

## **Beyond myself. The self-portrait in the age of social media**

The infinite desire to be seen, heard, thus being »connected« and, last but not least – to have as large an audience as possible, has in our age manifested itself as one of the prevailing cultural phenomena, where we as individuals cannot imagine our lives without a phone with an integrated camera and internet connection. With the emergence of social media our modern culture has become obsessed with self-image and self-presentation, as we are consciously changing our lives into some kind of parallel world, shaped to our ideas and desires. Our society, with consumerism as its main driver, reproduces narcissistic, self-absorbed personality population structures, with their main imperative being “me”.<sup>1</sup> Social communications are becoming part of the entertainment industry virtual worlds while in creating omnipresence in the world of social networks it is the photographic self-image in the so called “selfies” way that plays a significant role.

Self-representation was sometimes the domain of arts but lately we have been witnessing an exceptional expansion of the self-portrait from the world of arts into the broader culture. Due to this fact it seems all the more important to once again re-examine the meaning of a genre that has always been important. Throughout history self-portraits have proven to be a privileged way in which the artist represents himself and in doing so builds his identity – mainly by presenting his own face, i.e. by depicting his own “real self”. The history of arts has in this sense also been the history of more or less expressive artists’ self-images.<sup>2</sup> In that regard some point to the elusiveness of psychological interpretations of personality character in particular, as they rather only see the external image in the self-portrait, which they define as “facial masks”.<sup>3</sup> Throughout history, artists have represented themselves for various reasons – in the past the self-portrait served more as a mirror to explore their own self and in the modern age the self-image has become the medium for the re-examining of various social topics. Into the conventional self-portrait format, we can also place all the “full-length” self-representations, dominated by self-reflective artistic confession, through which the artist can explore her/himself and her/his relationship with society. And at the same time by integrating the whole body into the field of the picture the artist can construct some other realities, tell some other stories in which reality and fiction mix, and through it he builds “identity constructions”.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Lasch, *Kultura narcisizma*, Mladinska knjiga 2012

<sup>2</sup> Luc Menaše, *Zahodnoevropski slikani portret*, 1962

<sup>3</sup> Hans Belting, *Face and Mask. A Double History*, Princeton University Press 2017

By taking over the leading role in the field of portrait, the photographic media in the 19<sup>th</sup> century took over the leading position in this area too. Due to progress in technology, photography or the photographic portrait was used by more and more people as the “social ritual, the defence against anxiety and the tool of power”.<sup>4</sup> But the general use of self-portrait remained for a long time on the periphery as it was mainly photographers’ – artists’ domain. In the history of photography from the first “selfie”, made by Robert Cornelius in 1839, best known in this genre are the bodies of work by Francesca Woodman, Vivian Maier, Cindy Sherman, or a bit less those by Richard Avedon and Robert Mapplethorpe. Outstanding, for example, is also the series of photographic self-portraits by Andy Warhol. Most of them can be classified into the subjective – expressive line of the classic “mirrored – cathartic”, self-reflective images, based on a partial or whole exposure of the (self) portrayed person’s privacy.

In the exhibition project *Beyond Myself* we are somewhat less interested in the self-portrait in the traditional sense, nor do we want to reduce the self-portrait to the function of an artistic use a la selfie.<sup>5</sup> We want to raise the issue of relevance of the (photographic) self-portrait as an artistic practice today and on the other hand we want to address issues of narcissism in arts generally and particularly in the photographic and video works of artists. Known is the cathartic function of the self-portrait while the practice of continuous self-expression has also an important therapeutic role. With the objectification of our “dark side” we can (through photography) “separate ourselves from what we do not like about us and make space for a catharsis.”<sup>6</sup> If it is true that “the pathological narcissist is the best adapted individual in modern societies”<sup>7</sup>, this on the other hand raises the question, how much could be expressing oneself in the arts also an expression of more or less narcissistic individuals. Self-promotion of artists today is an entirely legitimate and even expected strategy and we can witness a rise in narcissism, even exhibitionism, in artworks or projects as well as in the communication of artists with the public.

The exhibition project includes works of artists who mostly use the media of photography to present themselves, which provides them with the possibilities for endless experimenting,

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1977

<sup>5</sup> On this subject see the exhibition *From Selfie to Selfexpression* at the London Saatchi Gallery 2017, [www.saatchigallery.com/#years](http://www.saatchigallery.com/#years)

<sup>6</sup> Cristina Nunez, *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling*, 2009

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Lasch, *Kultura narcizizma*, Mladinska knjiga 2012

transforming and manipulating their own image and through the genre of the self-portrait they re-examine social as well as personal subjects. Artists **Uroš Djurić**, **G.R.A.M.** collective, **Nika Oblak & Primož Novak**, **Dušan Kochol**, **Paula Muhr**, **Evelin Stermitz** and **Tomaž Tomažin** in various ways within their artworks expose the problem of the consumer society and the role of an individual in it. The aestheticized everyday life in the form of spectacle events and fascinating effects that happen in all the spheres from politics, social engagement (e.g. feminism), pop culture and arts, serves them as creative inspiration. The artists in their selected work, by putting themselves in the spotlight, expose stereotypes of everyday life and create conceptual photographic projects, where the fundamental motive has been manipulated and subject to different interventions. The foreground of the works mainly represents self-irony, humour and narrativeness, while the artists present themselves as “constructed identities” in various social spheres of modern life.

A critical and simultaneously ironic attitude to popular culture, which has passed over into all social pores amongst all selected artists, is shown mostly in the work of the Serbian artist **Uroš Djurić**. Typical of his work is him taking on various roles in his projects. So for example his self-portrait also finds itself amongst football players, he appears in the company of public persona and in newspaper headlines. Djurić is an artist, to whom popular culture serves both as an inspiration as well as a medium for creating. He offers his image to the market and with it addresses the western elites. Djurić’s artistic style is founded on an overt populist agenda which lays open how the world of arts really works.

The Austrian duo **G.R.A.M.** too, is taking on different roles from the world of politics, popular culture etc. The artists reconstruct specific historic situations in a way of performative photography. In their works they toy with troublesome “figures” from the world of politics, sports and show business. Their works are largely based on researching real life scenes and above all of issues provided by the mass media which they then set into new contexts.

The tandem **Nika Oblak & Primož Novak**, too, often introduce into their works (especially their earlier ones) principles, which are typical of popular culture. They immerse themselves into various roles, from famous movie actors to the Guinness book of records’ heroes, and question the role and the influence of the media on the modern viewer. In their works they also expound the problems of the artist’s role in relation to the artistic system in which he has been caught. Similar assumptions of the artistic context are also followed in the presented project by

the Czech artist **Dušan Kochol**. The theme of his works is not the artist's reflection of his ego or his mental outlets but the performative reiteration and interpretation of some historical event in which the artists plays a precise role.

The female artists **Evelin Stermitz** and **Paula Muhr** explore themselves from the perspective of social gender and post-structuralistic feminist artistic practices.<sup>8</sup> The artists communicate in their works the need to perceive wider the woman's body; not just as something they own but as a social body, subordinate to sexual, cultural, social and political conventions. Both Stermitz and Muhr deal with the issues of self-image and innate social clichés (taboos and norms). However, if at Muhr's work the face is what the modern society today puts into spotlight (to be beautiful, forever young), at the forefront of video works by Stermitz there is a woman's self-awareness.

In accordance with the spirit of the time some artists play multiplied roles in their works. **Tomaž Tomažin**, via his own image, addresses the viewer with the issue of identification and identity, the essence of his work though is the manipulation of the visible. Tomažin combines specific locations, the attributes of different nationalities, film heroes and his images. With a mixture of all these elements he creates psychological tensions between spaces and protagonists and builds fragmented stories. Added symbols and identities form absurd situations which add the component of humour to the projects and by doing so he warns us of new "values" of the capitalist society – to be present everywhere, to be seen and effective in all roles, i.e. to be everything in one person.

The fact is, with the self-portrait, the artist is simultaneously also the model, at the same time he or she is the portraitist and the portrayed person, the observer and the person observed. The subject and the object are one and the same person. By representing self-image numerous questions arise about our own self and self-identity. However, this time we take interest in the self-portrait, which has been labelled as the relationship between subjectivity and representation, mainly in a distanced-humorous "objectivist" approach, through which artists do not so much explore themselves but more so the social relations that ultimately define their artistic "identity".

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<sup>8</sup> In doing so, both refer to feminist theorists e.g. Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva.

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