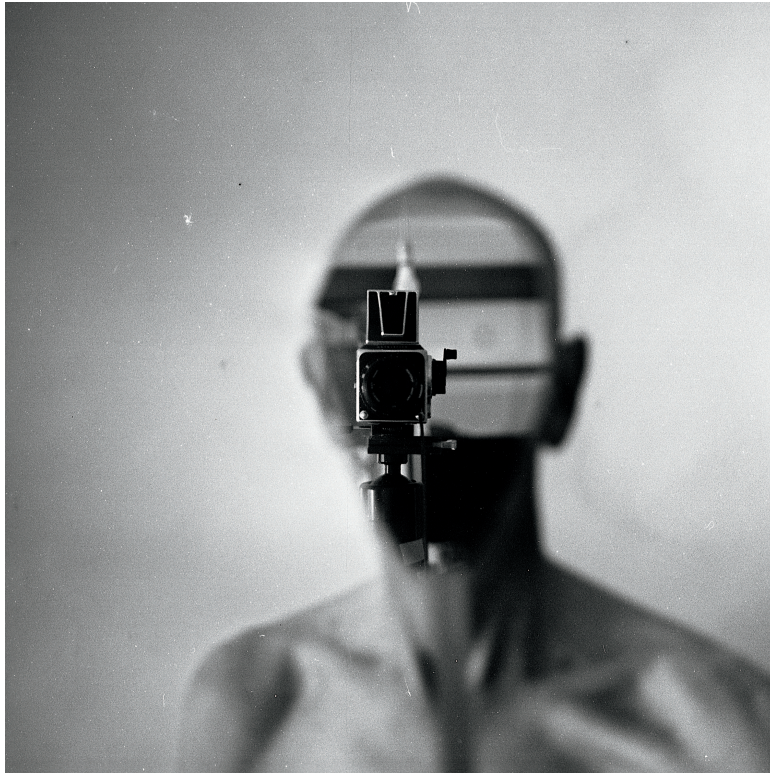# Presence
Performance and the Self-portrait

Aldobranti

(editor)

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2023

Here is the record of a shared space for practitioners in the fields of performance art and the photographic self-portrait to reflect on the overlap between these topics in the context of their own work.

We offer an overview of the artworks and working methods of some 70 artists who, in responding to an international Call for Artists, identified themselves with a process of performance to camera together with that interaction with the photographic which tends to reveal portrayal of the self. These artists then joined in this group discussion of the themes they held in common and to use this as a basis for network building. A stimulating range of shared experiences, similarities of approach and contrasting differences was revealed.

Every artist works in a spectrum of experience and technique to explore their unique situation meaning that there can be no clear boundaries here: accordingly, this text sets out a survey of this space between performance art captured as photographs and the photographic self-portrait. Focusing on an intersection of presentation and representation, we can identify some of the themes that can distinguish between between, and combine these art forms.

To summarise, we have brought together the work of 18 artists whose practices span art photography, live performance, and private performance to camera; in this selection, we create a narrative between the ephemeral essence of live performance and the enduring nature of self-portraiture. The text is enriched by the opportunity to include, italicised in the text some parts of the discussion stream.

Figure 1: Hippolyte Bayard, Portrait of a Drowned Man, 1840

introduction

When Jan van Eyck painted a portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife in 1434 he made sure to show a status symbol, the highly valuable mirror on the wall behind the couple. It was a convex mirror and neatly captured the whole room including perhaps a reflection of the artist himself. It was convex also for the reason that mirrors of any size were made from a bubble of blown glass with a metallised interior. A plane mirror without spherical distortion was not made until the beginning of the 1500's when Venetian glass blowers learnt to stretch a molten glass bubble into a sausage shape; cut it while still plastic into an open sheet, and flatten on a hot metal plate. Mirrors made like this could be as large as 80cm square.

It has been argued that, from the 16^C onwards the availability of these better, brighter, and larger mirrors enabled painters to create the self-portrait as a considered art form, often acting as an ad-

vertisement for their main business as portraitists. Even if this is not the case there must have been profound social effects, encouraging greater self-awareness, and surely fuelling the vanity of the early self-portraitist.

The invention of photography could stand in place of the mirror for an enduring image of the self, and further relieved one of the self-portraitist's headaches: as an advertisement for a painter the self-portrait must show the tools of the trade, introducing the difficulty of painting the painting hand in action.

the self

A range of historical and cultural developments can help us trace the evolution of portraiture and its influence on power dynamics, celebrity culture, and self-perception. During the Tudor period in England, monarchs employed portraits as a means of bolstering and consolidating their authority. These portraits were disseminated to convey their power and project a meticulously curated image to the public. The portrait stood as symbolic of power, status, affluence, and control over representation.

As the UK experienced increased affluence due to colonialism and the Industrial Revolution, access to portraiture grew. A burgeoning middle class could afford to commission and possess portraits of themselves and their families. This availability of portraiture contributed to an individual sense of identity and self-awareness. The Age of Enlightenment underscored rationality, individualism, and scientific inquiry, and its impact extended into the subsequent Romantic Age. This period witnessed a surge of fascination with the emotional and subjective facets of human experience, including individual self-expression. The nascent concept of the self as a distinct and significant entity influenced the interpretation and use of portraits.

The ascendancy of the Romantic novel further solidified the notion of individualism and emotional exploration. Novels like "Frankenstein" and "Wuthering Heights" delved into the intricacies of human nature, often depicting characters through intricate psychological portraits. A liberalised print industry facilitated the dissemination of printed materials, encompassing portraits. With the spread of the printed word, the printed image at the same time reached a broader audience, further shaping

public perceptions and interpretations of individuals and events. It is to be noted that the early pioneers of photography Niépce and Fox Talbot began with the direction to capture individual likenesses in print: culminating with Fox Talbot's invention of the photogravure process in 1848

Roland Barthes[2, p.31] saw photography's roots in theatre, highlighting the performative aspect of posing for portraits. Photography's capacity to freeze a moment in time, akin to a theatrical freeze-frame, contributed to the dramatic essence of early photographs. Equally as photography gained traction, actors and theatrical managers embraced the photographic medium to promote their public image. The proliferation of photographic images contributed to the development of celebrity culture, as the public could now visually appreciate and admire their chosen idol in ways previously unattainable.

The maturation of psychology as a field prompted heightened curiosity in the psychological constitution of adopted celebrity icons. Public focus on celebrities' inner lives further fuelled the demand for their portraits and personal narratives. Barthes regarded death as a common theme, a link between theatre and photography. The prolonged exposure times required for early photography often led to impassive, death-like poses, reinforcing the dramatic quality of early photographic portraiture.

When the Tudor monarch distributed their likenesses it was to claim the embodiment of the State in their Self — for Louis XIV of France: "L'État, c'est moi". The successful property owner of the 18^C more modestly sought a representation of influence and wealth while marking their place in the family's lineage. The mechanical reproduction of the photographic portrait though proved a double-edged implement as the ownership of the likeness revealed was now available as a commodity item.

The celebrity portrait is an invitation to form a personal connection with the figure and in the increasing interest in psychology encouraged a wider public to take ownership of the portrayed, even to speculate upon a state of mind of the subject. Where this became invasive some photographers, for example Francesca Woodman[15], used self-portraiture to critique the cult of celebrity itself. They employed satire, irony, or social commentary to challenge the obsession with fame and the superficiality of celebrity culture. The contemporary angle on performance art probably owes more to the libertarian instincts of the 1960's and 1970's[10], to construct a contrary position to the staged theatre, in opposition to the art market to create an artwork with an event that could not be repeated, captured or purchased. In this latter spirit there are artists who will not document their performance believing firmly in the virtues of a word-of-mouth story.

Holly Burton

In my self-portrait titled 'maroon,' I had the opportunity to stage a new lighting setup and color scheme. Focusing on a monochrome theme accentuated the impact of the lighting, resulting in a moody atmosphere. To complement the tone, I performed moody facial expressions. Being a self-portrait, I had the freedom to explore and decide whether or not to share the outcome with an audience. Unlike broadcasting the process of image-making to the camera, self-portraiture grants me full control over when and where my work is shared. With that security, I dare to venture beyond my comfort zone.

Rosalind J Turner

I am interested in images of unmodified women, particularly older women. With the exponential rise of the commodified woman, and the pressure to conform to that trope, I am curious about our responses to ourselves as we age.   Especially within the context of the rise of social media and the seemingly endless narrative of women watching themselves, rather than being themselves, of seeing themselves through the lens of the onlooker, rather than as themselves, looking out.

This image plays with this theme ...
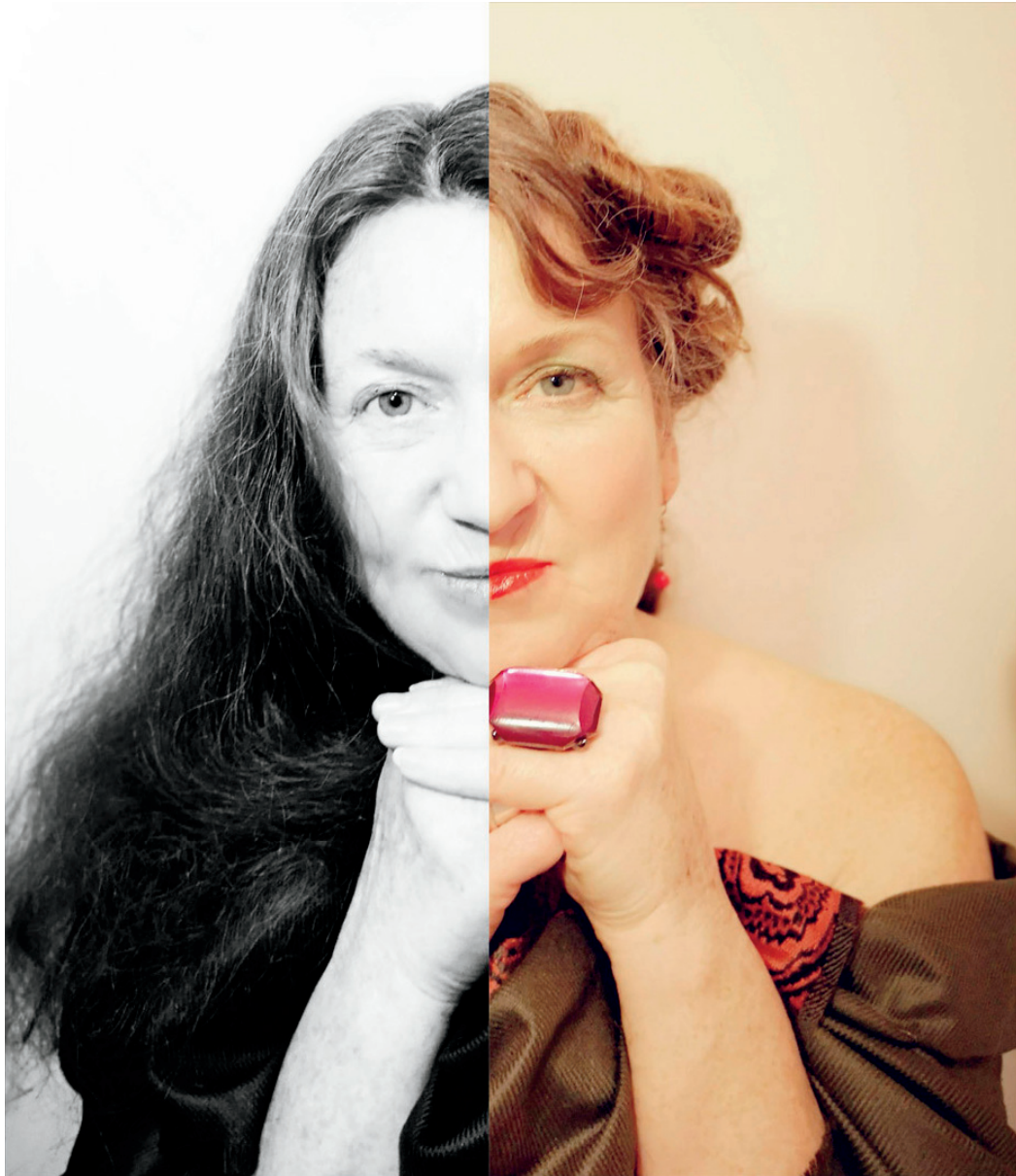
Or Williams

I am an artist and performer working predominantly with low key imagery using moving image, digital art and new media. My artistic expression centers on my body as an instrument through which I weave compelling stories that delve into themes of perfection, the impact of social media, and the nuanced experiences of disability. With a keen focus on exploring these concepts from the unique perspective of a middle-aged woman, my art endeavors to challenge perceptions and foster a deeper understanding of the human condition.

Through my art, I aspire to break societal norms and inspire a shift in perspectives, shedding light on issues that often remain unaddressed. Guided by a passion for storytelling and an unwavering commitment to authenticity, my performances transcend the conventional, offering a visceral experience that prompts introspection and empathy.
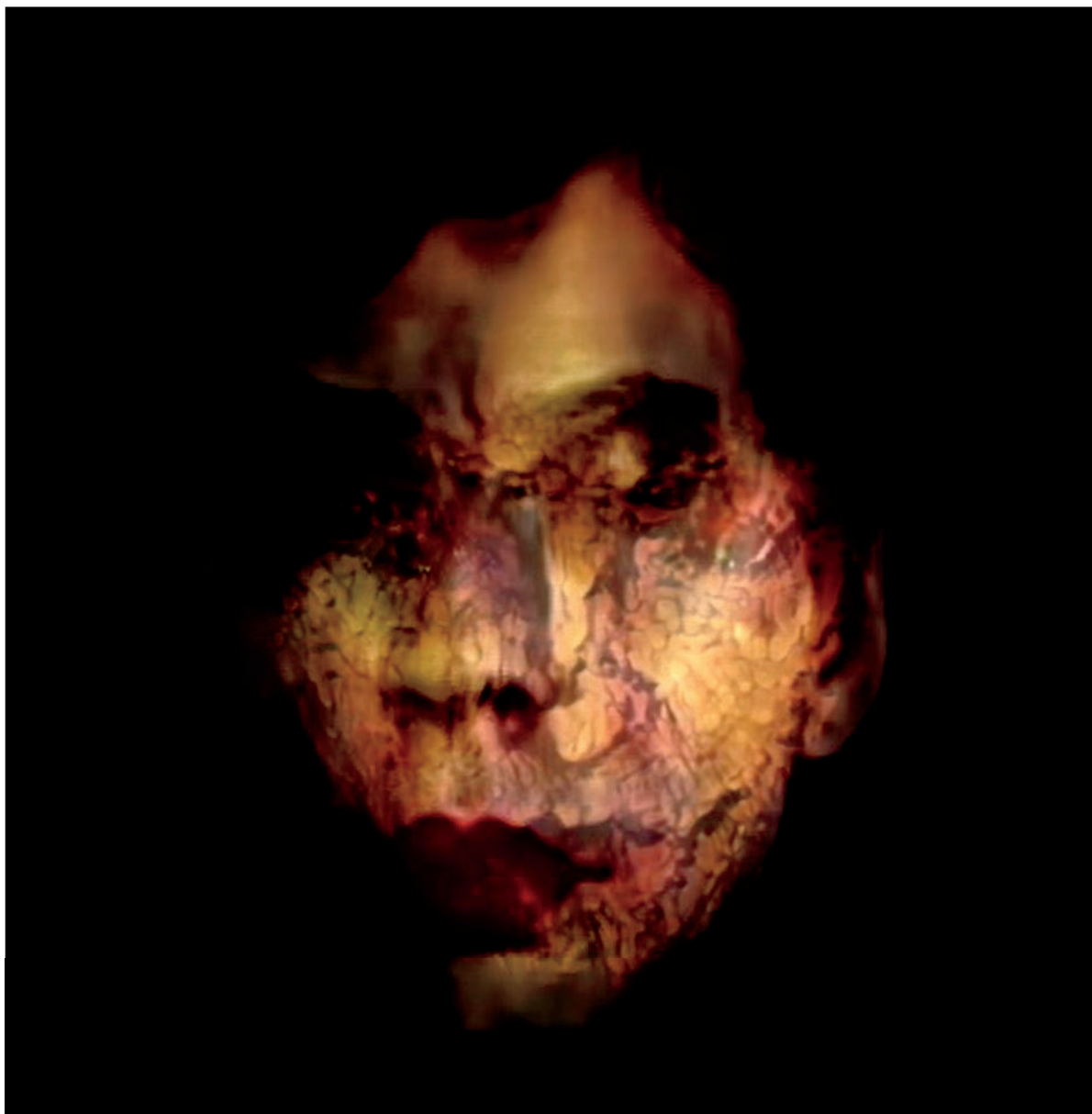
performance to camera

The first performer with a camera was the photographer who would hide beneath a black cloth to fuss over details of composition and focus; then to disappear into an alchemist's tent, emerging in due course with a miraculous relic of a past moment.

Little more than 400 years after van Eyck, Hippolyte Bayard's staged photograph "Self Portrait as a Drowned Man" (1840) is significant in the context of both performance art and self-portraiture. Bayard challenges realistic depiction, presenting his suicide as an act of protest, intentionally blurring the lines between reality and fiction. He portrays himself as the subject, exercises control over his image and how he is perceived. He disturbs his viewers with a piteous note on the reverse of his image "He has been at the morgue for several days, and no-one has recognized or claimed him. Ladies and gentlemen, you'd better pass along for fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay." Through this act of self-representation, Bayard asserts his artistic agency and challenges the conventional roles of photographer and subject.

His intentional, theatrical staging and self-representation create a presence that transcends the photographic medium. This highlights the performative aspect of the photograph, blurring the boundaries between performance art and self-portraiture. In so moving between performance and self-portraiture, he challenges notions of representation, provides a platform for self-presentation, and demonstrates the power of presence in our current discussion.

The performative gesture and timing

We must try to be as precise as we may in our use of the word *performative*, meaning something that is not just descriptive, but also has the power to bring about a new reality or change in the world. It is often used in the context of language, where certain utterances or statements have the ability to perform an action or create a new state of affairs, rather than simply describe an existing one. For example, when a jury declares the defendant "guilty" in a courtroom, the statement not only describes the defendant's legal status but also performs the action of convicting them.

Above we talked of Bayard blurring boundaries between performance art and self portraiture and in these terms we constructed a space of metaphor in which artists may practise their art which in their

own terms they classify as performance or portraiture. In the wider space however, any individual *viewer* of an image of that artist's work may perceive a dividing line where it appears that a performance artist in process has adopted some part of a self-portraitist's practice. In the moment that the performer imaged herself the performative impact of that image shapes the record of the performance; or an artist working in self-portrait mode has switched mode, or relaxed into a place where she apparently began to perform for the camera.

The Call for Artists[1, date:22Mar2023] spoke of approach, even crossing boundaries, intending that participants could expand their viewpoint beyond their individual work: to position themselves in relation to other artists within a shared space. The space is both a concrete, geographical location where we engage, coexist, breathe, and create, and a space imbued with metaphorical meaning. This metaphorical quality is akin to the symbolism inherent in a camera — from the Italian for "room." This camera space serves to capture events within itself. In this very moment, the metaphorical space is brought to life within the camera — a space that captures and embodies the essence of the scene. Moreover, this metaphor within the camera extends an invitation to viewers, encouraging them to delve beyond the literal depiction and to interpret and extract meaning. Time is suspended within this unique camera-space, preserving a record of the people and events from that moment.

For the performance artist, their usual working environment is of continuous time and an attempt — as in this project — to capture a still image is to do violence to their time base, whereas the [self] portraitist hopes to construct a whole flow of narrative from that one blink of the shutter. The problem here is to collapse the duration, the length of time of the performance into a single frame; to make the frame stand for the whole performance.

photography and [re]presentation

When applying a linguistic argument on presentation and representation to the realm of photographic images of the self, we encounter a fascinating interplay between the medium's claim to transparency and the inherent complexities of interpretation. Photography has often been regarded as an ideal of representation, a means to capture and reproduce a faithful depiction of reality. It is assumed that the photographic self-portrait functions as a direct and objective reflection of the subject, conveying a fixed and reliable identification of the person and objects revealed.

Ceci n'est pas un chapeau ... or is it?
performance to camera
2023

Demeter Dykes

As a mature woman my work is the result of frustrations in relation to others' expectations and misconceptions of me. Taking up space, unapologetically, has allowed a performative version of myself to emerge. I am interested in this commitment to performativity by mature women on social media sites.

My images are made quickly and with materials and props that are to hand. The resulting photographs include filters and digitally drawn elements that build a persona, and my working process can be seen as a playground for the exploration of potential irreverent storytelling, both real and imagined.

The swirling farrago of sensations that is menopause slaps you in the face, hard, and lets you know, unequivocally, that you are on a one-way street with no turning circle at the end of it.

So, having less life ahead of me than there is behind compels my heels to dig into the earth so that the dizzying swiftness with which I am travelling along this one-way street, towards the exit from which there is no return, is at least decelerated.

Living an exaggerated version of myself, within my art practice, makes the ride more thrilling. There is absolute joy in discovering this other person who lives inside of me. She is powerful and loud, and we will not go quietly.

Alexandra Holownia

During the pandemic, performing artists were confronted with streaming live performances via Zoom or posting a video of the performance. In this situation, both forms of participation had to be prepared with the help of a camera. A camera placed on a tripod documented and recorded our activities, but also passed them on. Thus, the differences between a self-portrait and a performance in front of the camera are very small. The differences between these two working methods are small but are very interesting for this project.When performing in front of the camera, I focus on myself as well as the course of action. I don't care about the clarity of my single shot, just the narrative of it and the overall action which are important to me. When taking a selfie, I'm only interested in one shot. A Selfie mobilizes to capture a clear, interesting moment. Therefore, it requires composition of the frame and posing.

Contrarily, through a deconstructive lens, we question this notion of the self-portrait as transparent representation. Instead, we can explore it as an act of presentation, a performative gesture that brings forth a particular version of reality, shaped by the choices and intentions of the photographer herself.

In this view, the photographic self-portrait resists a straightforward interpretation. Its meaning is not fixed or predetermined, but rather subject to a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations. Each viewer brings their own background, experiences, and biases to the act of engaging with the image, shaping the meaning they derive from it.

Moreover, the photographic image itself is not immune to the inherent playfulness and indeterminacy of language. It is a construction, an assemblage of visual elements, framing choices, and post-production techniques. The photographic self-portrait does not offer an unmediated view of reality but presents a version of reality shaped by the photographer's subjective decisions and the technological apparatus used.

Therefore, the photographic image can be seen as an invitation to interpretation, a space for the viewer to engage actively with the image, to question its claims to truth and objectivity. It highlights the productive potentiality of photography as a medium, where meaning is generated through the act of interpretation rather than passively received.

By embracing this understanding, we approach the photographic self-portrait with a sense of openness and curiosity. We recognize that the image is not a fixed representation of reality but rather a performative presentation, subject to a plurality of meanings and interpretations. We become aware of our own role as active participants in the process of meaning-making, engaging in a continual dialogue with the image and its manifold possibilities.

Adding these all up, to apply this argument on presentation and representation to the photographic self-portrait is to challenge the notion of photography as transparent representation. Instead, it invites us to view the image as an act of presentation, where meaning is not fixed but subject to interpretation and shaped by the photographer and the viewer. This perspective encourages an active engagement with the image, acknowledging the complexities and multiplicities inherent in its construction and reception.

...of being present

In the context of the foregoing argument on presentation and representation, the notion of presence and being present takes on a nuanced and complex dimension.

From its etymological roots, presence has been associated with a sense of immediacy and directness, implying a full and unmediated encounter with reality, and of being fully engaged and attentive in the present moment. However, the deconstructive approach challenges this notion of presence as a fixed and stable state.

The post-structuralist argues that presence is always elusive and deferred, as meaning is never fully present or transparent. Language, including the language of images, is inherently mediated and operates through a system of signifiers that are always in flux and open to interpretation. Therefore, any claim to pure presence or immediate access to reality is undermined.

From this perspective, being present is not a static state, but an ongoing process of interpretation and engagement with the world and its representations. It involves an active awareness of the complexities of language and the play of signification. Being present means recognizing that meaning is not simply given, but emerges through our ongoing interactions and negotiations with the world around us.

In the context of the photographic image, being present involves acknowledging the constructed nature of the image and the multiplicity of meanings it can evoke. It means approaching the image with an openness to its potential interpretations and being receptive to the ways in which it can provoke thought, emotion, and reflection.

At the same time, being present also acknowledges the importance of embodied engagement with the image. It recognizes the sensory and affective dimensions of the viewing experience, allowing ourselves to be fully immersed in the visual encounter. Being present in this sense entails an attunement to the aesthetic qualities, compositional elements, and emotional resonances of the image.

But, even in this embodied and immersive engagement, we must remain aware of the interpretive nature of our experience. Being present does not imply a passive acceptance of the image's apparent meanings, but rather an active and critical questioning of those meanings and the conditions under which they emerge.

And so we argue, being present takes on a dynamic and interpretive nature. It involves an ongoing process of engagement with the world and its representations, recognizing the mediated and contingent nature of meaning. Being present entails a receptive and critical attitude towards the complexities of language and a mindful immersion in the sensory and affective dimensions of the photographic image.

drowned or not

In terms of representation, Bayard's photograph challenges traditional notions of realistic depiction. The image depicts a staged scene where Bayard himself pretends to be a drowned man. By intentionally blurring the lines between reality and fiction, he questions the concept of objective representation and raises the idea that photographs can be manipulated and constructed. Regarding self-presentation, Bayard's photograph is self-portraiture. By portraying himself as the subject, he exercises control over his image and how he is perceived. Through this act of self-representation, Bayard demonstrates agency and enabled a future of a dialectical play of photographer and subject.

The concept of presence is also relevant to Bayard's work. Although absent physically, Bayard's presence is strongly felt through the performative nature of the image. His intentional staging and self-representation create a presence that transcends the photographic medium. This highlights the performative aspect of the photograph, blurring the boundaries between performance art and self-portraiture. Summing up, Bayard's "Portrait of a Drowned Man" exemplifies the intersections of performance art and self-portraiture. It challenges traditional notions of representation, provides a platform for self-presentation, and demonstrates the power of presence in the realm of photography. This work serves as a precursor to later explorations in performance art and self-representation, leaving a lasting impact on the artistic practices that followed.

the questions

In any scene that is photographed the questions 'who is present', 'why are they present' , and 'who is observing' remain unresolved. For the self-portraitist there is an ambition to delay the arrival of an audience until the image is deemed fit for public viewing:

> *The conflict between having control over your final artwork and giving yourself the freedom to explore limitations is an age-old discussion, but I find that photographic self-portraiture allows myself as a photographer to find a compromise between the two.*

And with this ambition comes a desire to exclude all but the self-portraitist and their reflection from the studio during the image-making process.

The performance artist looking for an exemplary [still] image faces different but comparable problems

> *Chance can play a significant role. In my own practice there are many takes from which I need to select and edit. How much of my practice is me, or a version of me or a fabrication?*

but significantly the performance artist is closing one door to the situation and opening a door to admit a different persona

> *As soon as I set the self-timer and stepped in front of the lens, I created a new identity. Like an actress, I automatically put myself in the shoes of a character and gradually moved away from the faithful representation of reality.*

What is left unresolved is some question of authenticity: this conveniently means different but equally valid things to either practitioner. The portraitist hopes to communicate a sincere and unfiltered portrayal of themselves, whether it be through a realistic depiction or an abstract interpretation. It involves introspection, self-reflection, and a desire to reveal aspects of their being to the viewer.

Gen Doy

Here is a link to a video piece performed to the camera, which is the audience. https://vimeo.com/585910420

It's called A Conversation about Art, where I have a conversation with myself about "why make art in a world full of awful events and problems?". It also makes reference to the idea of "two brains", one in the skull and one in the gut. Having a "gut feeling" about something is something quite visceral and I wondered if after that feeling the brain then tries to decipher and understand what the "gut feeling" means. Is art more about "gut feelings" than brain feelings? Or is it a dialogue between both?

the voices from call centres, the incessar
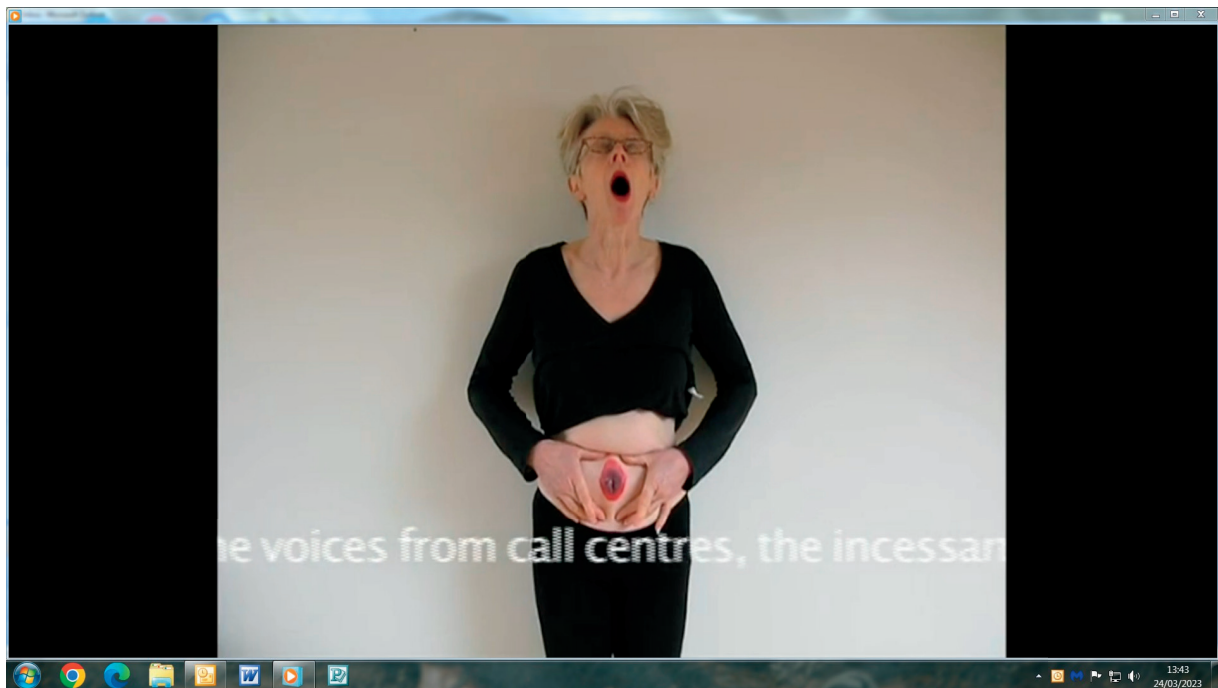
Aldobranti

I have always been aware of my exteriority, my Otherness -- just not being part of it. Roger Water's lyrics spoke to me

> *Heaven sent, the promised land*
> *Looks alright from where I stand*
> *'Cause I'm the man on the outside looking in*

I made this image #1503 as a contradiction to my sense of being an impostor as an artist which for years was rooted in not being a proper artist for not painting or drawing. I stand against the wall in a blacked-out room and open the shutter on the camera, I then trace my outline, holding a laser pointer to my body so the spot is [generally] visible to the camera.

This sense of an impostor status is perhaps a driver for this whole project: to find out how other artists "do it". I hope that all applicants can share in these discoveries...

There may be something in the presence of others that generates an expectation on the performance artist to embody and convey a truthful experience or concept through their actions and presence. Their authenticity lies in their ability to genuinely engage with the performance, tapping into their emotions, thoughts, and physicality to create a meaningful and impactful experience for both themselves and the audience. It often involves a sense of vulnerability, risk-taking, and the breaking down of barriers between performer and spectator. A minor point for the performer to camera may be the level of agency in the making of the shot and the record of their ownership of the photograph vis à vis a spectator. An early self-portrait of Woodman's[15, p.75] records the shutter release cable firmly in her hands.

Both self-portraiture and performance art can challenge the notion of authenticity as an inherent quality. This returns us to the 'why' question above pointing to the nature of the [eventual] audience of the work; rewriting the question as 'how is the work going to be made public, and if not now, then when?' As indicated above both the self-portraitist and the performer to camera have hoped to postpone this. Although we know that the rights of the author all but disappear at publication, for many in this survey there is distrust of wider access to images of their work

> *Growing up in an age where women feared (still fear) the potential release of non-consensual images, I was told to never allow my body to be showcased on film or photograph.*

And this distrust, fear is rooted in the gendered violence in social media responses to women's nakedness, the trolling of Halle Berry on Twitter to cite just one example. Choosing to make naked work, to reveal one's own body can be a career and, or personal choice

> *I was hesitant at using my own body because of the gaze I was going to be subjecting it to ... my own was the only option I had. ... I would [not] put another woman through the experience...*

or

> *... gaps in the authenticity of my approach ... only be resolved by the loss of clothing as armour, and the acceptance of vulnerability through nakedness*

The older woman finds some relief from social expectations of youth, even entertainment in puncturing expectations of the feminine body

My photo, on the other hand, ridicules the canon of generally accepted female attractiveness

Added to the anti-social nature of social media noted above, the employment of these channels create demands on time and effort, distraction to curate and share content, and possibly a misplaced focus on popularity rather than artistic activity and progression. That said, a presence on social media can be a more realistic path to an economically viable practice compared with the traditional routes through gallery representation etc particularly in fields such as performance art.

route plan

In selecting the following images we tracked a theme for the text spanning from representation through presentation and ultimately in the senses and the experience of being alive. What follows here is not so much a route plan in some attempt to order these artists, rather to collect them in common themes and to offer a connectivity between these clusters. Of course, many of these artists found common ground with other groupings, but ultimately a continuing visual narrative was found useful.

In identifying a contribution within a first section under a heading of representation we were mainly guided by the artists themselves though mindful of our own argument concerning the tenuous boundaries between self-portraiture and performance.

We had asked those artists who thought of their work as being performance to try to identify the one image that best summed up the durational aspect of a performance – the performative shot – and so allowed us to print a single image as a synopsis of their presentation. Another approach can be to use a long exposure and record an aggregate scene *[pp.23,45]* .

Adele Giles

The Aurora Hale Project comprised a collection of carefully orchestrated self-portraits exploring what it means to be seen as a woman in society and visual culture. The project was curated for digital presentation and delved into the performances of cultivating an online identity.

Through the art of transformation—using make-up, wigs, heavy photo manipulation, and adopting a new identity as Aurora Hale—I immerse myself within the captivating realm of a social-media-obsessed culture. Empowered by the vast reach of social media, I wield control over my online persona, artfully shaping and sometimes even manipulating how I am perceived.

After creating the images, I furthered the project by printing and exhibiting them in my local town, effectively bringing the private into the public domain—a concept prevalent in digital spaces. The selected image titled 'Venus of Merthyr' gained new significance when placed against found graffiti, an art form often created 'without permission' in public spaces. This choice prompted me to question consent and censorship within the vast landscape of the internet.

Starting this project, I saw myself as neither a photographer nor a performer. I was an artist looking for a means of self-expression and found myself straddling the two disciplines. Throughout, I developed a strong interest in the use of the body, self-representation, relationship to the camera, and the performative aspect of photography, all of which are areas of focus of the survey publication.

Kristen Elizabeth Donoghue-Stanford

In art history, I learned the distinction between being nude and being naked. Nudity was associated with goddesses and historical figures, while nakedness was deemed scandalous for contemporary women. Growing up, I was cautioned against showcasing my body due to the fear of non-consensual image release, which could harm my future career, relationships, and social standing. However, I observed conflicting portrayals of women in media and art galleries, leading me to question the correct form of nakedness.

When I started exploring Performance of Camera, I hesitated to use my own body due to the objectifying gaze it would be subjected to. Paradoxically, I realized that using my own body was the only way to prevent other women from experiencing the same objectification. My performance to camera serves as a reminder of the act of watching, particularly within the context of femininity's Gothic existence under patriarchal trauma, exemplified in horror films.

Watching horror or any film as a woman often involves viewing oneself through the lens of the male gaze. This myopic perspective can inflict discomfort and shape one's perception of being seen naked. In my performances, I focus on the idea of being watched while refusing to take responsibility for the act of looking. I challenge the notion of blame associated with being watched, emphasizing the voyeuristic dynamic.

The ultimate question underlying my performances is, "Why are you looking?" This inquiry applies not only to the viewer but also to ourselves when encountering nudity in art. I invite introspection on the motivations behind watching, othering, and being a voyeur. My performances remind me of my own existence and presence, emphasizing that I am a contemporary woman, whether clothed or not. I never invited others to look.

Lastly, I want to emphasize a crucial takeaway: there is a distinction between sending a nude and being naked. The act of sending a nude implies vulnerability and potential exploitation, while being naked is about embracing one's authentic self. By recognizing this distinction, we can navigate the complexities of self-expression and the impact of our gaze on others.

Pauline Le Pichon

When I started taking photos in the late 2000s, I quickly began to take a lot of self-portraits. At that time, I didn't dare to take pictures of people, so it was easier for me to take self-portraits.

By exploring the question of appearances year after year, I created several series of self-portraits. And as with the selfies, I realized over time that the camera pointed at me had the power to transform me.

As soon as I activated the self-timer and stepped in front of the lens, I created a new identity. Like an actress, I automatically put myself in the shoes of a character and gradually moved away from the faithful representation of reality.

Strangely, I rarely took my self-portraits in the presence of others, as if this change was too intimate, too personal.

With few ingredients, «Asymétrie» shows me as a photographer and as a model, talking about the moment when I leave reality to reach something more fake.

With this work, I show how I was deceived by the photographic medium, and how I can deceive the viewers. If you look at my images without reading my artist statement, you may think that these images are backstages of photoshoots with my twin sister. But this isn't real. These photographs are staged and manipulated. I don't have a twin sister. So, in a society overrun with images and fake news, I encourage the viewer to step back and check the information given before believing it.

Our starting point will be those artists whose work we most closely identified with as self-portraiture *[pp.5,7,9]* — our criterion being the sense of representation in the work and our perception of the artist's desire to manage appearances within a recognisable version of their own self. This must reflect a desire for the artist to claim their personal presence in the image. Even within this selection we note employment of 'post-production' techniques: the use of filters and electronic manipulation to the same end.

In a second grouping *[pp.13,15]* we identify the assertion of the existence of more varied personalities within the image; to live out a dramatic presence, and, or toward some polemical endpoint. In this company, we note attempts to challenge the viewer's understanding of presence with the introduction of some other personality in the image, or a questioning of presence altogether *[pp.21,23]* .

For many performance artists, the forced closing of venues during the SARS-COV2 pandemic mandated a change in working patterns. The absence of a live audience meant different things among the artists gathered in this survey and is very much a personal choice. The self-portrait is, *par exemple*, that presentation that is delayed until the artist is ready for its release; other artists here surely thrive on the adrenaline rush of a live performance. Within this survey it is clear that performance to both still and moving picture record have grown in importance as working methods, with these artists*[pp.27,29,31]* we report on their staging and audience engagement.

As a penultimate grouping, *[pp.35,37,39,43]* we offer a transition from the staged view of performance and the performance artist's response to the audience toward some engagement with the senses — how it feels — to contrast with a transition from places of personal freedom into more constrained circumstances.

In rounding off, there is little pretence left; the layers of presentation are gone and these artists are facing the reality of their senses: sight, the cold and wet, the smell of grass, tiredness and exhaustion. These down to earth works *[pp.45,47,51,53]* in a real sense bring the exploration back full-circle to the unedited, unimproved self-portrait.

the artists

self-portrayed

Some of the artists surveyed here began with self-portrait from a perspective of a believed inexperience and the necessity to find a model in themself. Others came to self-portrait for its technical challenges, others were denied live audiences during the pandemic and reached out for the lens. If we separate these next four for self-portraiture it is to explore their contribution to the necessary representation of the self and in no sense is to exclude their own identification with performance..

Holly Burton *[p.5]* directs herself for this self-portrait in pursuit of a specific lighting set-up and colour scheme. While an idea is in development and parameters are subject to change, a private opportunity to explore the technical space is valuable.

A good number of the surveyed artists report using a self-timer on the camera and then moving to the required pose. Naturally there are upsets: an editing step is required, a lightbox perhaps until an image is selected that meets a first level of satisfaction. Of course the viewer rarely sees what does not make the cut.

We picked out these following images for their use of some post-processing. First **Rosalind J Turner** *[p.7]* has suppressed colour scales on one half of the image to raise a number of critical points. For one, the black&white photograph still carries an aura of 'proper' art, for another she writes and challenges herself

> *i think that's not me! my hair colour is gone, i look ancient, it doesn't really bear much relationship to how i feel*

Before Photoshop there was a time of hand colouring, of multiple exposures, and layers of process film. The opportunities for manipulation of a digital image expanded as movie makers sought audiences with special effects and the fashion industry drove a trend for less realistic models. **Or Williams** *[p.9]* has excerpted a frame from a video work which uncannily results in an image full of motion: *"new ways of defining the self, as well as what 'moves' the surface"*

Explorist

My work is predominantly performative and this is documented by self-portraiture, so the topic of this blog and project feels extremely relevant. My work explores ideas of the body in space, and the human body in the natural environment (either as an organism amongst others, or a biological thing amongst human and unnatural elements). Although my work is all technically self-portraiture, I use masks to play with ideas of characters, roles and myth, often referencing folklore, or playing with ideas of classical statues. This anonymity allows the pieces to be judged (I hope) on their own value, not because of the specific individual in the image. In many cases this is a play on the heroic nature of these historic precedents, question what masculinity is, and represent a vulnerable naked 'everyman' or human figure.

Many of my pieces use my own body to enact roles, or convey ideas (and I would see these less as self portraiture than using myself as material or medium). In other situations I am exploring and sensing my immediate environment with my body and documenting this through photography, especially in reaction to the outdoors, or reacting to the texture, weight, constraints of objects I work with. Playful exploration is an important part of my practice.

In my life modeling practice I am also interested in the performative dynamic between 'artist' and 'model' and the empathetic relationship between those responding/drawing and the model. I am interested in working with others (where they are drawing or photographing me, or we collaboratively explore ideas). There is a greater vulnerability in this scenario, but also a more human, and less abstract, connection.

Rachael Rutherford

The interests within my practice at large lie with portrayals of the body and how we heal through and with them. This has often been framed within the female body and it's mis/treatment within healthcare settings.Using textiles and sculptural techniques, the nature of performance and self-portrayal comes through in the form of costume creation. The costume allows for sculptural elements to overtake the human form and in the context of my own practice, takes the internal and visualises it on the external.

Thinking through the work as a visual form and way of healing, textile coverings allow the self-portrayal to embody something beyond the human form, a monstrous re-imagining of the self. For me, the performative aspect comes through within the use of video as documentation of the wearing of the costume.

The creatures created exist within these videos as a way to create a barrier between the self and the audience, while creating an intimacy between the costume and its wearer that generally wouldn't be able to exist with an audience present. It creates an opportunity for self-reflection and authenticity while still maintaining a measurable distance, and opportunity to push narrative through post-production editing.
This way of working gives a stronghold of control over the perception of the self's image. To use the body first and foremost as a way to connect with the inner self, and then with the audience through the screen and narrated image of the familiar figure distorted.
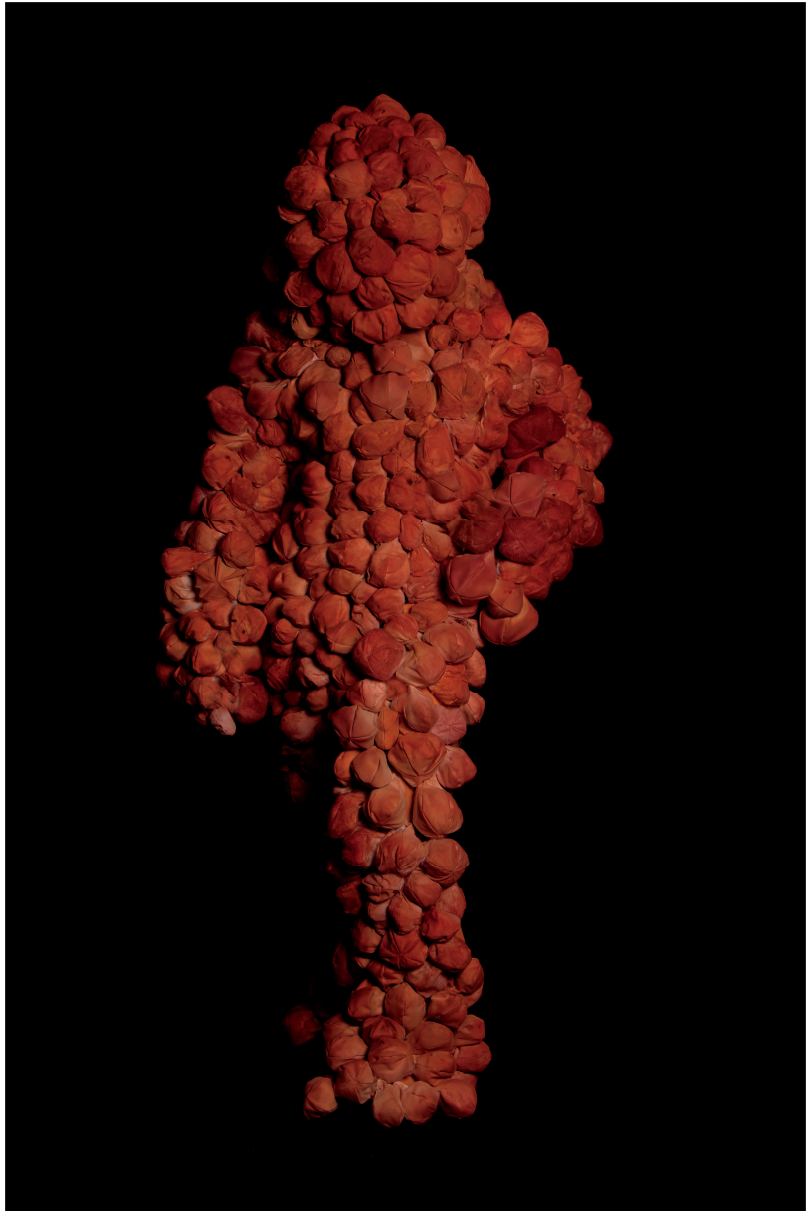
Frances Willoughby

I am a multidisciplinary artist specialising in sculpture and installation. Exploring the metamorphosis of the human form, my practice merges autobiography with invented narratives to confront personal trauma, family history, fear, and desire.

I completed a project last year exploring the use of photography within my practice. I created a series of photographic self-portraits bound by anxiety and discomfort, exploring home as a place of both security and uncertainty. Obscure bodies and objects situated in unexpected domestic scenarios were brought to life through these photographic works.

Previously, I created sculptures and installations of figurative textile bodies (based on myself). It has been interesting to explore using my real body through a performative lens, rather than a textiles copy.

their other selves

It is expected of a self-portrait that it should say something of the subject, and in searching for this intangible the self-portraitist must look beyond the reflection. If no more than to coax a reaction from the reflection the artist must scowl or smile and in every sense will begin to perform for the camera. Other parts of her personality reflecting joy or grief, aspiration or loss cannot be far behind.

The comedic value of these next three pieces set a knowingly unknown course for the remainder of this survey, — *"valuable things to say ... singing from the rooftops"*. For each artist surveyed here, who approaches their process as performance, beyond portraitist and portrayed, is the quest for the new self: the setting, the costume, the make-up, all is considered. The aim is for this other self to find more expression in the day-to-day.

The claim to power in this image—**Demeter Dykes** *[p.13]*—begins with the red Phrygian cap of Liberty and the muscular stance. The sunglasses and face paint echo Carnival and masked balls, for *"absurdity is something that resonates - it is necessary in order to navigate our world. I was brought up on nonsense poetry and find it an effective way to elevate oneself from the parts of life that can bring one down."*

In a glorious flight of fancy **Alexandra Holownia** *[p.15]* presents the ultra-processed woman. A grotesque of collagen implant treatment gone rogue: to parody *"the desire to be a desirable, attractive woman dreaming of pouty botox lips"*

Gen Doy *[p.21]* makes a radical subversion of the performance space in introducing a painted, talking navel. As with a ventriloquist's dummy it steals the audience's attention, becoming credible as the source of the words spoken. To exploit this export of the sound of the voice, Doy characterises it:

> *I am your voice from within, the voice from the umbilical zone—the wound that never truly heals after the child has been cut from you[4]*

In tracing his outline and removing any sense of his presence, any trace of his body it is questionable if **Aldobranti** *[p.23]* has offered a portrait, and of whom? With an eye to Rimbaud's *'Je est un autre'*[i] he excuses himself: *"In making the image, I am trying to define a place, a landing zone in the image for another, perhaps removing myself from the scene"*. Helpfully Demeter Dykes writes of *"negating the distraction of my actual self ... another version of myself gives voice to my actual self"*.

who is out there?

The practising artist in the 21^C cannot often avoid a question about the market for their work. To have an audience or not — presentation or no — is the image intended for viewing? Who will see it? What might they think? For many contributors in this discussion the burden of the male gaze could not be dismissed.

With a multi-layered installation **Adele Giles** *[p.27]* constructs a comprehensive critique of a woman's place in contemporary visual culture. The hair, the make-up combine with art-historical references in an enlarged photograph that is then placed in a contrast to graffiti and hoardings.

> *The images were originally taken for social media. Then I printed and mounted them to photograph outside ... in the bin or on park benches.*

illustrating occasions when discarded top-shelf magazines, images of women become part of the wind blown detritus in streets and public places.

Two artists here employ a mirror to break the fourth wall in performance, blurring the boundaries between the viewer and the scene. **Kristen Elizabeth Donoghue–Stanford** *[p.29]* sets out to challenge the viewer to reflect upon their own role as an observer and question their own perceptions and interpretations of the image.

> *Why are you looking?*
> *It is the ultimate question and one I believe we need to ask, even when looking in an art gallery at nude.*

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[i]Through this non-grammatical usage Rimbaud claims that his creative process involves tapping into a deeper, more primal aspect of the self that goes beyond the individual's conscious identity.

Kate Langrish-Smith

This image was developed as a way of contextualising the scale of a form I had made. It references a photograph taken in 1931 by Man Ray titled 'Woman holding the disagreeable objet' - the 'disagreeable object' was made by Alberto Giacometti. My large hollow spiked ceramic club is part of a series of forms and ongoing research, in making, sculpting, using and documenting objects associated with physical culture. The original solid wooden lathed fitness pins or 'Indian Swinging Clubs' that influenced my ceramic form and that I have been re-making in clay, became fashionable in 19th century Britain, and were used to develop both military and civilian fitness. By subverting the practical intention and materiality of the original object (in this case the fitness pins/clubs) as well as their movement capabilities, I am seeking to discuss the nature and physicality of sculpting bodies of 'matter'. I am questioning the space our bodies occupy and how we play and work at both the sculpting and crafting of them, exploring the boundaries and intimate relationships we share with materials and the objects that they then take the form of; and how, in turn, they can form and sculpt us. These posed and captured gestures and forms, and the provocative, performative, experiential and somewhat temporal moments that happen through the photographing, deconstructing, re-making, subversion and composition of material and bodily tensions continue to form the basis of my practice.

Fiona Harvey

This image is from a series entitled SPACE MAPS in which I explored the idea of mapping the space we occupy and what happens when we change that by moving.

It was taken while holding the camera and making a movement, in this case a sidestep. It was made in a room with mirrored walls, so shows the self, reflected whilst moving, together with the surroundings visible to the camera.

The series explores our relationship to the world around us, and how that changes each time we make even a simple movement. We take a step forward or turn around and our connection to the space we occupy alters drastically. These long exposures record what happens around us during those basic movements, and show the surroundings from a multiplicity of angles, the resulting sensory overload producing abstract images..

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Grass
drone camera shot
image courtesy of Paul Corey

Rachel Macmanus

I used crawling as a methodology so as to slow the movement down and to experience being close to the ground. The action becomes about the mark making effect, as one's ability to see is blinkered by the close to the ground positioning and by the tall grass surrounding. During my crawl I saw spiders, bugs, flies, different grass and flowers. I felt every lump, bump and uneven area under me and my arms and legs became soaked from the damp ground.

Crawling is a democratic movement pattern on the body, extending (if performed carefully) equal gravitational weight bearing pressure throughout the hands and knees and feet. It also requires the right and left side of the brain to work together to coordinate the movement.

An act of attendance.

An act of exploration.

An act of mark making.

An act of endurance.

An act of observation.
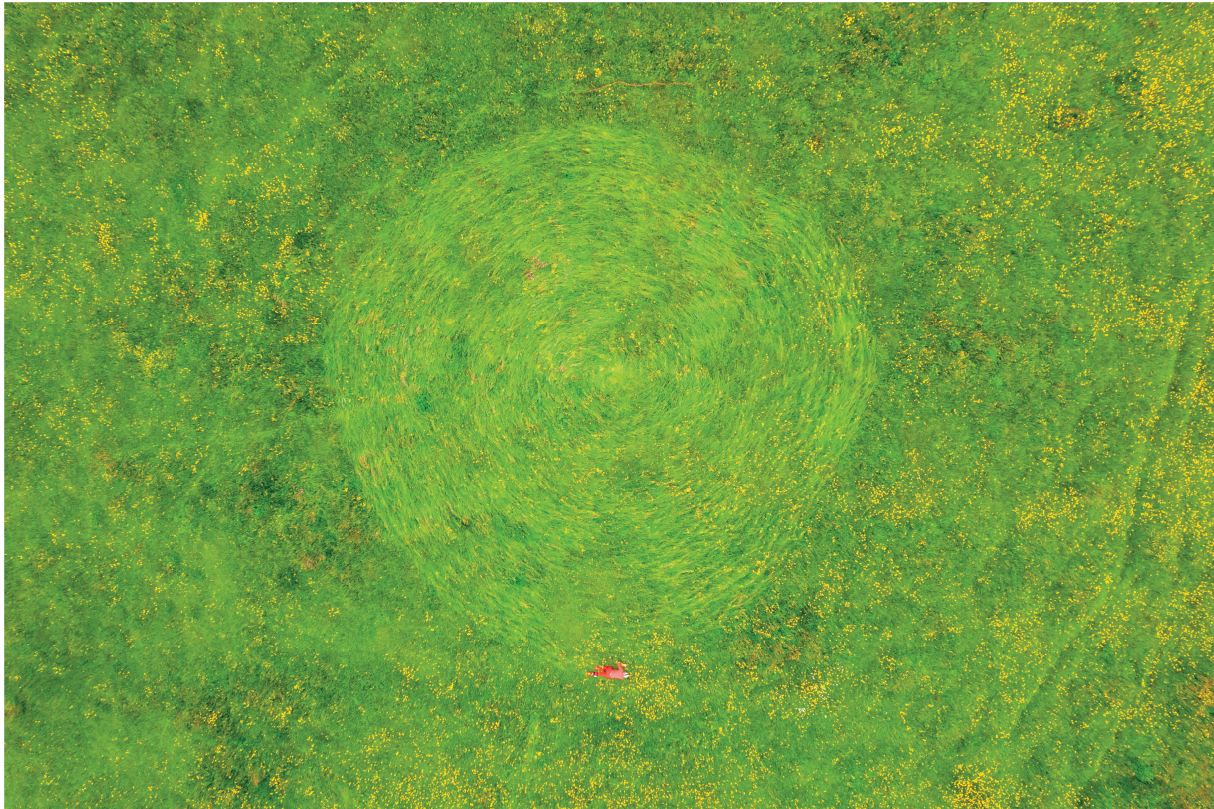
Pauline LePichon *[p.31]* also uses a mirror with good effect here to redirect the camera's gaze back to the operator. In a play with identity a second, or perhaps a third person is brought into scene to enable the artist to question her own presence-as-subject in the scene while requiring space to reveal the photographer as observer. The visual trickery of this shot thus becomes an unsettling counter to the viewing gaze:

> *Why I wonder, is it so different when deception is used in place of a lie, within art?*

This may be an opportunity to think about the visual disconnect when the mirroring function of the self-facing camera of a cell phone is disabled. The painted self-portrait will record the artist's own view of themselves as seen in a mirror, the default setting on the phone is to simulate this which makes the framing of the selfie more intuitive. When disabled the image is reversed from the operator's usual self-perception and any asymmetry of the appearance is felt by the subject. As viewers we are unable to say directly if the artist has employed this device, but it may offer yet further means for the artist to disengage from the recorded scene, choosing to point at the racemic twin left behind.

a job to do

As a further example of the performance artist's experience of a staged work with an audience we should consider the life drawing model. In this scenario an audience of drawing artists will portray the model as he must adopt and hold a more or less demanding stance for them. The professional anonymity of the model does not usually require the concealment of the face, but here **Explorist** *[p.35]* widens the field of expression for the life model by turning the craft into a vehicle for experimentation and reenactment of stories from myth to question their legacy. The more normal path of a life drawing as a representation of the naked body freezes the art-object – the drawing on paper – into a "nude study" for a gallery wall. Here the mass of balloons anchors the image in the performance space preserving its playful, living nature.

Frances Willoughby *[p.39]* demonstrates an interesting path to performance when she resites sculptural works in her own body. Previously, her large sewn constructions have carried the piece but installing herself in their place she takes charge and ultimately makes the stronger political point against the patriarchal view of a woman's place.

Conversely **Rachel Rutherford** *[p.37]* uses a whole-body construction as a concealment to facilitate an externalisation, a dramatisation, a reification of symptoms of poor health while finding within the mask interior space to be [temporarily] relieved of the symptoms. It is an interesting self-therapeutic process which seems dependent on an expression through private performance to camera

> *to create a barrier between the self and the audience, while creating an intimacy between the costume and its wearer that generally wouldn't be able to exist with an audience present.*

With a sculptor's eye for form **Kate Langrish-Smith** *[p.43]* has the stated aim to use the body as a plinth for the sculptural object — here a massive ceramic work — but neatly disturbs the performance space introducing another, albeit inanimate presence into the performance setting and so challenging her own presence c.f. Gen Doy's *[p.21]* additional player. Yet the rough texture of the fired, unglazed ceramic and the undoubted weight of the club connects with us for the very real range of sensations it brings.

the senses

With some amount of etymological licence, we move from a condition of *presence* to the experience of the *senses*. Performance art brings liberation from the stage or daïs to offer fresh directions for the personal development of the artist, new formats for the record of performance, focusing attention on other topics: ultimately to feel different..

Fiona Harvey *[p.45]* from a background in psychology explores an issue in perception and vision to draw attention to the way in which our visual cortex, as we move through the world, seamlessly stitches together a model of the physical world. The camera has recorded the accumulation of scene as the photographer moves, blurring the fixed world to draw attention to the time dimension through the visual artefact where the strip lights in the room conjure up a *commedia dell'arte* masked presence.

A live audience, too, must exchange the comfort of the indoors for the realities of the weather and share some of the sensations of the artist in performance. Film maker **Jessica Warren** *[p.51]* takes her audience into an unsafe [for women], rural space

Jessica Warren

Within my artistic practice, I find that using my body as a medium of exploration and experimentation is vital in embracing the idea that art, lived experience, and the world around me are all deeply interconnected. Through this approach, I am able to incorporate the effects of these elements on the way my body and mind react to primitive contact with the spaces I inhabit. In my art practice, I often use improvisation as a tactic, claiming the unplanned as moments of chaos and occasional beauty, which are typically captured through digital formats.The nude form allows my body to be connected without restriction to the environment through bodily senses. When I am undressed, I no longer feel like myself, but rather experience a sense of overwhelming power and a disconnect from societal structures of human behaviour. When I take away aesthetic things, like clothes or makeup, I feel united with womanhood and a connection to all women. Through my art, I am able to express and explore the complex relationships between my body, gender, and the environment.

kerry rawlinson

Circumstances find me pared down, reaching for performative art as an outward confirmation of the business of surviving, of being alive. I'm processing how that looks: not inserting my presence into the space, which performs continuously with or without me? Or manipulating the space with my presence? Or manipulating my presence into a manifestation of space? I photographed the lowliest of bodyparts: the feet. These images I manipulated into imaginary desert landscapes--hence my body has become the terrain. It's sterile and lifeless--yet a mysterious energy suggest we explore further, and walk in...
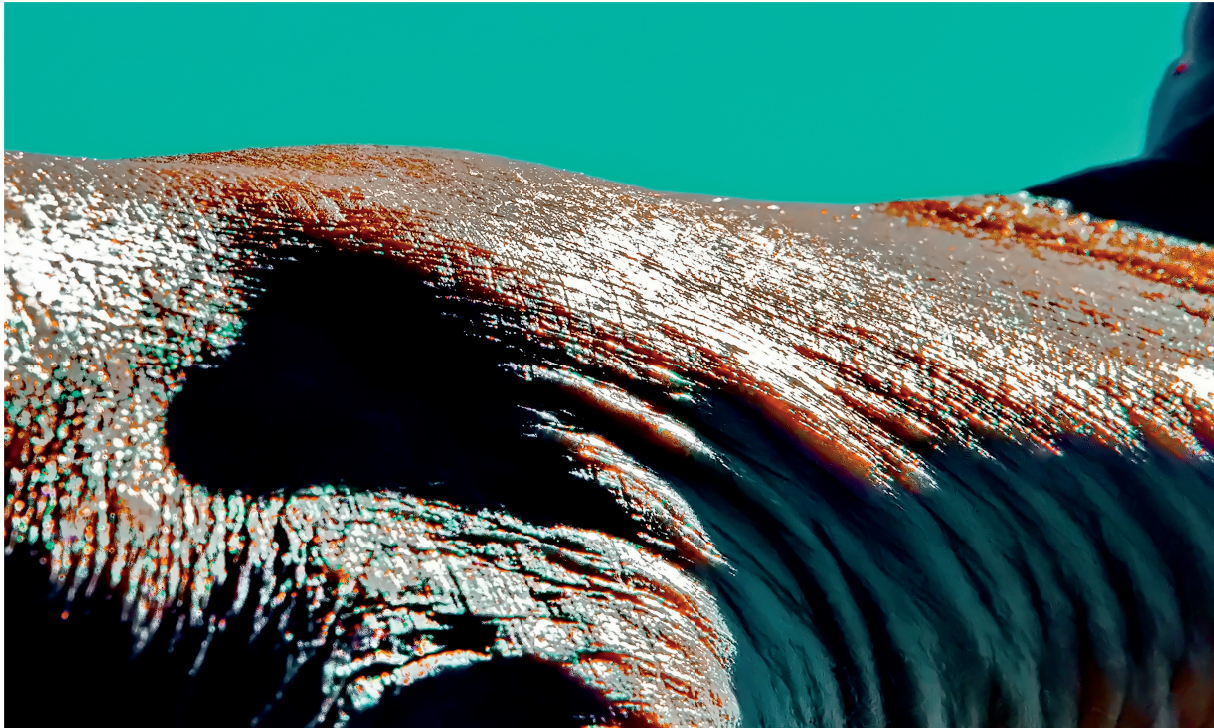
... to explore new and often ambiguous narratives. My nude body becomes a tool of attraction for the audience and a tool of embeddedness for me, allowing myself and the audience to be hyper-aware of the space and context in which I am engaging. This leaves space for them to question what is going on and why.

Simultaneously Warren uses the *"smell of the dirt ... the sound of the wind against the leaves"* to reconnect and rebuild personal history.

In this selected image from **Rachel Macmanus** *[p.47]* the aerial drone shot of the artist reduces her to a small speck of colour but has to be the only point of contact and record as she crawls through tall grass, out of sight of any spectator at ground level. For Macmanus the felt physical exertion of her task heightens an extended awareness of her environment to see

spiders, bugs, flies, different grass and flowers
I smelt the grass, and the peaty earth. I felt my dew saturated knees and feet, and the grass kept tickling my face and making me sneeze. The unevenness of the ground beneath me and the knee high grass around me obscuring my view meant that I was constantly disorientated

A sense of displacement, or disorientation causes **Kerry Rawlinson** *[p.53]* to direct her practice as a photographer towards the hardest working and lowliest body part — her feet which must carry the body weight but enable her agency of movement. These arid, desiccated wastelands shout of the loneliness of the carer, but equally affirm the presence of the person. Just as Coplan's[3] images of hands evoke the whole person as self-portrait we too can find our way back in this survey to our start point of the self-portrait.

In overview it is necessary to call-out the bias in the selection of the works presented here. A linguistic approach focused on the balance of presentation, representation, and presence. This focus drew attention to works that seemed best to answer the questions posed above (p.19) and of these the identity of the photographic subject seemed key. The identity might be disguised, masked, or removed. It might be subject to distraction ploys or used to throw the questions back at the viewer. Yet again the image may be gate-crashed by an accident in the making of the shot.

All these different attempts on the answers to questions of presence and identity serve to emphasise the non-decidable nature of the questions. The artist has made the image in their personal capacity, in the intentionality of that moment; for them it was a performative statement — 'a line in the sand'. Our engagement with these images is not so fixed in time: we must revisit each page in a fresh enquiry to investigate our own presence as a viewer. In fact it is important to note that the questions themselves are not absolute, that is they need not be answered with identical answers by all. In particular the artist and a member of the general public will vary in the answers they find and for different motivations. In the modern art world, public discourse about art has been dominated by the art market and thus the tendency of questions about an artwork is towards establishing economic value. It is sufficient that the artist can answer her own question about identity with a persona of their own choosing but the question of the eventual viewer and their purpose is not so readily dismissed. A good deal of the discussion in the project space centred on the 'male gaze' and it was very useful to find this riposte

> *My relationship to the camera here is refusing to take responsibility for your looking, and*
> *even my own. Voyeur becomes voyeured becomes voyeur.*
> *Why are you looking?[1, date:23Mar2023]*

As artists we may yet find our way back in solidarity with performance artists of the 1960's and 1970's hoping to detach art and the questions that arise beyond the reach of the capital-intensive art market.

In review, the above sequence has been only one of many possible visual tours through the works submitted for selection in this final form. Given another approach a wholly different set of images might have surfaced, or works that have been commented on here as self-portrait could have figured as performance record and vice versa. So many striking images, such strong verbal statements; so little space to give them all credit.

Fosco
Hampshire, 2023

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Front cover photography by Aldobranti.
Back cover photography by Lar MacGregor. "I am tree"(2022)

Aldobrandi

More than 70 artists from around the world have come together to investigate the creative processes unleashed when the act of making a photograph of the self is approached as performance. Responses to a Call for Artists identified practitioners of the self-portrait, researchers of identity, durational performance artists, and many more who resisted any such tight categorisation. All valid responses were enrolled in a months' long on-line discussion site — this small book is a fractional record of their many valuable interchanges.