

ROMANUS, NY
THE PHOTOGRAPHY MUSEUM. 2003 LIZ WELLES

Angela Kelly, 'Self Image: Personal is Political' in *Camerawork*, 12 (January 1979).
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Angela Kelly

SELF IMAGE

Personal is political

THIS ARTICLE PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY to dispel a few myths and raise a few questions about photographic self-portraiture. The challenge I have presented to myself is to examine the use and misuse of self-portraiture, and to determine what relevance a seemingly private practice has to a public audience. It is important to look at and review what self-portraiture there is available for public consumption, and to attempt to analyse it from a critical position – that of a photographic self-portraitist.

Photographic self-portraiture has not been seriously analysed. As with most photography, assumptions are made and essential questions rarely asked. Pictures cannot be considered simple. Photographers need to be more aware of who they are communicating to and how the original intent of their work is affected by the context in which it is viewed. In passively accepting visual statements as works that 'speak' for themselves there is a danger that the underlying ideas are also accepted without question.

One idea that needs to be challenged is the basic notion that an individual artist is creating from her/his 'unique' experience; one should acknowledge art as a language of form within definite cultural parameters.

It seems from my observations that the terms 'self-expression' and 'self-portraiture' have become synonymous. This concept of self-expression also needs to be examined. Traditionally the activity and the term 'self-portrait' came from easel painting. From Rembrandt to Warhol self-portraiture has been freely accepted as a valid activity for artists. Whilst it was considered acceptable for the artist to produce a self-portrait, photographers never had the same licence. To record one's own image by means of a camera involved unwritten rules. The photographer usually presented her/himself in the role of artist or suggested status through objects of her/his particular profession. The association between self-portraiture and self-indulgence or vanity still prevails. The relationship that can exist between self-portraiture and self-awareness is rarely understood.

One simple definition of a self-portrait is that the artist/photographer makes an image purporting to reveal the 'inner' character of the sitter as opposed to a likeness. Both Steichen and Coburn depicted themselves, brush or printing press at hand, as artists revealing their aspirations and demonstrating their equally dual talents at a time when Stieglitz was leading the debate over photography as an art.

Rembrandt, with his self-portraits, demonstrated not only his skill in his craft and art but that the creator of the work was also the subject. Early twentieth-century photographers, sensitive about their own artistic credibility, appropriated the painters' approach, making the content of their art the expression of the artist, missing the point that work such as Rembrandt's was also showing the inventory of a changing self-image.

Artist photographers also borrowed the idea that they could use nature as a metaphor for self. In photographing a 'nature' that they are a part of, they purport to reveal a world hitherto hidden that only creative insight can show. The end result, the image, then is left to speak for itself, telling us how the artist's 'soul' and 'psyche' has somehow processed nature.

What lives in pictures is very difficult to define . . . it finally becomes a thing beyond the thing portrayed . . . some sort of section of the soul of an artist that gets detached and comes out to one from the picture. . . .

Francis Brugiere, *Photographers on Photography* (ed. N. Lyons).

Pictures will always be ambiguous if photographers rely on Brugiere's methodology. The assumption again is that photographers are expressing aspects of their own unique vision when ideas are essentially part of a collective experience, one we all share. Personal experience should be seen in relation to a wider context. As Doris Lessing states at the beginning of the *Golden Notebook*:

There is no way in not being intensely subjective. At last I understood that the way over or through this dilemma, the unease of writing about petty personal problems was to recognise that nothing is personal in the sense that it is uniquely one's own. Writing about oneself is writing about others.

The more isolated we are as individuals the less chance we have of developing trust and working together and the more precious individual contributions become.

However, the position of the 'self-expressive individual artist' is an ironic one. The illusion is that the artist is expressing her/himself. The reality is that any attempt at critically examining a concept of self in a wider social context is treated as taboo, as self-indulgence. We may look in the mirror only to check our appearance, not to see through it.

The use of self-expression in practice has also become synonymous with photographic 'seeing' – ways of ordering, selecting, and fragmenting the world through a camera. Holding up views as singular realities, an individualist view without any wider perspective. This approach tells us less about the actual world and more about a photographically viewed world. The subject of photographs becomes photography.

It is not sufficient to cultivate unconventional ways of photographing, as Friedlander has done in his book of self-portraits, and ascribe their uniqueness to an individual vision. This formulated approach can be mimicked by anyone. However, photographs about photography help make the point that the camera view is not a universal window on the world and this knowledge should be part of the content of the work. Photographers who formulate 'original' ways of photographing are considered to be self-expressive in their approach; in fact, there is a belief among photographers who use self-expression that every photograph is a self-portrait. The assertion allows photographers license to be 'self-expressive' without dealing with any concept of self at all.

It seems that this notion of self-expression should not be the only criteria for self-portraiture. What other uses then can self-portraiture be put to?

[. . .]

Self-portrait and self-image

One photographer and writer whose work functions on a more political level is Jo Spence. A feminist, Jo has been involved with a group of photographers, the *Hackney Flashers*, working in the East End, documenting aspects of working-class culture. She refers to her work as 'visual life-line' and in an article in *Spare Rib*, March 1978, discussed her way of working through extracts from her photographic album. The article, called 'Facing up to myself,' is an attempt to examine how she appears to 'the world' through photographs taken of her from eight months old up to the present day. She carefully juxtaposes images from the past and present to point out how a complete image is built up through stages. Her pictures show us how we have conventionally stereotyped poses for the camera which are encouraged and reinforced by the media. Her pictures and text work together to challenge the viewers' perception of themselves. Jo Spence points out the gap between how women are presented in the media and the more positive and active images of women produced by women themselves. Her pictures attempt to bridge that gap. Without the text the pictures in the article would be just another set of photographs from an album; the text is essential to the understanding of the idea. Because the pictures are not ends in themselves but serve as illustrations to the text, the overall photography is often banal, making literal rather than visual statements.

Photography is used to show 'life' as a literal record, ignoring the problem of distortion inherent within the medium itself in using photography to make statements of facts, 'objective truths'.

The photographs entitled 'feminist portrait' pose a number of problems regarding what constitutes a feminist approach. The fact that a feminist shot the pictures of another feminist hardly makes the content a feminist one. They can be seen as feminist, insofar as both the pose and expression of Jo Spence is a neutral one, the very opposite to the glamour poses of the media. More than one picture is provided which argues against an isolated static image, and finally an active dialogue between the sitter and the photographer is suggested through gesture, the sitter as much in control as the photographer.

The problem of dealing with self-portraiture for me is whether I can now make

feminism the central issue, and how to put that across. Using sexist imagery or stereotyped images can be misread as perpetuating sexist ideology. It is very difficult to articulate our oppression as women through a medium that is misused daily to exploit us. Male/female role reversal through photographs helps to show that women need not be defined by media stereotypes – getting a man to pose provocatively soon shows the ridiculousness of such gestures.

The meanings of the role become denaturalised and the separation of sex and roles begins to take place. Because woman's role is so tied up with her sexual identity and vice versa, many women have begun to challenge the notions of female sensibility.

Many women, as Lucy Lippard points out in *From the Centre*, (feminist essays on women's art), deal with sexual imagery in their work:

When women use their own bodies in their art work they are using themselves: a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject. However, there are ways and ways of using one's own body and women artists have not always avoided self-exploitation.

There is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult.

It is taken for granted that a woman who uses herself in a photograph is being narcissistic. Women are using themselves in photography to very different ends to men. They are reclaiming back what is theirs, a right to self-defined sexuality.

In my work, which at first may not appear to look any different from other photographs, I am suggesting a new practice – the radical nature exists:

- a) in the relationship between individual images
- b) in the value and information that is extracted from them
- c) in the context in which they are presented and viewed.

The issues are feminist in a wide sense in that they deal with aspects of my woman's experience. They begin to deal with a set of appearances, women's self-image, and involve all the complexities of doing that. The earliest self-portraits I made show more of a concern with photography than with a changing self-image. It was only in retrospect when I placed the pictures next to each other and combined them with text that I could see a developing consciousness of self. When I began the series, which is a continuous work, I tended to avoid the camera rather than confront it, until I could find some way of expressing myself from a feminist perspective. The problems I am concerned with are how women see themselves and how much that self-image defines their behaviour and limits their role. Women tend to model their own image on what is socially acceptable, generally a distorted male concept of femininity. There are few images of women which express typically 'male'-associated feelings of assertion, aggression, activity, self-confidence, etc. Yet positive images of women (although helpful for other women) do not point out the discrepancies between how women actually are and how they are reflected in the media. Congenial active images of ourselves are good role models which women badly need but it is not enough to present more idealistic images of ourselves. What

*Woman's Identity 1**Woman's Identity 2*

Figure 38.1 Taking self-portraits creates all sorts of problems and raises questions both practical and psychological which don't exist within the ordinary reference of portraiture. Although taking portraits of others is a socially acceptable activity, self-portraiture has been considered self-indulgent. The self-analysis, within a social context, that I am attempting is a challenge to that assumption and directs the viewer to challenge his/her self-image. Angela Kelly.

*Woman's Identity 3**Woman's Identity 4*

need to be challenged are the images and role stereotypes that are reinforced daily through the media. My photographs are an attempt to challenge that and can be seen as a positive step towards defining my own sexuality, redefining my role for myself from a feminist perspective.

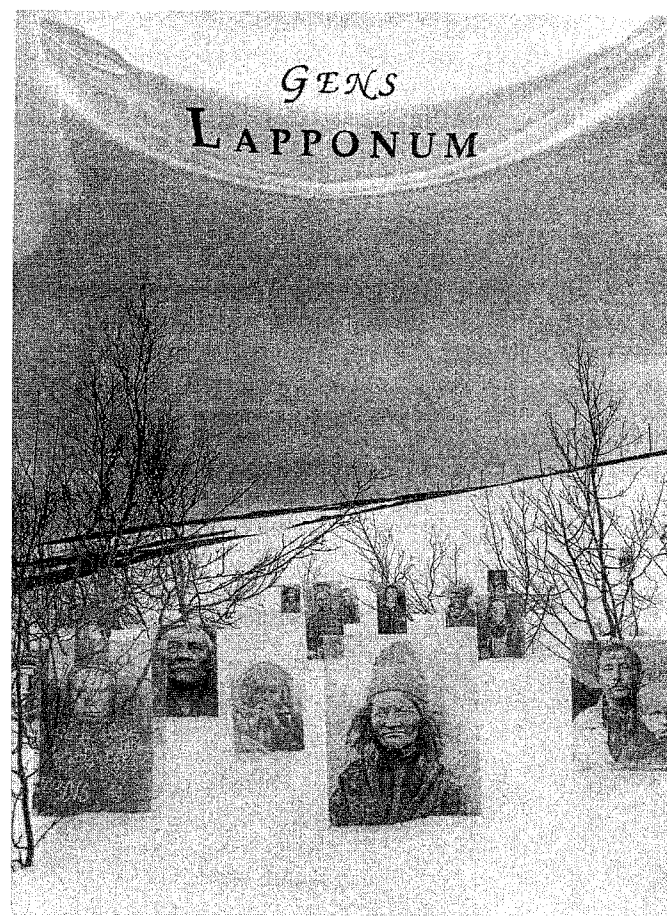
Turning the camera on to the photographer involves problems that do not exist within the ordinary reference of portraiture – the photographer becomes her/his own sitter and, unless a mirror is used to check the pose, the moment recorded is only 'felt' rather than seen through the camera. The final result is only seen at the contact stage and often the results can be surprising as there is a greater element of chance involved in the unmediated process. To photograph oneself, one has to stand in front of the camera and not behind it. The camera confronts the photographer rather than separates the photographer from the subject. One learns to accept 'unflattering images.' We do tend to carry around a static view of ourselves in our head, catching ourselves in a mirror unawares, we are often shocked at our own self-image. We get some idea how we appear to others.

There is a risk and fear of self-exploitation when making self-portraits. The photographer is in the very vulnerable position of opening up and stating how she/he is, but it is a position that is continually developing and evolving.

Women have been particularly dealing with this area of women's identity through photography because we live in a society where women are assigned a negative place. The very language we speak is male-dominated and women's identity is constricted around this negative role. Woman's identity is tied up with her need to be a person but, in our society, person automatically stands for male. It is contradictory for women to see themselves as persons before women. My work is an attempt to challenge that negative role and I think it also indicates how a personal experience can have a wider social purpose.

PART NINE

Contexts: gallery, museum, education, archive



Jorma Puranen, *Gens Lapponum*, 1995. Courtesy of the artist.