Bodies we fail: productive embodiments of imperfection

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Portraiture and Self Loss

Two twin-like bald heads with small dark eyes and mouths theatrically present themselves to the viewer of a black-and-white photograph (1928) by the French artist Claude Cahun. These sets of eyes and mouths are engaged in a visual dialogue, involving each other and possibly someone standing in front of the image. The heads turn toward each other at a twisted angle: they bend uncomfortably backwards or sideways to avoid touching each other with their noses and cheeks. They are conjoined at the upper part of their shoulders, like Siamese twins, but express a kind of independence in their postures, contradicting their cloned appearance. As defiant as they seem toward each other, there is little space in the image allowing them to avoid each other. As a result, they pose as identical doubles, who nonetheless exhibit disparate personalities.

Caught in the frame of the photograph, the starkly lit white heads are positioned in front of a diffuse grey background that, with its faint grid-like pattern of straight lines, intensifies the contrast between the image’s rectangular form and the subjects’ round scalps. The portrayed pair looks involuntarily trapped in the
constricted space of a photographic print. The doubleness of the faces and the work’s title intensify this impression by suggesting that each investigates the presence of the other in the image. *Que me veux-tu?* asks: What do you want from me? Denying each other’s claim to be represented exclusively, the two subjects highlight their respective struggle for recognition. Caught in space, they seem, however, to break the spell of time: the photographic process has frozen the movements of eyes and mouths, but the recorded moment is so expressive that it draws the viewer into a continuing exchange of looks; an exchange that leaves the still space of the image and builds a relation to the spectator.

The twins do not struggle for each others’ recognition, since the two sets of eyes do not clearly look at one another, but for the sort of social recognition, which Butler describes in her account of social address, where an individual’s social recognition is dependant on the address of the other or on the interpellation of a self by the other, as in someone saying „hey you!“ (Butler, 1997:5). This account of recognition simultaneously declares its possible failure and the addressed subject’s lack of will. On a visual level, I interpret self-portraiture as a form of representation that calls for recognition by the viewer, a form of address that calls on the other to recognize the portrayed, to hail the portrayed subject into social existence. In that sense, self-portraiture exhibits a counteraction to the initial „lack of will“ in being addressed, while adhering to and even buying into the common norms of recognition. In Cahun’s case of double-portraiture, the call for recognition might be seen as a double counteraction in that it actively prompts an address from the viewer (what do you want?) and confuses his or her form of address (who – one, two, male, female – is there to be addressed?).

The composition of the photograph bears resemblance to an early Greek form of “naturalistic portraiture,” which took on the form of double busts. “Double herms” date back to the early first century B.C. The sculptures usually consist of two heads

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56 Nathanaël Stephens kindly brought to my attention that Cahun used this photograph as a model for a drawing on the cover of a novel by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, *Frontières Humaines* (1929). The accompanying title of the drawing reads: “N’ayez pas peur d’etre dévorés” (Do not fear being devoured). In contrast to the photograph’s title, the drawing does not pose a question and consequently does not clearly state who is speaking: The plural could mean to address a multitude of viewers as well as the two represented subjects in the image. This confusion, paired with the pretended reassurance in the statement, which of course has the contrary effect of what it states, points to Cahun’s play with forms of (self-)representation and social address.

57 Joanna Woodall describes “naturalistic portraiture” as an attempt to represent the identity of the depicted subject through physiognomic likeness. She refers to the early twentieth-century artists’ challenge to the idea that visual resemblance necessarily represents a model’s identity. Woodall: 8.
conjoined at their back from crown to neck and shoulder. They were commonly mounted on pillars marking the entrance of a house or the boundary between two streets, rooms, or fields. The faces often represent two closely related, yet different figures of historical or intellectual importance. Cahun’s image suggests a clear reference to the idea of the double herm, yet mocks it, on the one hand, by apparently displaying the “same” face twice and, on the other hand, by turning the faces toward each other, which creates a space and a border within the sculpture instead of marking an external spatial border.

I read Cahun’s self-portrait as a classical double-portrait with a twist: it stages two subjects made alike, not through garments, make-up, head-dress, posture, or other identifiable accessories, but through the absence of markers of identity. Cahun’s image is stripped of details that would link the portrayed subjects to the outside world. Because there are no references to where, when, and under what conditions this photograph was taken, the faces are presented to their viewers in a direct way. The brightly lit skin enhances the effect of barenness, highlighting the absence of clothes and other decorations, behind which the portrayed could have hidden their presence. The harsh light paradoxically obfuscates meaningful details in the subjects’ faces. It is impossible to see personalizing signs, such as wrinkles, pimples, or birthmarks, and it is difficult even to make out the exact forms of ears, chins, mouths, and noses. The undefined, geometric background, disturbed only by the two blotches of dark shadow created by the heads, offers just as little information about the setting of the image.

To me, the image suggests a defiance of the identificatory power of representation in portraits. It performs a critique of portraiture, and especially of the possibility that photography can capture subjectivity. I view the image as a precarious mirror image, not of the artist and her subjectivity, but of the complexity and obscurity of visual (self-)representation. A painting by Catalan artist Miquel Barceló, Double Portrait (anverso de Deux Papayes) (1995), exhibits similar themes, while also showing meaningful differences.

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58 See more on ancient Greek portrait sculpture in S. Dillon.
In Barceló’s painting, two dark-colored heads stand out against a light-colored background. The heads are neckless and hairless, and lack clear indications of eyes, mouths, or noses. These face-shaped, yet blurry forms could almost be seen as two halves of an oval fruit-like object, as suggested by the title’s reference to the work’s corresponding reverse side, named Deux Papayes. To call Barceló’s image a portrait seems macabre: the heads are depicted as melting, oval black patches on a beige and white colored background. To perceive the two black lumps as faces is suggestive, yet painful in view of the fermenting state of the two portrayed objects. The heads maintain a subject- as well as an object-position for the viewer and confuse, as in Cahun’s image, the point of reference for the portrayed subject(s).

In Cahun’s and Barceló’s images, the color effects and particular atmosphere provoke ways of seeing face-shaped objects in a particular light. While the exposed and vulnerable-looking faces of Cahun stimulate the viewer to emphasize the subjects’ potentially more feminine markers such as rounded chins, missing facial hair, or narrow shoulders, Barcelo’s rough and dark faces trigger the perception of racialized stereotypes associated with dark skin, such as full lips, large ears, or hairiness.

The most revealing difference between Barceló’s painting and Cahun’s photograph is the reversed color scheme and the respective visibility or invisibility of
the heads’ eyes and looks. Cahun’s two faces are almost blinding against the image’s background. The multiple eyes and mouths stand out starkly, leaving the impression of piercing looks and cavernous throats. In contrast, Barceló’s heads are black against ochre, and are adorned with halo-like white illuminations. Now, the eyes and mouths are barely visible; indeed, one suspects rather than sees them. Only the form and tilt of the vestigial heads suggest that the head on the right looks to the right, while the other looks straight ahead. Barceló’s double portrait amasses color and form in such a way that the two faces become black holes resembling hollow eyes. What becomes of the portrayed subjects in the image? Where do the selves of the depicted faces reside?

What in Cahun’s image is over-lit is, in Barceló’s image, under-lit. Yet both have a similar effect: the obliteration of human features that would allow the viewer to determine the subject(s)’ gender, race, and age, and possibly their societal or cultural origins. As a result, the heads become removed from the category of the human. The missing reference to an original subject in the portrait through doubling and cloning is reinforced by the use of lighting and the play with the contrast between black and white. This contrast, especially when comparing the two images, suggests a further difference between Cahun and Barceló. While Cahun’s faces are dominated by the small but piercing black holes of their eyes and mouths, Barceló’s faces appeal, through the lack of light, to the viewer’s imagination and her or his ability to fill in what is denied to vision. Despite this difference, I contend that both images suggest that what becomes meaningful in the representation of subjectivity is precisely what the viewer cannot see.

Against the background of this challenge to visibility, I inquire into the intricacies of knowing oneself through representation. Cahun’s and Barceló’s images suggest that subjectivity is formed, yet also de-formed, through portraiture. Artistic self-representations that explore queer forms of identification offer ways of analyzing the deformed or transformed self in visuality. With the phrase “queer identification” I want to describe forms of identification that challenge the stability of identity and question the formation of subjectivity through linear and socially invariable processes. Queerness here stands more for the dislocation or the disturbance of representational traditions, linked to heteronormative ideals of gender and sex, than for the artists’ sexual orientation. Queer self-representations allow us to positively re-think the formation of subjectivity within the field of vision. My aim is to reveal a certain productivity that emerges from the loss of self in queer portraiture.
In order to substantiate this claim, I first explore psychoanalytical and phenomenological theories of subject-formation and their conception of narcissism, which, in relation to Cahun’s artwork, challenge the belief in the self’s containment and uniqueness.\(^{59}\) The self is analyzed in its amorous as well as potentially uneasy relation to itself. But then, in my own theoretical double portrait, I approach portraiture from a different direction. I contextualize Cahun’s image and a self-portrait by British-American artist Del LaGrace Volcano (*Andro Del*, 2005). Volcano’s photograph cites, yet opposes, the gaze of scientific portrait photographs at gender-deviant subjects. In a reversal of the self-loving images shown in narcissistic representations, medical photography produced portraits of subjects that were hostile to their sitters’ selves. Cahun as well as Volcano combine these two contrary traditions of portraiture. As a result, they counter their ways of producing subjectivity. Thus, the scientifically studied self comes to play a subversive role in queer art works. Integrating these two ways of countering specific traditions, I finally turn to the question of how a self can (re)present itself to others. Following Judith Butler’s conception of how one can give an account of oneself in language, I suggest that Cahun and Volcano, by challenging portraiture’s condition of likeness, defy of the regimes of gender, race, and age. In doing this, they allow us to consider possible alternative forms of communicating subjectivity in the field of visuality.

**Narcissus and the Loss of Self**

The body of Narcissus flows out and loses itself in the abyss of his reflection. (Salvador Dalí)

Recounting Ovid’s story about Narcissus, Mieke Bal illustrates the occurrence of a “hidden” life in the image:

This story of “death and the image” is about the denial of the true, natural body, not as opposed to, but as inhering in, the body’s image. The point is not that the body “behind” what we see can be revealed in its reality. The point is that there is a “real” body inside the image, which is - precisely because it is inside - out of reach, of vision. (238)

\(^{59}\) Cahun’s double images recur throughout her oeuvre and additionally allude to an emphasis on self-perception and self-awareness. They also suggest her narcissistic struggles, which found a suitable stage in her art. She once wrote, “Narcissism? Of course. It is my best feature” (LePerlier, 1994, p. 128). D. Knafo: 45.
For Narcissus, what is fatal is not excessive self-love, as common interpretations of the myth suggest, but a sense of hopelessness that is triggered as he loses his self to the assumed lover and his real body to its image. The loss of Narcissus’s self to his mirror image as love object leads to his death or, more poetically, to his transformation into a flower.

Dying is intricately linked to the relationship between Narcissus and his reflection. Desiring his specular image, Narcissus falls prey to the very condition of becoming a human subject, as Freud and Lacan have theorized in different ways. Freud interprets the myth as symbol for a self-absorbed subject whose libido is directed towards his own ego more than towards other subjects. While Freud believes that narcissism can lead to a form of perversion or disorder, he also argues that narcissism reflects a stage in every subject’s psychosexual development, in which “primary narcissism” designates a necessary stage between auto-eroticism and object-love. The child’s libidinal attachment to her or his mirror image allows the subject to acquire a sense of self and humanness (1914). The subject’s (ideally) intermediary state of self-love symbolizes Narcissus’s imaginary death. The realization of the impossibility of his desire’s satisfaction is accompanied by the recognition of having to leave behind his self.

Lacan similarly draws on the myth as the model for human subjectivity and death. Freud’s formulation of primary narcissism is recast by Lacan as a process of internalization of relationships - first of the child’s relationship to itself and, later, the subject’s relationship to others. In his essay on the “mirror stage” (stade du miroir, 1949/2006), as well as in later rearticulations of his thesis, he radicalizes Freud’s account by linking the subject’s formation in the mirror stage to its simultaneous alienation from itself. In the mirror stage, the child forms an ego through an imaginary projection, believing to be the external reflection in the mirror, which is its counterpart, non-self. Narcissism is caused by the self’s identifications with the images and language that convey the seeming consistency of a bodily entity that, however, is situated at some remove from the subject’s body. In the mirror stage, identification with one’s image creates a corporeal image that partly replaces the child’s corporeal experience. Narcissus’s recognition of himself as a desirable object

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in the image is accompanied by the loss of his bodily self-life. Becoming-subject through a visual process leads to a failure to survive humanness.

For Lacan, the reflection of the subject in his or her self-image demonstrates a particular power: on the one hand, it establishes an erotic relation between self and self-image; on the other hand, it alienates the subject by placing the ego in the mirror, thus creating a split between outer appearance and inner reality. In the mirror, the child recognizes its body as an image (external Gestalt), which presents an apparent unity and wholeness that is objectively missing in the child’s body-image (inner experience). The mirror image consequently triggers a form of identification that the subject experiences as external to the self. Ultimately, the mirror stage paradoxically becomes an alienating tool for self-discovery. It constitutes a subject by way of self-love and self-loss simultaneously.

In his book on Lacan, Malcolm Bowie (1993) writes: “The ‘alienating destination’ of the ‘I’ is such that the individual is permanently in discord with himself” (25). The self’s inner discord leads to an identification, which removes the self from itself but that is preferably overcome by the simultaneous desire for and identification with others. In this sense, narcissism, as it is formulated by Lacan, is a necessary function for becoming a subject insofar as it establishes a relation between the subject’s Innenwelt (organism) and Umwelt (surrounding reality) (Lacan: 78). At the same time, it is a drama in which the self is split up between a body-image and alienated identity; a drama that transforms the self from what Lacan calls the “specular I” into the “social I” (79).

In seeming contrast to traditional and psychoanalytical interpretations of the story, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (1968) adds another dimension to our understanding of narcissism. He observes a fundamental narcissism in all vision, and ascribes to narcissistic behavior a positive and socially constructive element (139). Humanity and identity are conditioned by the visual reciprocity of self and others, which is elicited by the body’s sensual interaction with the surrounding world. Self-seeing establishes a necessary “intercorporeity” between the subject and others (141). The objects seen return the subject’s look and constitute the subject’s being in the world. Feeling oneself looked at becomes comparable to the reciprocity of touch, through which a hand that touches something equally feels the touch of the object.

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61 The version of the myth that lets Narcissus be transformed into a daffodil (narcissus) seems to attest to the loss of human life while allowing for the continuation of life in a different, subject-less, form.
Vision constitutes the subject as part of the human landscape. This characterization of vision as an almost material condition represents for Merleau-Ponty a necessary element for subjectivity, formed always in relation to other subjects and the material world. As strongly as Freud’s and Lacan’s accounts of narcissism introduce a sense of identity that separates the subject from the maternal body and the world of others, Merleau-Ponty stresses the foundational character of vision in the constitution of the self vis-à-vis other subjects. The boundary of the child’s skin with the rest of the physical world, so important in psychoanalysis for the formation of the self, in phenomenology becomes a tool to facilitate the physical and mental interaction with others. Lacan’s alienation is turned into the necessary element for becoming a social human subject.

Merleau-Ponty posits the quest for the unity of the self as a communicative task: engagement with the surrounding world through the receptivity and reciprocity of the body. In his essay “Visions of Narcissism” (1991), David Michael Levin interprets Merleau-Ponty’s “narcissism of the flesh” in a way that radically reverses pathological definitions of “narcissistic personality disorder,” especially in Freud and later psychiatric conceptions:

In [Merleau-Ponty’s] “narcissism” of the flesh, there is ... a dialectic of reflection, and this dialectic deconstructs the narcissistic structure of the self, redeeming, at the very heart of “subjectivity”, its primordial sociality, its inherence in the reciprocities of a social world .... (54)

If self-reflection is reciprocated by another subject rather than a lifeless mirror, it returns a different image, which potentially shows more of the other than merely of one’s imagined self. In other words, the self is reflected in, but also through, another subject. The reflection of the self becomes a matter of who is reflecting whom. Where is the subject ultimately formed: in the reflected image or in the space between self and other?

Other than Lacan, Merleau-Ponty situates the facilitating specular image in the body of the other. While for Lacan the transformative character of self-reflection

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62 See more on Merleau-Ponty’s “hermeneutics of the flesh” and his “phenomenology of narcissism” in D. M. Levin: 53-54.
63 M. Bal in Bal & Bryson: 246.
64 Levin’s essay shows Lacan’s influence on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, yet presents the fundamental differences between the two approaches to the formation of the subject.
depends on the gaze of the (m)other who sees the self seeing itself in the mirror, for Merleau-Ponty the process of seeing oneself reflected in the other lies in the reciprocity of a shared vision. Seeing one another seeing, in this sense, does not answer to a psychoanalytic formulation of ego-formation, but reveals the productive dimension of vision, which allows for a reciprocal view of the self as shaped by the presence of the other. This “mirror of flesh” suggests not only a basic interaction between the self and others through the body but also predicates the self’s fundamental otherness. The self-alienation that Lacan ascribes is here not so much a méconnaissance (illusionary or false recognition) but rather an extended recognition: a recognition enlarged by the aspects of the other’s features in the flesh. The self is thus defined by its own decentered, yet not fragmented, body and by the bodies of others. As a consequence, the partial loss of self in narcissistic processes of identification is now positively connoted, since it is constructive for every subject’s sociality.

In his book on visual representation in the Western tradition, Stephen Bann (1989) calls the relation between Narcissus and his reflection “specular reciprocity” (133). Bann situates the dependency between portrayed subject and outside spectator on a second level. In typical representations, Narcissus is shown to observe himself in his reflection, so that the viewer of the painting participates in an act of voyeurism (128). When Bann connects art’s historical preoccupation with the myth of Narcissus to contemporary painting and photography, he observes a fundamental shift in the relation to images of self-reflection or self-projection as experienced by the artists and spectators. Contemporary artists and viewers of art, Bann contends, are confronted with an amended form of narcissism, in which Narcissus is saved from the fatal spiral of self-reflection by interiorizing the effect of representation.

Taking this interiorization into account means that, for a number of Western artists, self-portraits are more truthful than their real selves (Paul Klee), images of self and other converge or shift (Paul Cézanne), or an inner sense of self, a sense of wholeness, is projected outwards onto the picture plane, toward an outside viewer

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65 Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh a mirror phenomenon and, alluding to Lacan’s glass mirror, sees it as the formative medium of the subject and the object.
66 In reference to Leon Baptista Alberti’s Renaissance art theory, Stephen Bann gives a detailed account of how the story of Narcissus became a keystone in the history of the visual arts. While Alberti contends that Narcissus was “the inventor of painting,” Bann cautions us to remember that Narcissus, after all, was not an artist but a hunter. Nevertheless, Bann states that the Narcissus myth has had profound consequences for the history of representation in the broadest sense. (105-106)
(William Tucker) (Bann: 166, 185, 181). Bann further observes that the photographic medium, with its shiny, coated print, can evoke the surface of Narcissus’s pool of water. Hence, the emergence of photography symbolically challenged the myth of Narcissus. Instead of situating pictorial signification within the image, it now pertains to the materiality of the picture’s very surface. Traditionally, Bann states, “Narcissus is trapped in the specular unity of the self and its image” (154). The self remains within the image, voyeuristically contemplated by an outside spectator. Later, as the visual history of the myth suggests, the self is also represented in and by the medium or the materiality of the image, thus standing in a closer and possibly more involved relation to the spectator. One might even suggest that the specular (mirroring) reciprocity of Narcissus and his reflection have been transposed to a visual (viewing) reciprocity of self and other. In a sense, then, Merleau-Ponty’s narcissism of the flesh has already been put into practice by contemporary artists, who question a subject’s relation to her or his visual representation.

If thus, in earlier artworks, Narcissus and his reflection often mirrored each other, later the “perfect” likeness of the two versions of Narcissus was distorted. Cahun plays with this likeness by showing a clear resemblance between the two faces, while twisting their poses and bestowing each with distinct gazes. The one face is not like the other; they are two selves, not two images of one self. Cahun’s critical revision of likeness establishes a crucial connection to the different theories on narcissism I have presented above. Art, in opposition to theory, thus adds to the analysis of narcissism an important aspect that lies in the image itself. Specifically, photographic portraiture, due to photography’s historical connection to likeness, allows me to adduce Cahun’s image as an example of a particular form of narcissism: a narcissism that leads to a loss of self.67

In Cahun’s double portrait, the subjects’ resemblance invokes the theme of the double. This doubling literalizes what Linda Nochlin describes as “the meeting of two subjectivities” in portraiture.68 If, in the traditional portrait, the viewer is confronted with the subjects of portrayer and portrayed, the self-portrait projects another double encounter: the meeting of two forms of subjectivity belonging to the same person, the artist and the artist’s self-reflection. The simultaneous presence of self and self-image in the self-portrait leads, in Cahun’s photograph, to a dislocation of two versions of

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67 See more on photographic portraiture and likeness in Gage.
the same. Each of the two heads seems to have made space for the other’s appearance in the image, which points not only to their doubled or split subjectivity, but also to a mutual recognition of each other’s existence.69

Despite the two faces’ likeness, however, it remains unclear whether the two subjects are twins. If not twins, they can only be duplications of each other, and are thus one subject. The photograph presents the viewer with the conceptual problem of the “Doppelgänger.” The subject’s ghostly double confuses the opposition between the original and the clone. This confusion becomes more pronounced when we realize that the depicted subjects are both replicas of Claude Cahun, the photographer. The title of the artwork adds to our bewilderment. It asks, provocatively, “What do you want from me?” without indicating who poses the question, and to whom it is addressed. The French title Que me veux-tu? can also be translated as “What do you want with me?” or as “How do I bother you?” The question in French has an old-fashioned structure, in which two grammatical objects (accusative: que and indirect: me) reside. The interrogative pronoun what and the personal pronoun me become confused. What results from this structure is that the meaning of the question starts to blur. I want to suggest that Cahun deliberately chose this sentence to leave unclear as to who poses the question and to whom it is directed. Cahun’s image confronts the viewer with an exchange between an invisible original and its two similar, yet different copies. The doubling of the represented subject and narcissistic self-imaging paradoxically meet in Cahun’s photograph. The self-centered relation exhibited by the artist is multiplied and hence transformed into a plurality of narcissistic selves.

The theme of duplication refers to a fundamental condition of portraiture, which depends on the face being able to be reproduced in representation. Joanne Woodall suggests that “a portrait is a likeness which is seen to refer to the identity of the person depicted” (9-10). There is, however, another conception of portraiture that questions the conflation between person and representation. It results from a dualist perspective on portraiture and believes in a division between the living body of a

69 In an article on Claude Cahun and the third sex, Danielle Knafo emphasizes Cahun’s preoccupation with the theme of the double in her artistic works. (46) Quoting Otto Rank who stated on the double motif that “The idea of death ... is denied by a duplication of the self,” (Rank: 83), Knafo sees Cahun’s double as a protective function against the loss of self: Should one self die or go mad, the second self would survive. This thesis reads Cahun’s creation of a Doppelgänger as a mode of survival. In contrast, I interpret Cahun’s double as a move away from the self – away from a stable, fixed, or normed self and towards a multitude of selves, which give the artist more freedom to become a person beyond traditional social categories.
person and her or his true inner self. This means that likeness here forms a barrier between the sitter and the representation of her or his “real” self. This view, coupled with other conceptions of portraiture, allows me to interpret Cahun’s image both as a self-identificatory examination of the artist and as an attempt to stress the distinction between identity and the material body.

Painting or photographing a face means doubling it, but also bestows on that double an uncanny life of its own: the created image hovers between reality and fiction. The represented face must resemble the original closely enough to meet the conditions of portraiture; yet, it must not be identical to the real so as not to threaten the subject’s uniqueness. The fine line between these two requirements makes portraiture, on the one hand, a precarious mode of representation; on the other hand, the genre allows for experimentation with the critical nature of representation in relation to subjectivity and reality - and, as I want to argue, in relation to gender, race, and age. Cahun’s double portrait, with its narcissistic dualism, combines a critical perspective on portraiture with a special conception of narcissistic identification.

The photograph refers to Lacan’s mirror stage not only by showing two faces that look like mirror images but also by exposing the two faces’ mutual acknowledgment of the other. They seem to become who they are through seeing each other seeing, as well as through posing to be seen by a third viewer, the spectator. Lacan’s narcissism is brought onto the picture plane. The inner formation of subjectivity is transposed into a process of entering into visual representation.

At the same time, the image does not use a real mirror but generates what Merleau-Ponty calls the mirror in the flesh: one face is mirrored in and through the other. The iconic likeness given by a mirror is constituted here in the flesh of the other, eerily alike, yet clearly different. In that sense, Cahun presents a self that is defined through the other in the self’s own flesh. Que me veux-tu? reflects Merleau-Ponty’s idea of self-seeing as a condition for the relation to others by its creation of an intercorporeity between bodies. Because self and other become interchangeable, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of a fundamental narcissism inherent in vision turns into the visual interaction between multiple selves, playing out in relation to an outside viewer. Self-reflection becomes, if not a social performance, then an interactive staging of self-formation. Lacan’s and Merleau-Ponty’s theories come together in Cahun’s image, transformed into an expression of selfhood that sheds new light on self-portraiture and identification.
Reflecting on feminist art, Rosy Martin claims that self-portraiture “is a way of coming into representation for women, in which the artist is both subject and object and conceives of how she looks in the sense of how she sees rather than how she appears.” The twofold and, in this case, facilitating structure of seeing and appearing (being seen), coupled with the synchrony of subject- and object-position, relates to Cahun’s work in a different way: the portrait is staged not so much for an outside viewer but rather for Cahun’s own eyes. Her selves come into view for each other. The confused object/subject- and personhood-status result in a qualification of originality and reference. Where in or for Cahun’s image is the original situated? The two faces demonstrate the impossibility of a primary model, the real thing. Outside the image, one can hardly imagine another, a third self, serving as the original for both. Consequently, Cahun becomes a subject without referent inside or outside the image. She presents herself as the representation not of a unique individual, but of an unbound subjectivity. Presenting herself as duplicated, she stages a certain absence. Subjectivity is lost in the quest for it. Nonetheless, visually, both selves act like self-determined individuals, performing their personhood with confidence. Cahun’s self-determination produces a subjectivity, in which a core self is absent, lost, or given up. My larger aim in the present chapter is to unearth the potential productivity of this loss for gender-queer or other ambiguous forms of identification.

To bring together Cahun’s narcissistic display and her loss of self in the image, I now wish to analyze the self-portrait in light of its interaction with the viewer. Therefore, I shift my attention from the inner-subjective relation of the image (I and I) towards the inter-subjective relation with the viewer (I and you). I draw on Bal’s concept of “second-personhood” to show how Cahun’s double portrait challenges the “interlocutory” viewing situation that is normally produced by a portrait. In my analysis of Cahun’s double portrait, I take the theatrical situation as the basis for a communicative situation between viewer and portrayed, yet I argue that Cahun’s two depicted selves complicate the self-other or you-me relationship of common portraiture. Despite their obviously theatrical (deliberate and affected) pose, the two subjects subvert common social behaviour. 

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70 Rosy Martin in Marsha Meskimmon: xv.
71 See Grootenboer on the theatricality of portraits and the communicative situation between a portrait and its viewer. In her analysis of seventeenth-century Dutch portraits, Grootenboer uses the concept of theatricality in allusion to Butler’s theory of performativity. Theatricality here denotes a social role-play, or the calculated depiction of studied social behaviour, which aims to have a specific effect on the
For Bal, “second-personhood refers to the fundamental dependence of each subject on his or her ‘other’, be it the caregiver, the interlocutor, or the social environment” (2006: 540). Cahun’s narcissistic self-relationality makes her other herself. Second-personhood is thus embodied in Cahun’s own self. Between Cahun as first person (“I, Claude Cahun”) and second person (“You, Claude Cahun”) there is a dependence, created by their visual communication. But since the image also assumes a viewer to whom it is presented, another other comes into play: the spectator. The viewer is engaged due to the expressivity of the depicted faces. The prompting title, coupled with the image portraying the artist twice, complicates this triangle between two selves and one other, however. It addresses as other not only the viewer but also the artist behind the camera. Cahun becomes another (invisible) other.

The involvement of this third Cahun marks, on the one hand, an absence in the image, of which one sees only photographic traces, the two selves. On the other hand, the absent third self stresses the peculiar presence of the doubled selves in the photograph, as other to one another. As in Lacan’s conception of the mirror stage, it is the gaze of another, third subject that makes the subject’s recognition meaningful. The two-dimensional self-portrait turns into a three-dimensional representation of selves in such a way that the spectator becomes involved in the engaged looks of the image. The (self-)portrait not only represents various versions of the same subject (visible and invisible), but also exposes their involvement within representation.

Thus, the image depends on the physical or visible absence of a third person. Through a third person, if we continue our Lacanian perspective, the I and the you become a he or a she. Only through the perspective of a third position, then, gender becomes meaningful; you and I are still genderless. Yet, Cahun turns the third person outside the image into a second person by directly addressing the viewer with the question posed in the title. In that sense, she refutes gender identification, ultimately any identification confirmed solely through the gaze of the other. Identities become meaningful only through first- and second-personhood, rather than through a third person. Those identities not only challenge Lacan’s account of subject formation in the mirror stage, but also question self-other relationships in connection to first-, second-, and third-personhood.
In Lacan’s account of the formation of the self in the mirror stage, he positions the investigative infant, so to say, at an angle to the reflecting mirror. The child can only recognize itself as self with the help of another. Its physical incapacity calls for a parent’s help to position the child in front of the mirror. The helping “hand” becomes the necessary third-person for the child’s self-formation: a subject needs the look of the other in order to see itself. In Cahun’s image, however, the other is indistinguishable from the self in the mirror. The double self is self and other in one form. In that sense, Cahun’s photograph challenges Lacan’s concept of self-formation through the split between self and other, or between first, second, and third person-positions. Self and other are exchangeable. The third term is not wholly absent, but is invisible and changes location in and outside of the image.

This personalized setting establishes a particularly intimate relationship between image and viewer. It creates a forum of exchangeable recognition within the structure of the image, independent of the social construction of subjectivity. Bal contends that

[Second] personhood indicates the reversible relationship of complimentarity between first- and second-person pronouns. The use of the pronouns produces subjectivity and constitutes the essence of language because, as Benveniste says, the pronouns do not refer. (Bal, 1996: 182)

*I* and *you* cannot refer outside the speaking situation; they are meaningful only within the setting in which they are used. The second person is crucial to the confirmation of the *I* as a speaker. When the perspective shifts, the *you* becomes an *I*. First and second person reciprocally confirm the subjectivity of the *I*: they condition each other.

In the field of vision, first- and second-personhood are not as easily distinguished as in language. This potentially allows for a broader signification of subjectivity bestowed by one to the other. In Cahun’s photograph, even the third person is turned into a *you* through the title, which further confuses the relation through which subjectivity is formed in the image. *I* and *you* in visuality do not represent (as, in language, they do not refer), and they do not result in iconic likeness with someone outside of the picture. Yet, likeness nevertheless plays a crucial role in portraiture, with its seeming reference to an external subject, the portrayed sitter who exists outside of the viewing situation. If likeness is contested, however, it becomes a
critical tool to challenge the ability of representation to mirror reality, to depict a
world outside the picture plane.

In relation to an artwork by Carrie Mae Weems (*Mirror/Mirror*), in which a
black woman’s face is mirrored in and by a racially ambiguous, possibly white
woman, Bal asserts the uneasy connection between the formation of subjectivity and
the external address of a cultural framing of subjectivity: “The subject is constituted
by ‘second-personhood’, by being addressed, confirmed or infirmed by others. ... What makes [Weems’s] work so confusing is that it depicts the self, but denies the
self’s harmony, unity and interiority, without reducing the self to appropriated
exteriority only” (Bal, 2005: 153). The subject here and in Cahun’s image develops a
complex character: it is not one, is not wholly itself, but neither is it fully exterior to
itself. First- and second-personhood merge and defy an identifiable essence of a self
within the depicted subject.

Narcissus and his myth are productively retold in images that, like Cahun’s,
refuse to believe in the fixity of identity and turn the perils of narcissism into a
productive reflection on representation as shaping subjectivity. My next section deals
with an entirely different perspective on portraiture, ostensibly the opposite of
narcissims: portraiture in scientific photography. The focus here shifts from the self to
the other, and first- and second-personhood move to the background. The third-person
authority of scientific, medical discourse bestows identity on designated others
through measurement, ways of lighting, and visual comparison.
From Scientific Display to Artistic Self-Imaging

A prominent self-portrait by Del LaGrace Volcano (Andro Del, 2000) shows a likeness to Cahun’s double portrait: it shows a bald-headed face, which looks, apart from the skin’s (too) obvious whiteness, free of identity markers such as age and gender. The inexpressive close-up of the face, shot against a black-tile background, instantly reminds the viewer of laboratory photographs of criminals, queers, psychopaths, and other social outcasts, which became the basis for quasi-scientific theories about human normalcy. In the portrait-series called Gender Optional (2000), Volcano portrays himself in two different settings. One sequence shows various full-body portraits, either clad in more or less feminine attire - flowery dress, lipstick, and a woman’s wig - or in a more masculine long leather skirt, short hair, and goatee.
Del Boy Swoon (Gender Optional) (2000) by Del LaGrace Volcano

Debby Muscles (Gender Optional) (2000) by Del LaGrace Volcano
In this series, Volcano performs gender through attire and shows the effects of a successful naturalization of gender. At the same time, these color photographs, shot against a harsh white background, often an unpleasant and acute perspective on the gender-conflicting features within Volcano’s appearance. The other sequence consists of mug shots that show Volcano’s face in differently aged and gendered stages against a black-and-white tile background. The obviously staged character of Volcano’s self-portraits does not entirely relieve the viewer of recalling criminological and psychiatric photography, which displayed their subjects as objectified types.

One of the more naked face-shots in Volcano’s second sequence is revealing for the image's artificiality. The subject in Andro Del seems beyond humanity, lifeless and bloodless, as if sterilized by the laboratory practices of representation. The face is turned into an androgynous, indeterminate, de-subjectivized mask. The skin is lit with blindingly bright light. As an effect, the black background grid breaks through the levels of the image, seeming to move towards the front, overwriting the face in the foreground. One cannot see the skin’s wrinkles or creases. There is no hair visible, and the transitions between nose, mouth, eyes, ears, neck and cheeks can barely be guessed. The one feature that stands out, and that cannot be securely located within the image, as it seems to hover between foreground and background, are the subject's eyes. They are dark blue, piercing and cold. In contrast to the rest of the photograph’s black-and-white tonal scheme, the eyes are the only colored element in the image. This fact makes them hard to place in the image. They take on a life of their own.

In his analysis of the work of contemporary transgender artists, Ben Singer shows how the subversive element in images mainly lies in the subjects’ look. Artists often picture themselves looking directly, almost provocatively, at the camera and the viewer. This use of the look corresponds to, and reverses, the import of the look in medical portraiture. The stare of the criminal or the mad person used to be singled out as dangerous and aggressive. Indeed, the fear of being seen by a degenerate led to a sense of personal vulnerability that was associated with the threat of violence (Fraser: 145). The self-portraits of Volcano can be seen to cite and ridicule pathological imaging.

Some transgender artists counter a laboratory-like atmosphere with chiaroscuro lighting, dark backgrounds, and self-assured posing as bodybuilders, fashion models, or businessmen. Probably the most famous transgender artist who posed as a nude bodybuilder is the photographer Loren Rex Cameron. In many of his
self-portraits, he directly refers to the medical gaze by holding the shutter release bulb in one hand while his other hand injects a syringe with body-modifying testosterone into his butt. Singer describes those images in the following way:

Cameron’s [self-portraits refuse] the Frankensteinian logic of medical expertise that puts the doctor and the medical establishment in the role of the creator. ... While the medical model asserts that Cameron is a product of medical intervention - or even invention, and thus a proper subject of the medical gaze - [his self-images represent] him as an active moral and ethical agent assuming responsibility for his own embodiment. (Singer: 606)

Despite their unquestionable significance for transgender emancipation, I have doubts about Cameron’s photographs. They seem to subvert the traditional objectification of gender-queer subjects by way of emphasizing Cameron’s hyper-masculinity. Posture, expression, and appearance in no way betray the artist’s transgender body—excepting perhaps the glimpse of the absent phallic bulge, slightly visible scars in place of breasts, and the syringe. The play with traditional masculinity is decisive, yet does not challenge representation’s coercive mechanism.
In contrast to the representations of non-normative bodies that allude to trans-bodied beauty, muscles, and male stereotypes, Volcano subverts those same traditions in a different way. Like Cahun, Volcano strips gendered markers from his face. In doing so, he refers to the photographs of sexual inverts that exhibited male and female features on the one hand, but on the other hand make it harder to identify the sitter. The omitted likeness to conventionally gendered persons resists the comparison with an outside reference. The ambiguity creates a void in the viewer’s reading of the image: the depicted criminal, queer, or psychopath cannot be read through common signs of identity.

In an article on the “Ethics of (Re)Viewing Non-normative Body Images,” (2006) Singer states that, since the nineteenth century, scientific photographs have been used to document the moral depravity of criminals, homosexuals, and people with physical anomalies. Medicine, psychiatry, and criminology conspired to produce evidence of “a common aesthetic impulse: to locate the sight/site of deviance on the bodies of a wide array of social outcasts” (601). In line with social changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the medical sciences developed new strategies to deal with health problems, to cure illnesses, and to help maintain the sanity of individuals. The medical perspective developed from one characterized by learning about illnesses in books (library medicine) to the classification and management of a patient’s symptoms (bedside medicine) at that time. With the advent of the first hospitals in Paris around the same time, the now dominant model of medicine in Europe and the United States arose (hospital medicine).

Today’s Western medicine, biomedicine, and pathological medicine has evolved over the last two centuries after what Michel Foucault described as the Birth of the Clinic (1973). Even so, during the twentieth century an alternative model of medical practice emerged. “Surveillance medicine” gradually superseded earlier medical perspectives. The new perspective concentrated on seemingly healthy populations; it observed and charted the development of children, tried to find incipient causes for physical and mental illnesses, and directed its gaze to the contextual space between individuals’ bodies. In an article on this “Rise of Surveillance Medicine” (1995), David Armstrong observes that

[the] space between bodies is also, from the early 20th century, a psycho-social space which is marked by the shift in the
psychiatric/medical gaze from the binary problem of insanity/sanity to the generalised population problems of the neuroses (which affect everyone), and the crystallisation of individual attitudes, beliefs, cognitions and behaviours, limits to self-efficacy, ecological concerns, and aspects of lifestyle that have become such preoccupation of progressive health care tactics. (401)

Surveillance medicine thus coupled the individual body to its potentially sickening social surroundings.

To include everyone within its network, surveillance medicine required the blurring of the clinical distinction between health and illness, a distinction that traditionally trained the eye on the individual body, a body situated within a three-dimensional framework that involved symptom, sign, and pathology, and that was no less informed by the individual’s social context and stereotypes about gender, race, and class. Yet, as illness begins to leave the margins of the human body, it starts to inhabit a new, extra-corporeal space. The shift in what Foucault called the effect of the earlier movement towards hospitalization, the “spatialization” of illness, brought with it a problematization of normalcy. The schematic coding of communities led to the classification of individuals not in relation to beliefs about illness and health but to the average or median in a particular society, deduced from systematic surveys. Normalcy and abnormality thus became relative phenomena. The resulting differentiation presented itself in degrees, not types. Difference became manifested in the spaces between individuals and bodies, all based on statistical findings that classified bodies on a continuum.

However, as the extra-corporeal space was often represented by the notion of “lifestyle,” which circumscribed a person’s sexual practices, desires, and her or his cultural and social background, surveillance medicine’s seeming objectivity entailed a classification of illness, insanity, and deviance based on the everyday habits of bodies and persons. Within this new medicalized space, self and community were no longer separated. The boundaries of a person’s identity became “the permeable lines that separate a precarious normality from a threat of illness“ (Armstrong: 403). Surveillance medicine’s object becomes a self that exposes the vulnerability of health, sanity, and normality; a risky self that, merely through its social interactions, poses a threat to a medically or clinically monitored delineation of persons and bodies.

Surveillance medicine’s relation to visuality is of particular interest for this chapter. In his historical study of space, Foucault focused on “spaces of constructed
visibility,” such as hospitals and prisons. Foucault demonstrates how these spaces constitute the subject by determining her or his being in space through the monitoring of light, controlling what can be seen or not seen. As much as visual technologies were able to discipline bodies in “panoptic” architecture, surveillance medicine succeeded in “providing for” a population’s health by using photography and portraiture. The distancing from the body of the individual patient allowed for a new clinical picture. The increased focus on the space between bodies made it possible, on the one hand, to visually document health risks on a broader scale: the findings of surveys could be checked against a grid-like structure, in which individuals became readable through their differentiation from other subjects. This mapping of bodies created a picture of the containment of pathologies and a seeming totality. On the other hand, visual information, having become more important, also became more strongly relational. A clinical picture can mean something only in contrast to another of the same kind. This relationality was typically enacted in series of images about certain types of illness, embodiments, or criminal dispositions.

In “Queer Physiognomies” (2004), Dana Seitler shows how “racial peculiarities,” “fetishism,” “aberrations and perversions,” and “freaks and other abnormalities” were serially illustrated in the genre of scientific pictorial display in the early-twentieth century. The well-known head-shot photographs of prisoners or sexual degenerates were often displayed in medical textbooks as a row of portraits, eliciting comparison. Not only did the pictured subjects inevitably refer to one another, but they also created a connection among a range of images of bodies designated as deviant. Cahun’s self-portrait alludes to those scientific head-shots in its cold presentation of the two faces, stripped from attire and other markers of social origin or status. The duplication of the heads imitates images of Siamese twins, which were circulated under the name of anatomical abnormalities; moreover, the work mimics scientific comparisons between different degenerates. By letting the heads acknowledge their mutual assessment in the image, Cahun questions the impassivity or non-involvement of the subjects in their classification as a type. The externally determined relationality is transferred into the picture, allowing the portrayed to appropriate the act of comparison.

The development of what Kathryn Fraser terms the “photographic insane” (1998) became the basis for transgender artists to counter traditional, depersonalized
medical representations with self-representative portraiture. Fraser observes how the use of portraiture and photography originally reinforced medical authority:

The use of codes of portraiture (e.g. image limited to representing the head and shoulders on a plain or non-existent background) and the choice to represent a posed subject rather than an arrested moment in time (such as a surgical procedure) all contributed to the increasing medicalization of such images. (144)

This practice had the additional effect of creating a visual model for the representation of a state of illness or insanity. To some extent, one could even say that the posed character of medical portraiture supported the objective aim to represent the deviation from a natural state of being.

This pathological relationality also incorporates the viewer of the images in a particular way. It exposes a visuality that refers to the other as part of a whole, a deviation from the normal, which at the same time has its place in the schema that maps society. The viewer finds herself or himself looking at a neighbor on a contingent categorical grid. This situation creates a viewing position that may provoke the spectator’s apprehension of resembling or even becoming the clinical image.

Photographic portraiture was first practiced in the field of psychiatry in the early twentieth century. Its photographs did more than merely document knowledge about deviance; they also aimed to inform the public about codes of insanity and potential aberrances from racial and sexual norms. A prevalent fear of cultural and moral contagion made the images an important marker to delineate the normal from the deviant, as Seitler observes:

Together, racial and sexual imagery in science’s visual culture enabled the human sciences to delineate a framework of deviance - to affirm, through the degradation of a racialized, sexualized, and gender-troubled body, the virtues of social hygiene, and to protect, through the elevation of scientific certainty, the social world that so many feared was endangered by the presence of such deviant bodies. The imperative of visibility helped demarcate a formal space of legibility within which conceptualizations of human sexuality became available,

72 See Bronfen on anxiety about portraits: “Anxiety about portraits expresses the fear that the transformation of matter from one form to another can engender the literal sacrifice of the ‘depth’ of the model. ... Anxiety is based on a confusion between the imaginary register with the real; a misunderstanding of the portrait as an iconic rather than an arbitrary symbolic sign; a misunderstanding that the production of an image can cause an incursion into the materiality of its object of reference. [It] re reintroduces an uncertainty about the distinction between a body and its image.” (115)
but the compulsive and infinitely expanding nature of this imperative also fundamentally challenged sexuality as a stable or recuperable category. (80)

The fear of contagion and the imperative of visual exposition are contrary phenomena that are combined and exposed in Volcano’s self-portrait. His face shows as much as can be shown of a face stripped of hair, shadow, and color; it is vulnerably naked. It exposes itself unambiguously to the eye of the viewer. The imperative of visibility is satisfied. At the same time, the starkly blue eyes shoot a look at the viewer that seems to break through the picture plane, crossing the border separating sterile image and impure reality. The viewer is affected by the authority of the image and the control of the portrait’s look. Volcano implements contagion within the image: he imports it into his self-representation, transforming moral panic into an actual effect of visual technology. The deviant’s self-portrait becomes a confident performance of a social actor.

Jean-Luc Nancy’s argues that the portrait sets a subject within a relation to the self (227). The argument allows me to pose a crucial question regarding Volcano’s self-portrait: How does the relation appear of the portrayed subject to its own self and to the self of the spectator? What does it provoke? In “The Look of the Portrait” (2006), Nancy ascribes to the portrait a peculiar quality, namely a capability of looking.73 He claims that, when the look of a subject is portrayed in a painting, the painting itself becomes the look it paints. The portrait’s look, however, does not look at something, it merely embodies or accommodates a look that might at best look at nothing. The portrait presents a look that draws the viewer’s eyes upon itself, that turns the spectator’s look into its own reflection.

When Nancy discusses Miquel Barceló’s Double Portrait, he observes the canvas’s transmutation into a close-up of the look. The flat and skin-colored surface becomes the upper part of a face. The two portrayed black heads become eyes that stare lifelessly at the viewer. The look of Barceló’s painting seems to disrupt a possible relation between the portrait and the spectator, as well as between the two portrayed faces. The viewer’s sight is drawn into two black holes and devoured by the painting’s eye-like look upon itself. In Volcano’s self-portrait, however, the relation between the look of the image and the look in the image is more complicated. With its

73 See also: G.Didi-Huberman, 1992.
direct reference to medical portraiture’s history of humiliating objectification, *Andro Del* incorporates the look of the portrait into Volcano’s own look and returns it to the viewer. In contrast to Barceló, Volcano reproduces the portrait’s look, and bestows it with a life of its own. The life of the portrait lies in the look. The face itself remains unresponsive, mirroring the deadening effects of visual objectification.

Volcano’s spectral face reflects androgynous as well as lifeless, nearly inhuman features. Because of the skin’s missing contrast, caused by the photograph’s bright lighting, the face drowns in its background. The effacement of detail turns into a *defacement*. Paul De Man has applied the notion of defacement to autobiographical writing (1979). He relates defacement to the production of new knowledge by stressing the act of writing on a surface, lending the object a personified appearance. Defacing means to infuse life onto a marred or dead object. De Man understands defacement as an effect of language that lends a face to something that does not have one; this new face can thus be understood as masking or naming something absent, deceased, or voiceless. (926)

Transposing De Man’s notion into the realm of the visual, I understand the “light-writing” of photography as a way to give a new face to a lifeless image of a face. Cahun’s photograph effaces the likeness to a human, living, gendered, and colored face. It defaces the representational truth of a photographic portrait. The face of Volcano is not, however, absorbed by nothingness, but presents instead an affective screen onto which new characteristics of humanity can be projected. It serves as a reflecting and reflected unity, which in its close-up appearance turns from reflexive to intensive. I am here following Deleuze’s concept of close ups in films, which, as he suggests, do not represent a face, but *are* the face.74 This effect in addition to the use of white light intensifies the visual power of the close up, as Deleuze states:

> [A translucent or white] space retains the power to reflect light, but it also gains another power which is that of refracting, by diverting the rays which cross it. The face which remains in this space thus reflects a part of the light, but refracts another part of it. From being reflexive, it becomes intensive (94).

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74 See Deleuze, 1986. Deleuze argues that “there is no close-up of the face” but that “the close-up is the face” (88), and that the face’s blankness or nudity represents an inhumanity that is “much greater than that of animals” (99).
Similarly, Volcano’s and Cahun’s faces confront their viewer with an intensity that “forces the spectator to rebound on the surface of the screen” (Deleuze: 94). They thus present to the spectator a screen or a facade, which overwrites the representational power of the portrait, and, as a consequence, the photographed subject’s gendered, sexual, and racial characteristics. They show a particular nudity, which consists of skin stripped of common markers. Both images consequently convey a certain inhumaness, or a flatness of human expression, that could be compared to the characteristics of a phantom-like figure, defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “something (as a specter or an optical illusion) that is apparent to the sight or other sense but has no actual or substantial existence.”75

The ghost-like appearance of both images is produced through the effects of lighting. As in the medical portraits, Cahun and Volcano use bright white studio lighting. However, in contrast to the scientific aim to bring out as many visual details as possible, the two artists flatten or even erase the faces’ features with this same light. Instead of absorbing and thus elucidating the illuminated faces, the artworks return the light, mirror it in the white surfaces of Cahun’s and Volcano’s heads.

In a similar vein, Bal analyzes the ghost-like effect of lighting in portrait painting. In Quoting Caravaggio (1999), Bal suggests that light in painting takes on a particular material quality, like paint (189). Light and shade can form a tactile substance, produced by what Bal calls “light-writing.” With this term, she refers to the art of "photo-graphy," which literally means “writing with light,” and ascribes to it the ability to create a physical effect on the viewer. Bal writes: “Light signifies the most tender and slight, yet most thrilling, kind of touch ...” (192). Engaging the viewer corporeally in the act of viewing, the light-written image makes itself available to a different kind of seeing. The color white, which in painting produces the impression of light, takes on a relevance beyond its material substance. It transcends the painting’s surface, creates depth, permits an “inward” view of the image and of oneself. “White compels us to look closely. ... It is not a color because it is all colors: it reflects them,” Bal concludes (46-7).

Thus, white lighting also suggests a mirror function. Applied to photography, the material quality of white paint/pigment is replaced by the evanescent yet significant immateriality of projected lighting. Richard Dyer’s essay on the

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75 See Merriam-Webster Unabridged (online): phantom.
relationship between whiteness and light in photography and film conclusively shows that both are used to produce certain aesthetic effects in vision. He emphasizes an obvious yet easily disregarded fact, namely that photographic images or frames of a projected film are products of the effect of light on a chemically prepared surface, a surface with light shining through onto a screen. Without light, there is no photograph and no film (85). The elements involved in the production of a particular photographic image, such as the light source, the skin color of the depicted subject, or the exposure and development of the film material, all affect the way an image is perceived. Through these means, the image controls visibility and causes a particular touch for the viewer. Depending on the play of shadows, back- or front-lighting, and different tones of light, the surface of the image takes on mirror-like qualities that can reflect a viewer’s look or, alternately, act as a black hole that swallows the spectator’s gaze. In photography, light becomes a medium of infinite plasticity (84). It is textural yet evasive, evanescent yet invasive. In Volcano’s and Cahun’s photographs, the bright and cold studio lighting on white skin against a dark background creates an eerie feeling, a dizzying effect.

Another type of whiteness also plays an important role in the two images: the white paper on which the photographs are printed invades the images from their borders and shows through the portrayed faces, blurring the difference between image or representation and outside reality. In the photographs, white covers as well as reveals most of the images’ surfaces. The larger part of the images is white surface, giving the depicted figures a translucent, indistinct quality. Combined with the brutally sharp contours of the faces’ outlines, which refer to the scrutinizing medical gaze in criminological, psychiatric, eugenic, and ethnographic photography, the images produce a dissonance between defined visibility and vague perception. What at first sight seems to present itself as a clear image turns out to create an opaque effect in the viewer. The sharp shapes against the background stand in contrast to the skin’s undefined whiteness. The characteristic of whiteness lies in opacity rather than clarity. Gendered and racial details are effaced and become unrepresentable. A defined personality is likewise erased, and the erasure causes a ghostly presence to become evident. The very humanness of the portrayed faces is questioned.

The faces appear as faces; yet, they refute their subject’s humanness. What both images expose, however, in clear contrast to Barceló’s two heads, is an uncanny aliveness in their eyes and their sharp looks. It seems as if what they represent as
subjects resides inside their heads, almost beyond visibility. The viewer is confronted with glimpses of a life that is projected outwards through their piercing gazes. The two-dimensional medium of the photographs becomes alive through the play of light and darkness reflected in the portrayed eyes. Cahun’s and Volcano’s images achieve this pictorial animation by unusual means: they give life to the visual image through the effect of blinding their viewer.

In the history of painting, the invention and popularity of watercolor was due to its transparent quality. Watercolor, when painted on white paper, reflected the background’s whiteness and produced a “brightness of tone, freshness of colour and luminosity of effect” (Reynolds, quoted in Dyer: 112). Bal observes a similar effect in one of David Reed’s oil paintings (#275), in which “the light does more than just draw and sculpt the shapes. ... It pushes up from within” (194). Like blood, pulsating underneath the paint. In contrast to watercolor images and oil paintings, the two photographs seem to reverse the effect of whiteness and the use of light. Watercolor and oil paint, as well as photographic techniques, employ whiteness and use the material quality of light to expose a particular life from within the image, a life that pulsates beneath the facade of the picture. In the first two cases, white and light are the markers of aliveness. Only through these two elements does the painting receive its texture, its tactility. In Cahun’s and Volcano’s self-representations, however, white and light indicate blindness and nothingness. All depth is lost in the white surfaces. Here, the seemingly insubstantial black (or blue) parts of the images contain and give life to the represented subjects. Life exists within the image, almost behind the surface of the image, at the edge of visibility, and on the border of representation.

I submit that this effect comprises the queering aspect of the two images. They imitate a cultural tradition in such a way that it is turned on its head, enacted in reverse. Using the same means as artists within a venerable tradition, these artists subvert the usual outcome. They queer the visual by exposing what ought to remain concealed, and by disrupting the repressive surface of representational imaging. Butler defines queering “as a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed.” She states that “‘queering’ works as the exposure within language – an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language – of both sexuality and race” (1993: 176). I want to use her conception of the term and apply it to the realm of the visual, where the disruption takes place on the surface of the picture by visual means and on the surface of representation by discursive means. Like Cahun’s retelling of Narcissus’s
myth in *Que me veux-tu?*, Andro Del changes the use of whiteness and the effects of light. The images do more than merely rearticulate visual traditions; they enact new, queer, or disruptive ways of articulating or accounting for a self in and through visual means.

This response to the history of portraiture brings me to the aim of the next section. My focus moves from the artists’ relation to their selves and others to the account they give of themselves through the image. In other words, I want to observe what the self-portraits reveal about the production of subjectivity in visual representation. The question of how a self becomes a self in a queer image is central. Coupled with the search for self is the *loss* of self, which has the potential to challenge the relation between subjectivity and visuality.

**Showing an Account of Oneself**

In the afterword to a book on the politics of mourning (2003), Judith Butler analyzes the productivity of loss if it becomes the condition for a new place in the world, a community, or one’s body. For Butler, loss potentially constitutes new social, political, and aesthetic relations. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler engages with the relationality of social recognition and the foreignness of language to the speaking and narrating self, which render the subject fundamentally “opaque to itself.” (20) She argues that “recognition becomes the process by which I become other than what I was and so cease to be able to return to what I was. There is, then, a constitutive loss in the process of recognition, since the ‘I’ is transformed through the act of recognition” (27-28). In that vein, the loss of self, through the subject’s opacity, may be constitutive of a new form of recognition: a recognition that is responsive to images of others, radical others as much as common social others. In this sense, subjectivity becomes fundamentally incomplete, dependent on the ethical space for divergent self-identifications. As Butler writes, “sometimes the very unrecognizability of the others brings about a crisis in the norms that govern recognition” (24). In line with Michel Foucault, she contends that “a certain risking of the self becomes the sign of virtue” (24).

Subjectivity, in other words, depends on a form of dislocation. “The possibility of the ‘I’, of speaking and knowing the ‘I’,” Butler continues, "resides in a perspective that dislocates the first-person perspective whose very condition it supplies” (2001: 23). This dislocation, which I perceive as a partial loss of self, is
occasioned by the self’s subjection to a set of cultural frames, or, in Foucault’s words, by “the contemporary order of being,” or, as Butler puts it, by the social structure of address. To know myself I must tell my story to someone, address someone. Address not only exposes myself to another, but also conditions my autobiographical account of myself. The “I” can only give an account of itself in relation to a “you.” Or, as Butler observes: “without the ‘you’, my own story becomes impossible” (24). Butler emphasizes the importance of an individual mutual recognition as well as the irreducibility of the subject. “The uniqueness of the Other is exposed to me, but mine is also exposed to her, and this does not mean we are the same, but only that we are bound to one another by what differentiates us, namely, our singularity,” she concludes.76

I want to stress three aspects of what it means to give an account of oneself in Butler’s argument. First, such an account is never fully mine, nor is it ever fully for me, because it can only be given in addressing another. The form this account takes depends on this other as much as on myself. Second, giving an account of myself happens under certain social and cultural conditions. Third, giving an account of oneself produces narrative form. I tell my story to you. My story emerges in language, and because language comes before my own emergence, my account always arrives late. My account then is also partial, since there is a (bodily) history to my self, for which I can have no recollection. At the same time, I produce myself in narrative (re)construction and become accountable for who I am and for what I do. This narrative construction of one’s life and acknowledgement of the limits of self-knowledge in the face of the Other, according to Butler, ultimately form the basis for an ethical stance that desires to know who the other is without expecting to resolve this desire by getting a final answer. To keep alive the desire to know or the curiosity about others is crucial to the social practice of address, to mutual forms of recognition, and consequently to ethical responsibility. The question here may be: “What have I become in the face of you?”

In view of this interpretation, how do the self-portraits of Cahun and Volcano give a visual account of the subjects? I propose that Cahun and Volcano give an account of themselves by visually addressing others, and that they challenge the

76 (25). Butler here uses Levinas’s notion of the Other, which in contrast to Lacan’s symbolic “Other” and to a specific “other,” as other than myself, is a material, if not knowable or objectifiable, other person. The distinction is important because in Butler’s argument the Other serves as a second-person Other, a “you,” whom I encounter face-to-face and to whom I give an account of myself.

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norms of recognition by addressing those others in specific ways. Visually accounting for a self might allow for a space of self-identification that lies outside common narrative structures: a space for ambiguous, norm-resisting, unsteady, or culturally lost selves.

In *Precarious Life* (2004, Butler is concerned with the potential failure of address and its precarious consequences for selfhood. Referring to Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the face, Butler links the social mechanisms of address to the conditions of representation:

> When we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. (141)

Humanity is often given or taken by way of the face. Apparently, the face is not automatically always a *human* face in the contemporary order of representation. The deformed, extreme, or ambiguous face is not one to which we can easily relate. If the viewer cannot effectively connect to the represented face, he or she looks for identifiable markers beyond the portrait, outside the frame, and thus engages in a non-reciprocal relation with the represented face. But, these images ask, do images ever allow for a reciprocal relation between represented selves and their viewers?

I ask this question from the position of the pictured selves in Volcano’s and Cahun’s images. What might their questions to their others/viewers be? I want to suggest that Cahun asks: To whom do I give an account if there is no constitutive “you” to speak to, or if there is no “you” that recognizes me as a human subject? Cahun’s practical answer is to reciprocally show (rather than narrate) herself to her other self, to a second self within or outside her. Cahun’s face becomes a humanly recognized face in light of her own view of a split or doubled self. Similar to what Butler describes as an ethically significant incoherence or contingency of one’s own story, Cahun presents to her viewer a representational impossibility - a double/split self - which exposes her own and the viewer’s shared partial blindness about ourselves.

Butler’s writing resonates with Cahun’s attempt when she writes:
Although some would say that to be a split subject, or a subject whose access to itself is opaque and not self-grounding, is ... not to have the ground for agency and the conditions for accountability, it may be that this way in which we are, from the start, interrupted by alterity and not fully recoverable to ourselves, indicates the way in which we are, from the start, ethically implicated in the lives of others. (2001: 35)

Cahun’s self-representation becomes a visual challenge to self-portrayal as the attempt to capture the truth about the represented self. It becomes an account of a self that anticipates the other - outside and within oneself - in the face of the other - Cahun’s own face. Referring to Levinas, Butler says in this context: “The ‘I’ finds that, in the face of an Other, it is breaking down” (2001: 36). I would add: In the face of oneself as Other, the “I” loses itself and gains access to a recognition that lies beyond the common norms of representation. The self here becomes more than “one self.” It proffers an identity that is larger than a singular, defined self. This brings Robin in *Nightwood* back to us, who analogous to Lacan’s mirror stage (Lacan, 1977) and the infant’s self-alienation “[knows] no desire because she coincides with herself.” (Van Alphen, 1999: 157). Robin is seemingly free from alienation. She does not separate herself from her self to become a subject, but alienates others and turns into a non-subject, becoming unreadable as human. Since, as we saw, Robin is always addressed and never addresses others, the word “I” is of no use to her. Matthew once says about her: “She, the eternal momentary — Robin, who was always the second person singular” (*Nightwood*: 135). She is forever beyond the formation of an “I” and yet affects others with a particular force.

In Volcano’s self-portrait, the blue-eyed, steely look of *Andro Del* disturbs the reciprocity between the portrayed subject and the viewer. The motionlessness of Volcano’s face, its slick surface without crease or wrinkle, and its agelessness and gender neutrality give the viewer few signs to identify (with). The look alone might invite a mutual exchange between spectator and portrayed, but although the sitter’s eyes seem to look at *something*, they are not directed at a particular “you.” Volcano’s self-representation does not take up the position of an “I” that addresses a “you.” Indeed, it does not seem to give an account of the portrayed subject at all. The blank look does not tell its observer anything about the presented subject. The eyes rather assert that there is nothing to say about the pictured self.
Here, the goal of self-presentation is not to tell the truth about the represented self. This is merely a self for itself, and thus, in reference to Butler’s theory, a subject that defies exteriority and relations to others. *Andro Del* presents its viewer with a self that is shockingly absent from view, a self that does not represent itself to others but exists only in and through itself. We see a subject that is utterly narcissistic, and possibly exhibitionistic, yet completely unrevealing to others. In this kind of self-presentational narcissism, it seems, the self loses itself in representation and only exists beyond the frame of the image. By disavowing the position of first-personhood the subject disorients the viewer’s position as a “you” and thus complicates the relation between self and other, so that neither can successfully give an account of themselves.

In “The Portrait’s Dispersal” (2005), Ernst van Alphen contends that Cindy Sherman’s photographic (self-)portraits and Francis Bacon’s distorting portrait paintings scrutinize the relation between subjectivity and representation in such a way that they show the self’s construction as a mere product of representation. They counter the traditional portrait’s pretension to bring out the true character of the subject through the image and, in contrast, posit the subject’s self as always already lost in representation. In other words, Sherman and Bacon in different ways disrupt the linear relation between a represented self and a corresponding subject. Van Alphen observes how in these images subjectivity as representable is scrutinized. In different ways, but with a similar questioning of portraiture’s tradition, Cahun and Volcano explore their selves’ visual presence or absence through and in self-portraits. Cahun severs the representational ties between the sitter and the image’s content. Volcano amasses and merges so many references – the countless anonymous faces of medical photography – that the link to an individual sitter becomes impossible. Cahun’s and Volcano’s photographs advocate the attempt to overcome subjectivity.

The idea of overcoming subjectivity brings back my earlier analysis of Robin. In an article on the loss of self in *Nightwood*, Ernst van Alphen (1999) connects what he observes as Robin’s loss of self to her bewildered relationship with the world that is emphasized by her love for the night and its anonymous shadows. Instead of becoming more transparent over the course of the story, Robin drifts more and more into anonymity and seems to lose all sense of self. Robin exhibits a form of selflessness characterized by her never having had a self to lose, and she thus has no fear of self-loss. She rather experiences her selflessness as something that has been
inflicted upon her while leaving her unaffected. She has no desire for identity and embodies for others a state of innocent and desirable oneness with herself, which inflicts in the reader in a fantasmatic longing for oneness as well as a painful apprehension at the prospect of losing his or her own self.

Cahun’s and Volcano’s self-portraits similarly perform almost self-less forms of selfhood that are contingent on the absence of identity and representational markers; forms of selves that are visible only beyond or outside of representational codes of portraiture.