



NARCISSISTIC
ME

narcissism/ 'nɑːsɪsɪz(ə)m/¹

Too much interest in and admiration for your own physical appearance and/or your own abilities.

self-portrait/ 'self 'pɔːtreɪt/³

A picture, photograph, or piece of writing that you make of or about yourself.

¹ Cambridge Dictionary, URL: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/narcissism>

³ Cambridge Dictionary, URL: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/self-portrait>

I am starting this research as a personal enquiry. Not purely to determine my level of narcissism, but to understand my and a lot of artists', urge to use their own body in their work. I am curious towards the fact that this process is often seen as narcissistic and that the word « narcissism » is seen as a negative thing in our society.

I want to find out more about the relation between narcissism and the creation of self-portraits, through the origin of the word narcissism: the myth of Narcissus by Ovid². I am interested in finding out what happens when I create a self-portrait and when I look at it. Am I really looking at myself through this process?

I am interested in finding out if the sight of myself reflects of a certain degree of narcissism. Are artists like myself and actors like my family members more narcissistic than others? Does the fact that we reflect on ourselves through our work impact our personalities, or is it our given personality that influences our creativity?

While reading The Myth of Narcissus, I have decomposed the text in five stages that I saw Narcissus evolving through. The steps go as follows:

1-Rejection -	He is beautiful and proud and thus rejects his suitors.
2-Jealousy/Revenge-	One of them jealously asks Nemesis for revenge,
3-Malediction-	which she gives by casting a spell on him.
4-Reflection-	He sees his reflection in the water,
5-Realization-	falls in love with his image and lets himself die because he can never possess it.

I am using this order as the structure of this text as I link Narcissus' development to the creation of a self-portrait and the reflection of the artist producing it.

I see self-portraits as a performance of the self. In a self-portrait I am able to show one facet of myself, amongst the many ones present in me. I choose to portray this particular side of me, in a pose, a specific outfit, or a background. All these elements around the « ME » influence how you look at me. They influence your perception of me and they become props that define the context in which I decide to portray myself.

² Ovid. The Myth of Narcissus in The Metamorphoses, Book III, 1st Century. A complete English translation by Kline, A.S. Published by Poetry in Translation, 2000

performance /pər'fɔːməns ,ɑːt/⁴

Art that consists only of a person or group performing something and that does not exist apart from when it is being performed.

⁴ Cambridge Dictionary, URL: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/performance-art>

My analogy of the self-portrait comes from my upbringing and my education. In fact, I was brought up in a family of actors. Both my parents, my grand parents from my mother's side and my great uncle and great aunt are actors. Growing up in such a family, I have always been well aware of the presence of the Ego and its importance for both the holder and the beholder. This is the milieu in which I started to develop my personality in. This is where it all started for me and where my vision was born. I escaped the realm of theatre by choice, or perhaps by will of differentiating myself from the group. I do not want to perform a written character, I want to create my own characters. I realize now that this upbringing has made me aware of the possibilities of my own body as a material and has guided me in finding my own way of doing so.

This is why I am questioning myself, after years of fighting this family tradition and escaping the realm of theatre, here I am: using my own body in photos, collages, films and performances. I have to wonder, when one is so inclined to using their own body to communicate, there must be something else than just exhibitionism and taking pleasure in showing my flesh. Does this need come from a curse like in Narcissus' case, a medical pathology or simply a common behavior of our time?

It took me four years at the Rietveld to realize that I too perform, that I too use my own body and my own image in my work, just as my family does. With one exception, that I make all the decisions concerning the story I am telling. I am not per se a performance artist, but like I stated previously in this text, I believe that any form of showing one's image is performance.

For me performance is a depiction of an instant, of a moment that has already passed, but is recognizable by all.

When I look at my family I realize that I do not know much about them, about who they are. Not because we do not talk about ourselves together but perhaps because they do not know which one of themselves they are either. I feel that what they do influences them so much, every time they take on a different character this character shapes them. They give part of themselves to the role and in return the role adds a layer to them. The way they look, the way they talk, the way they dress: it changes them. And as a child, growing up in this ever changing crowd of personas has eventually shaped my way of dealing with others and created my own way of performing.

Rejection

“If he but fail to recognize himself, a long life he may have, beneath the sun.”⁷

ego/'ε:gəʊ/'i:gəʊ/⁸

Latin word for « I », describes the conscious thinking subject in philosophy and the Me in psychoanalysis. It is your idea or opinion of yourself, especially your feeling of your own importance and ability.

⁷ Ovid. The Myth of Narcissus in The Metamorphoses, Book III, verse 348 . A complete English translation by Kline, A.S. Published by Poetry in Translation, 2000

⁸ Cambridge Dictionary, URL: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ego>

Rejection

I read an article that stated that narcissistic minds tend to believe more in their creativity than others.⁵ Perhaps narcissists are more confident about their individual genius and thus give in their fantasy of becoming an artist. Perhaps it is in the same way that Narcissus first rejected the others around him who idealized him for his beauty. Perhaps he, who did not yet know himself, could only look forward, until he looked into his own eyes. This was perceived as self confidence and proudness, although it could just have been ignorance of his own power over the others.

The Ego does not exist in the individual from the start. And neither is it present in Narcissus from the beginning, according to the soothsayer Tiresias.⁶

With this prophecy the oracle gives one condition to which Narcissus could live a long and happy life: for him to never see himself. It is to be understood that, in our modern understanding of what a narcissistic being is, narcissism is not part of a person from the day of birth. In the case of Narcissus the trigger comes from the discovery of his own image, but in modern psychology narcissism can be developed in a person through various moments of his upbringing.

Just like the Ego, narcissism has to be developed. Unlike auto-erotic instincts, which are there from the very beginning. In order to bring about narcissism there must be something added to auto-erotism, some sort of psychological action.

Freud's interpretation of a narcissist is that of « a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities. ».⁹ This vision is that of a perverse act, which occurs when the libido has been withdrawn from the external world and has been directed to the Ego. In a modern way, that would simply be called masturbating.

In that sense a narcissist, in Freud's opinion, rejects the outer world.

⁵ Le Breton, Marine. « Les narcissiques ont tendance à (trop) croire en leur créativité. » Huffington Post, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2013/10/08/narcissisme-croyance-creativite-etude_n_4062025.html

⁶ In Greek mythology, Tiresias (/tai'ri:siəs/; Greek: Τειρεσίας, Teiresias) was a blind prophet of Apollo in Thebes, famous for his clairvoyance. He is called upon Narcissus' birth in The Myth of Narcissus and warns his mother (the nymph Liriopé) that he will thrive as long as he does not know himself.

⁹ Freud, Sigmund. On Narcissism, 1914, pp 1. Free eBook from www.sigmundfreud.net.

Rejection

If I speak of myself it has to be opposed to something,

otherwise why do I need the I?

Rejection

That is to say that a narcissist has no interest in the outer world and focuses all his attention and desires on himself. But if a narcissist is detached from the world and an artist is the translator between the outside and inner worlds, can artists be absolute narcissists?

Lacan's mirror stage theory is a study of the toddler's first encounter with his image in a mirror. It is to be understood that between the age of six months to eighteen months the infant will construct a permanent structure of subjectivity. Lacan continues noting that this experience is both constituent and reassuring to the child. Constituent, because this experience gives birth to two new concepts in the child's imagination of himself: the relation between the Ego and the Body and the relation between Imagination and Reality. Reassuring because it is the formation of the child's Ego through a process of identification, it is the result of identifying with one's own specular image. By seeing his own body reflected it gives the child the possibility to identify with his own image and to feel a sense of mastery.

Although this sense of mastery is soon being compared to the second body reflected in the mirror, the one of the parent holding him. His understanding of himself can only exist once he recognizes the image of the other.

From that stage on, the child becomes aware of the parent's omnipotence and builds up anger against the non-serviable parent.

Since narcissism develops in a child who feels anger against his parents, it can be present in homes where the child has been the hope of one or more of his parents, seeing their own failures and wanting the child to take on only the qualities of said parents to live up to their expectations. This, instead of building any kind of self esteem, brings a high sense of self hatred in the child. He is never able to arise to the expectations and constantly builds them higher.

The superego of the child conforms him into becoming unsatisfied with himself.

The mirror stage, even though absolutely determining for the child, is only an instant, which does not exist anymore once it has been performed. It is the realization of Narcissus in front of the water, a high angle shot moment in a dream, when all of a sudden one can see oneself from above. One is aware it is him, it looks like him, it acts like him, but then again it cannot be him since one is looking at it himself.¹⁰

¹⁰ Lacan, Jacques, « Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je, telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique » (1949), dans *Écrits, Le Seuil*, 1966.

Jacques Lacan was a french psychoanalyst and psychiatrist, who believed the stage of the mirror to be forming the permanent structure of the child's subjectivity.

Rejection

I reject the other as being more important than me. I oppose myself to the other, I see the world through my own eyes and thus create my understanding of myself as a God. Being a creator I construct and impose my almighty image above the others. I am not trying to depict anything else than what you can see, for I know that you will not see what I see in my portrait, thus I reject your ability to view it differently than I do.

It may seem inconsiderate because, although I do allow you to look at my portrait, I do not allow your vision to equate mine. Perhaps there is here a similarity with the study of the « new corporate leader » by Michael Maccoby¹¹. He explains that the new corporate leader is a person looking for exhilaration running his team and gaining victories. He wants to be known as a winner and his deepest fear is to be labeled as a loser. This kind of personality is depicted in the movie « The Wolf of Wall Street »¹², with Leonardo DiCaprio's character inspired by the real life story of Jordan Belfort. In fact, the manager's view of the world is as follows: he sees the world as a mirror of himself and has no interest in external events, except when they throw back a reflection of his own image.

In the discovery of myself in the mirror I realize that I am both a body and a mind.
Because I see myself, I oppose myself to the other but also to myself.

11 Maccoby, Michael. The Gamesman, The New Corporate Leaders, Simon & Schuster, 1977.

12 The Wolf of Wall Street, Martin Scorsese, Paramount Pictures, 2013, Film.

Jealousy/ Revenge

It was Narcissus' rejection of the others' attention, his disregard for their point of view and their love that caused one of his suitor's jealousy and triggered Nemesis' revengeful act.¹³ And it is the viewer's jealousy towards the artist that makes him see the creator as an overly self-obsessed beast.

But as Freud further explains, a person in pain or suffering gives up any interest in the outside world unless it is linked with his pain. Same as when one is sleeping. Sleep also implies a withdrawal of the position of the libido on to the subject's own self. The wish to sleep, like the pain endured, both imply a focus on one's self. Freud uses these examples in order to explain the operation of a narcissistic person's behavior towards the outside world. So is that to say that a narcissist behaves like a sick person, purely interested in the obsessive idea of fixing the pain? In that case, is the fact that artists are obsessively attracted to their own work a sign of narcissism? Or is it a misunderstanding? In the sense that most people might not enjoy their jobs and in the suffering of this obsession, artists are just the only ones that have found a way to make it through the days. Creating something and whilst creating, finding some pleasure in doing so.

I do see the link here again between narcissism and the artist's act of creating his self-portrait, in the sense that our process is of a sexual nature. I search for and work for a personal reward, like an orgasm and in the same way do I try to make it last. Since as soon as I have climaxed the work is done. Over. And I start anew with the next project. Perhaps narcissism in that sense is of a self-preservation nature. In what Freud calls « the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation ».¹⁴ Perhaps it is a defense mechanism against aggressive impulses.

¹³ One of Narcissus's suitors who had been rejected by him prayed to the gods as follows « So may he himself love and so may he fail to command what he loves. ». Nemesis heard that request and found it fair.

¹⁴ Freud, Sigmund. On Narcissism, 1914, pp 2. Free eBook from www.sigmundfreud.net .

*Revenge
Jealousy*

When using my own body in my artwork



am I really showing myself?

Extreme narcissistic personalities are often welcomed with two opposite reactions. First their traits of character are viewed as admirable, their confidence compared with our own self doubt, but on the second look, they are seen as being diminishing to others and cruel. Our society values and disregards their behaviors. We elect them and listen to their songs, but as soon as they show what we view as too much of their personality, we reject them.

Kanye West's¹⁵ example is the first to come to my mind. He has been admired for his music and performing talent for years now, but his pretentious speeches seem to have ridiculed his image to the public. Though this behavior has in no way changed his musical talent.

We judge artist's personalities as much as we judge their work. Probably because nowadays, the two are very much linked and the persona that they create to perform is most of the time misinterpreted as their true self. When we see a movie, or see a theatrical performance, we are able to detach the actor from the character. We know it is a performance and that the actor is not the persona he interprets. But when it comes to performance art (any kind of performative art, music and fine arts alike), because the name of the artist is the same as the name of the persona he is being, we misjudge the act for the reality. We have a hard time separating them.

This can be seen as well with Marina Abramovic¹⁶, when we see her work it is her, it is her name on the poster and the event. But in my opinion, the Marina we see is performing. When she sits in the MOMA for hours on during three months, she does not talk, she does not move, she is in character¹⁷.

¹⁵ Kanye West is an American rapper, singer, songwriter, record producer, fashion designer and entrepreneur. He has released seven albums so far and is largely acclaimed in the music industry. His outspoken views and life outside of music have received significant mainstream attention. He has been a frequent source of controversy for his conduct at award shows, on social media and in other public settings.

¹⁶ Marina Abramovic is a Yugoslav performance artist. Her work explores the relationship between performer and audience, the limits of the body and the possibilities of the mind. Active for over four decades, Abramović has been described as the "grandmother of performance art." She pioneered a new notion of identity by bringing in the participation of observers, focusing on confronting pain, blood and physical limits of the body.

¹⁷ I am here citing her work « The Artist is Present » performed between the 14th of March till the 31st of May 2010 in the MOMA, New York. In this work she sat at one end of a table while the viewers could sit facing her.

Revenge Jealousy

Malediction

« The new Narcissus gazes at his own reflection, not in raw admiration, but in unremitting search of flaws, signs of fatigue and decay. »¹⁸

Is this curse of self scrutiny a way for us to face the challenges of the new era?

¹⁸ Lasch, Christopher. The Culture of Narcissism, American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation, Norton, 1991, pp91.

Being an artist is not all the joy and continuous genius-ness that people attach to the idea. The reality of it can be felt like a curse. Just as Narcissus was cursed by Nemesis into falling in love with his image, artists can drown in the image of themselves in their artwork.

The growth of wealth in our societies, permits health to become a commodity for more people. Through seeing doctors and getting care more easily, the common knowledge on diseases and their symptoms becomes everyone's trouble. The general medical advice is to increase the amount of check ups and to advise the patients to check themselves regularly. This tendency brings a new behavior in everyday life, namely the one of self scrutiny. Maybe artists have always been more aware of themselves. The self-portraits in that sense, could have been one of the ways of investigating their aging, or their illness.

Nowadays Egon Schiele's self-portraits are being studied by psychologists¹⁹ to understand better his fascination with his own sexuality and how it can be relevant to others in the same situation. Schiele goes further than simple representation, he shows a personality disorder through his body's deformation in his self-portraits. He is in a self analysis and introspection. He is picturing feelings from within and manages to depict them with the lines of his body. Between the looks on their faces, their position, the colours, the composition, artists say a lot about their inner and outer selves through their self-portraits.

Artists are not completely part of the production system that controls our societies, they have always been slightly outside of this realm. Perhaps the feeling of not belonging in this organized society has increased this sentiment of self doubt associated with artists. The idea that their artwork might not make a difference in the way the world works, the particular schedule they work with, (which makes them seem like they are lazy). Artists have always been somewhat outcasts of the society. It seems like what most people are going through now, thinking that where they stand in society reflects who they are and what they are worth as human beings, has always been part of the artist's reality. Maybe society could learn from artists in the sense that they might have felt something and expressed it for everyone to understand.

¹⁹ Egon Schiele: A self in creation, A psychoanalytic study of the artist's self-portraits written by Danielle Knafo (1993) is a good example of these studies. In this book she argues that Schiele's childhood traumas are both exhibited and mastered in hi art. She goes on explaining that the evolution in his self-portraits testify of Schiele's development of his sense of self.

Maldisnoit

I selfie



therefore I am

noitəɪbəlɪsM

simulacrum/ˌsɪmjʊˈleɪkrəm/²⁰

An image or representation of someone or something.

Is it Me that I see in my self-portrait?

Since the birth of social medias and the profile pictures they request from users, people have been filling the internet with pictures of themselves. First the scrutiny was personal, but nowadays I give people the authorization to scrutinize my image and compare it with the many others they see everyday. Showing my everyday life and watching reality tv shows has become the norm. The unrealistic life style I have been forced to want is now even more present than ever. Using filters or make up, posing and other ways of tricking the eye are a necessary skill in this world of constant connectivity. « I show myself therefore I am » is the new motto.

The smartphone is the new mirror. This change in the way we look at one another has of course had a huge impact on the art world, since art can also be seen as a magnifying glass, aiming to show the current trends of a society in order to discuss them, criticize them or embrace them. The selfie has democratized the self-portrait, previously predestined to the elite. Like Cindy Sherman²¹, we are all creators of our own auto self fiction. And by exposing myself, I am constantly looking at myself.

In the multiplicity of the images, do I get closer to an understanding of the self, or am I constructing a simulacrum of myself?

In an interview²² Cindy Sherman explains that she uses a mirror next to the camera, so she can see what she photographs. She goes on explaining that she only takes the photo when she does not recognize herself in the reflection. She does not want to recognize herself yet she makes photographical self-portraits. It is through her disguises, her characters that she can become someone else and thus her image becomes something else than a copy of the reality. It is through the repetition of the act of photographing, through the perseverance of her work that she manages to lose herself, the « true » model, in order to become a reproduction. She is and is not the person represented in the photos. By deforming herself, she is able to show the Idea of Women.

My understanding of the image so far is that it is a reproduction of an image of myself. Since I had to go through the process of looking at myself in the mirror and then translate the reflection I see of myself. This reproduction is consequently different from the original: Me. It is different in the medium that is being used but in its existence alike.

21 Some art historians have labeled Sherman's work as being narcissistic, due to her emphasis on self-portraiture, but as a counter example Krauss (1993) believed it to be self-abnegating for it is about representation and fiction and thus depicts no-one in particular.

22 « Cindy Sherman by Betsy Sussler », BOMB n°12, Spring 1985. URL: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/638/cindy-sherman>

Reflection

Reflection



Reflection

As an artist, I might have an intended end, a direction to follow, but I know that the work is worth nothing if I just follow a recipe without any set backs. The work is the process, it is the way of getting there, not only the arrival. It is about the highs and the lows, the backs and forwards.

And in the end I know I might not even grasp what it is I was looking for, but I will have gone through a journey that will have brought me somewhere I did not expect. That is what I look forward to, even when it is frustrating.

And what is this process if not a way to try and find out more about myself and the world around me. If not an investigation of my inner self, a way to « process » it through images.

Narcissus only got a glimpse of his own reflection and while staring at it he realized he would never grasp it entirely. When looking in the moving water, he understood he could never see each and every drop that mirrored his image.

Like a painter who religiously paints his own portrait every day to try and get a glimpse of who he is, he will never get it all. Each painting, like each drop, is changing and displays another facet of he who looks at it.

While watching « American Psycho » I realize that the movie's main character , Patrick Bateman, is an extreme example of an excessive narcissistic personality. The movie uses this persona to translate the idea that the moral climate of contemporary society is self absorption²³.

In movies and medias one is being depicted as self obsessed and this since the 1920s, when advertisements started encouraging one to search for self fulfillment²⁴. In fact, the advertisement industry started portraying models looking at themselves in mirrors in order to encourage one to see the self as the highest form of creation. From that moment on commercials have vowed a cult for the glamour, fame and glory, which makes it more and more difficult for one to accept the banality of everyday life. Encouraging the consumers that they need and want something that they would have never thought of not only has driven our society to be all about consumption, but it has also been encouraging the ordinary men and women to cultivate extraordinary tastes and to identify themselves with the privileged minority against the rest.

²³ American Psycho, Mary Harron, Universal Pictures, 2000, Film.

American Psycho 's main character, Patrick Bateman, is suffers from a narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), shown from the beginning of the movie in a scene where is grooming himself and wishing to look better and thinner. He is suffering from all nine of the characteristics of NPD: he has an exaggerated sense of self importance, of sense of entitlement, he is envious, arrogant, preoccupied with his fantasies of beauty, unable to recognize other's feelings and taking advantage of others. He represents an extreme narcissistic personality.

²⁴ Cited from The Culture of Narcissism, American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation, by Lasch, Christopher. Norton, 1991, pp92.

Reflection

« The first work of art in an artist is the shaping of his own personality. »²⁵

Reflection

They live in an illusion, where they float from place to place, from dream to dream, never fully satisfied with anything. And especially not satisfied with themselves. Artists share that quality and I feel like it is difficult to find any kind of satisfaction with my own work on the long term, especially as it represents my state at this time. I always want to be able to tell more, or do better and as soon as the work is out there, for everyone else to see, I long to be that person who made the work again, in order to understand it. But that moment is gone, with doing the work, I have evolved, I am not the same and thus can never go back to the same understanding of that first impulse. I will be able to view it in a different light and to reflect on it. I might even understand where it all came from, but that very first instinct will be gone.

As an artist I see that anything could become art, the old rules of the past have been pushed and the new ones are unclear. Artists from the twentieth century like Marcel Duchamps or Andy Warhol, have drastically changed the perception of what art could become²⁶. There are so many mediums available, so many platforms, publics, themes and scenes. The constant experimentation has created so much confusion about standards that the only surviving measure of excellence is novelty and shock value. These criteria have always been shaping art and its history, but were always recursing the emergence of a new organized current. Nowadays everything can be anything and its opposite and the easiest way to understand it, is through the artists themselves. In literature as well, there seems to have been a switch. Artists and writers alike do not seem to distance themselves from the work anymore. It feels like they see the world as a mirror of themselves and use that reflection as the work itself.

I believe that Oscar Wilde is a good example of this transformation. After writing the Picture of Dorian Gray, he said of his three main characters « Basil Hallward is what I think I am, Lord Henry what the world thinks me, Dorian what I would like to be in other ages, perhaps »²⁷.

²⁶ Marcel Duchamp's works brought light on the fact that any object could become a work of art. With his Ready-mades he challenged the very notion of what is art. And as for Andy Warhol, he participated greatly in transforming the making and the subject of artworks into merchandises.

²⁷ Quote by Oscar Wilde, pronounced after writing The Picture of Dorian Gray, in 1890.

Reflection

« Every portrait that is painted with feelings is a portrait of the artist, not the sitter. I will not exhibit this picture because I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my own soul.»²⁸

Reflection

What I understand from this quote is that, writing this novel was Wilde's way of expressing his homosexuality and eccentricity. It was the only place he could be true to himself, without risking his life. In a time when homosexuality was considered a crime, his writing gave him the power to create an alternate reality, in which each character possessed a trait he wished he could proudly exhibit. In my opinion, the novel became a place where the picture was merely a metaphor for the way he felt he was seen, a deformed version of himself, a simulacrum.

Whether in art or literature I try to say something, through my work and through myself, that might be able to reach other individuals even though none of us have the same experience. I know that many will connect with what I present. But detaching myself from the work, when I feel like the work is me and my vision of the world surrounding me, seems impossible. And probably, because I feel like I open up about myself in my work, I feel a sense of self as a performer under the constant scrutiny of friends and strangers.

But this feeling is not purely addressed to artists. In a world of omnipresent mirrors, I feel like all men and women are being watched and showing themselves.

To a certain extent we all perform and change ourselves depending on the context and the people around us.

I believe that we all have different characters inside of ourselves and usually we allow two or three versions of ourselves to each take turn into representing us. We are a certain way with our family, another with our teachers or colleagues and a third one with our close friends. We know we are several, but sometimes it is difficult to tame the rest of us. Saying this makes me think of the movie « Split »²⁹, where the actor James McAvoy plays a man diagnosed with twenty-three distinct personalities. It is a remarkable performance and, even though the script is more of a horror-esque movie genre, the idea behind this character with multiple personalities reflects very well what I feel the actor's life is like. I saw it as an amplified version of what I can identify in my family member's personalities. They are aware of their inner multiplicity and allow themselves to taste the feeling of all of these inner characters.

²⁹ Split, M. Night Shyamalan, Universal Pictures, 2017, Film.

Reflection

In a self-portrait and in a performance, I show myself, or like I have been stating, a part of myself, but I also enable myself to look at me. Not only are people looking at the image of me, but I also confront myself with this image. Perhaps the only difference is the long lasting quality of self-portrait, may it be a painting, photograph or video. I can look back at the self-portrait over and over again and be that person I was being then.

My understanding of this image will vary with time and as my understanding of myself, through other self-portraits, will help me get closer to a bigger understanding of the Me, I will look at it differently, but the moment will be depicted. It will not disappear, the way a one time performance dies the moment the last movement and words are played. I will be able to reflect on this images and continuously look at myself through it.

Though is it really me that I see?

Was Narcissus aware it was his own reflection?

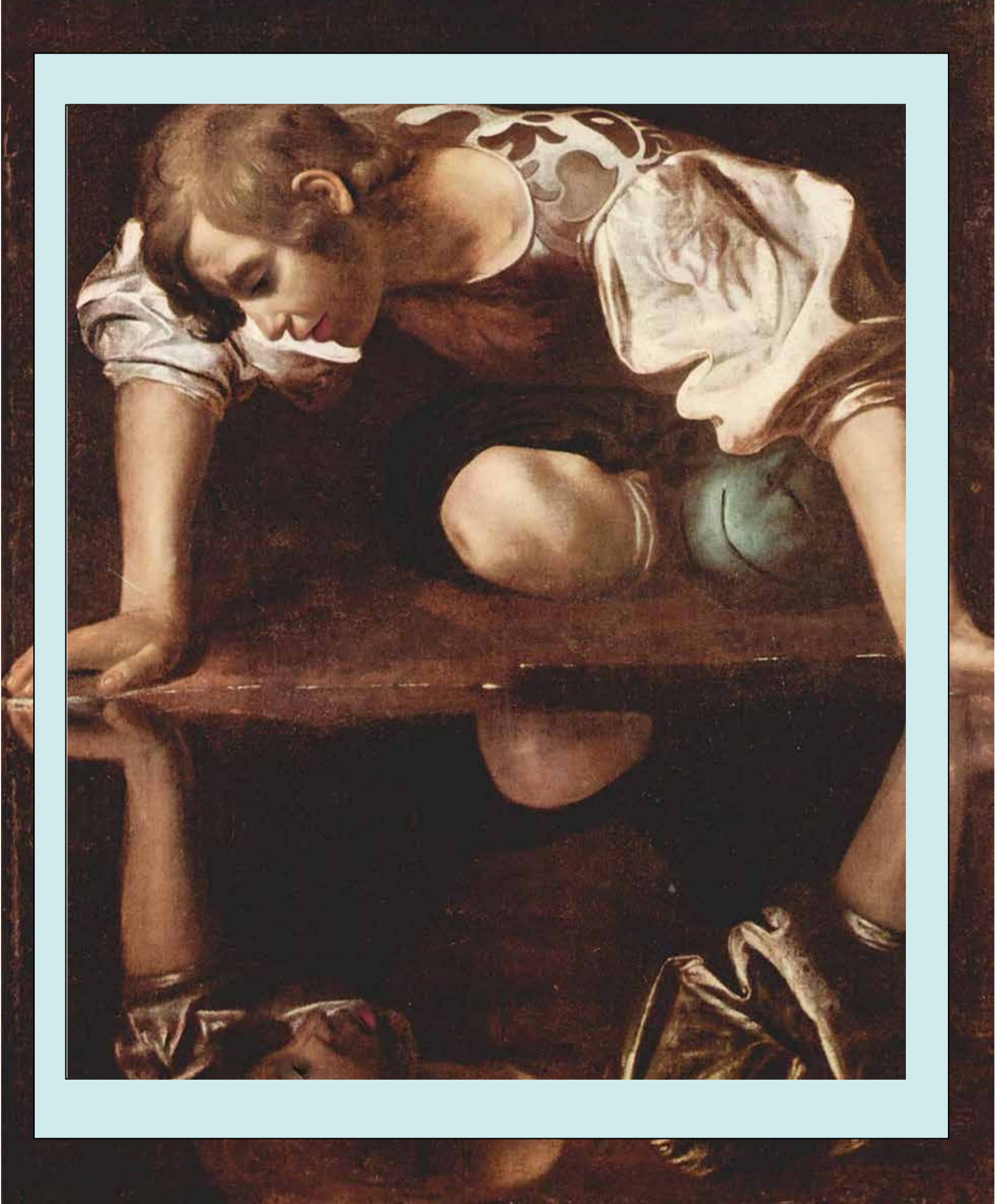
Or did he fall in love with a beautiful thing he had never seen before?

Because of all the facets I am made of, once I have discovered my reflection and identified it as an image that looks like me, I also realize that it is not me.

The image is something else, it is a deformed vision of me.

It is a thing on its own, so how can it be representing me fully?

Reflection



Realization

Which of the Me do I see in my self-portrait?

« He loves a bodiless dream. He thinks that a body, that is only a shadow. »³⁰

We have entered a « New age of Faith », as proclaims Leslie Fiedler³¹, were people are not interested in the restoration of a golden age, but in a momentary illusion of well being. In this new age, therapists are the new priests, who instead of bringing salvation, deal with our mental health.

Psychotherapy is the new remedy and what is psychotherapy if not an introspection into my own mind. As the future becomes more menacing than comforting, only fools put off until tomorrow what they can have today, which is a profound shift in our sense of time. Religion is not as popular as it used to be (in a general way) and art is as self conscious as Men.

I am watching Star Wars and I realize that more and more movies talk about escaping the Earth to make a new civilization on another planet. Whilst trying to escape (instead of saving what they have), the main characters are being told it is in their power to do it. They have to know themselves, more than they have to master any skills and to believe in their personal strength in order to accomplish the miracle that is forced upon them to make happen³². It seems like there is nothing else to believe in anymore and that everything is doomed, (which seems to be the case in every single sic fi movie/book). Since we have ruined our planet and we do not believe in God to save our souls anymore, what else is there to believe in but ourselves?

If this is the general feeling of our society, does it not make sense that artists are translating that thought through their art? Contemporary time is uncertain and new generations believe less and less in the choices they have, artists or not. We all look at ourselves in the mirror to find comfort in the only thing we think we can know, ourselves. More than a self scrutiny, it is « the faith for those without faith » Narcissism, seen as having faith in oneself, has become the best way to cope with the tensions and anxieties of modern life.

Just as the prisoners in Plato's cave³³, Narcissus believes the image to be the truth, when in fact it is not. The shadows are not the truth, only a mirrored image of what I think I know about that object. For Plato this allegory represents life being an imitation of the forms, created by God, which are the only true reality. And when it comes to art, his thought is that it is an imitation of an imitation. Art can never represent reality, for life itself, is a collection of appearances, like shadows projected on a wall. He rejects representational art, claiming that it appeals to the lower parts of the soul and distracts men from higher virtues of philosophy.

³¹ Fiedler, Leslie A. The birth of God and the Death of Man, Salmagundi, n°21, 1973, pp3-26.

³² Star Wars IV-Return of the Jedi, Richard Marquand, 20th Century Fox, 1983, Film.

In this episode of Star Wars, It is up to Luke Skywalker, son of Darth Vader, to save the Galaxy from the Republic. In doing so he is even forced to fight against his father and to resist the dark side of the force. It is said during the movie that it is in his power to fight this on his own.

³³ Plato. The Allegory of the Cave in Republic, Book VI. Translation by Shorey, P, in Plato: Collected Dialogues, Hamilton & Cairns, 1963.

Realization

My self-portrait is an imitation of the image I have of myself, it tries to depict an instant of the ME, but it does not have the pretension to say it is ME.

Through the water reflection I learn, with Narcissus, that I am not transparent to myself. My understanding of myself at this stage, has only been mirrored back at me through an image. And I know this image for not being my true reality. However, is it the truth that I am looking for? In Plato's mind it is and my thoughts would be unbearable for him, but in my understanding of my reality I need imagination and optical illusions, or better, it is not that I need them, it is simply that being a creative mind I feed myself with them. I do want to get closer to a true idea of who I am, but in order to do that, I need to embrace the multiple possibilities that may take. Though I am aware that these ideas, once found, will vanish and my questions will arise again, this time with a little more knowledge but still looking at the vast ocean of possibilities in front of me.

The self-portrait is not me, the performance is not me, they exist outside of me. They exist on their own, they do not need me once they have been carried out.

Not only when I look in the mirror am I not able to see myself entirely, but when I see another one's face depicted I can see myself in it too. Rembrandt's face painted by himself shows me a part of myself, the same way it showed him a part of himself but also a part of whom who is looking back at him. Like an eternal mirror chamber I can see myself in a billion facets, through my own eyes and through the eyes of another, looking back at me (and so forth...).

Realization



Realization

« I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself. »³⁴

« The self consists of little more than its « image » reflected in others' eyes »³⁵

³⁴ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Les Confessions*, 1782. Translation by Conyngham Mallory, W. The Floating Press, 2012, pp12

³⁵ Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism, American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation*, Norton, 1991, pp59.

Realization

Rousseau here states that he who is writing, is able to talk about himself and take from his own experience in such an objective way that it represents every other human being.

And, disagreeing with Rousseau, I understand that a self-portrait (in any shape or form) is always a lie. In that my self-portrait cannot be seen as the absolute portrait of human kind. I am always mediated by something else, whether it is an image, or in Rousseau's case, language.

I am always bound to my own experience and upbringing. But perhaps my self-portrait can help you to understand yourself. Isn't that what artists have been labelled to be doing all along? Are artists not translators of some kind, who through their art help us see the world in a different light? And whether their topic is the self or the outside, it is always highly linked to their own view on the matter. I am able to view part of myself in someone else's autobiography, in the sense that I then compare the differences and it makes me understand the similarities better. We are all different and yet all so inclined to feeling the same way.

In my view, this claim that Rousseau's text is universal is not entirely wrong, but it only is universal in the fact that we all, through our many differences, can relate to a many great deal of emotions, feelings and behaviors. It is the same with any visual portraiture. No matter the gender of the person depicted, I am still able to identify myself with him because of one common characteristic: the fact that we all are human beings.

In that sense it is our negative connotation of the term narcissistic that is wrong when it is applied to an autobiography or a self-portrait. Because isn't narcissism a necessity for an artist to talk about bigger things than himself? It makes sense if you believe that it is only through one's own experiences that one can reflect on the world and thus give a universal feeling from a personal story.

So when I see my body parts floating around in one of my videos or collages, I could be depicting anyone and no-one. I am using my own body, but before being a blonde, or a tall woman, I am part of a larger group. Which is why I believe that my work can speak to a lot more people than simply my look-alikes. My body is a medium to communicate larger ideas. I certainly don't see myself in my work the same way I see myself in the mirror. Or the way I see myself on my birthday pictures. The same way Cindy Sherman does not recognize herself in her

photographs. I am several and my depictions help me see some of the many me's. But so do they help others see themselves in/through my body.

Realization

Going back to Marina Abramović, when questioned about the emotional response the audience has had during her performance « The Artist is present », where she was sitting at a table and the audience could go one by one to sit in front of her and stare into her eyes. A lot of people started crying and could not stay very long. She explains : « I give them tools to become themselves. There is nowhere to go except in themselves, where they found the depths and pain and loneliness and everything else. »

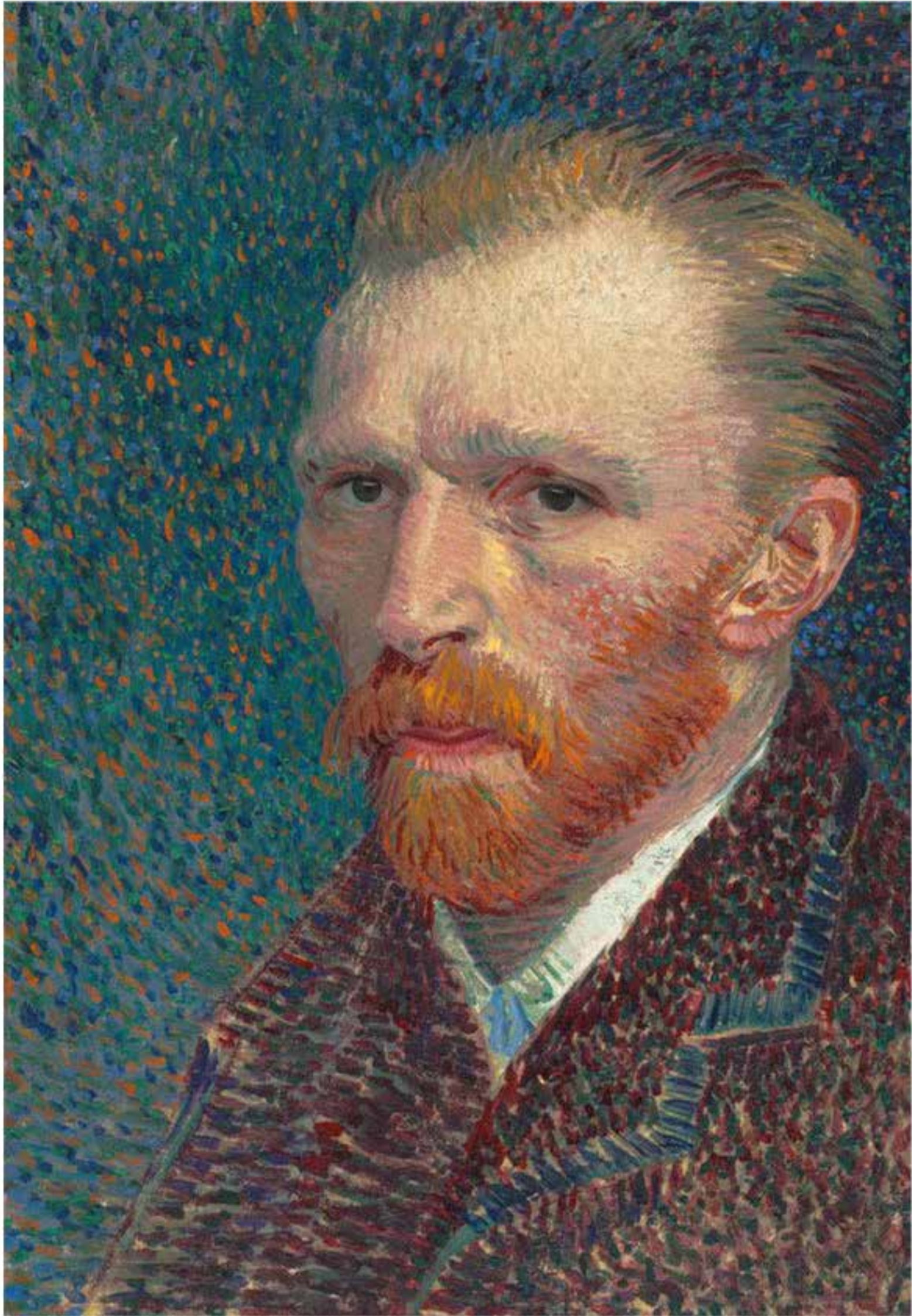
Looking into her eyes, the viewer was looking right back at himself.

Realization

I am staring at a Van Gogh's self-portrait, I do see a man's face, but most of all I see a human emotion.

I feel the look of that man going through me and back, my face slowly changes and starts to resemble his. I feel his pain and he saw mine even before I became aware of it.

Realization



Realization

By portraying myself am I showing the
infinity differences of all,



or am I contemplating what I am?

I can note a difference between a selfie and the artist's self-portrait. Selfies are mostly a way to show ourselves in the best way possible, under the best angle. When self-portraits, like the ones of ORLAN³⁶, are a way of disfiguring oneself, to transform her image and thus represent women as a whole and not as an individual. In a sense, there is a link between her work and the one of the surrealists, by taking everyday objects and elevating them to the rank of artworks.

Her self-portraits become the artworks' claim and individuality. They are a study of her « mystical » self, where the mirror inverts everything. Self-portraits are the artworks' diary and their elaboration. They are a pause in time, a moment in which the artist represents himself. The realization is anachronistically when I can identify myself to a portrait that is several centuries old. They are universal.

In a broader sense, isn't all creative act a narcissistic one? In the sense that artists feel like they have a message to deliver, something to express outside of their own world. But does that make that art or any art any worse? And the fact that I portray myself in the work does not only show my body to the world, there are other topics and ideas at play. The body in that sense is simply a medium, to share the thoughts that the artist feels. A self-portrait is the same process as any other art work, it is meant to be seen by the many, to testify of a journey and a thought process, in order to communicate the artist's views. And if that is being named narcissistic, so what?
As long as it is relevant.

So what(?) because it is again our understanding of the word narcissism that is wrong. Artists creating self-portraits go through a journey that holds similarities with the one Narcissus goes through in the myth. But I strongly disagree with the idea that being narcissistic is a bad personality trait to have when being an artist. I believe that it is a necessary trait to have when one's role is to comment on the world around. In my introspection I am able to view the rest with more distance and because I don't recognize myself in the self-portraits I have made the work universal.

³⁶ ORLAN is a french artist. In her Reincarnation of Saint Orlan performances she alters her body, using plastic surgery to add features from famous works of art, including the forehead of Leonardo's Mona Lisa. Doing so she was not trying to make herself into a static image of ideal beauty, but on the contrary was questioning the origins of such ideals of female beauty.

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