



Review of Ana Peraica (2017). *Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture*

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Penesta Dika^{1,2}

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Books about *selfie-culture* – a very contemporary phenomenon in our society – are surprisingly rare. Ana Peraica’s open access book, *Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture* (2017), presents author’s broad research about the phenomenon of the selfie and also distinguishes between selfies and self-portraits. Peraica considers histories of self-observation and self-recording, the history of space in self-portraiture based on the grammatical structure of Henri Lefebvre (1991), the role of the viewer, and the technology of self-recording. Furthermore, Peraica treats related issues such as ethical problems and psychological disorders.

The selfie is rarely approached from the perspective of art history. For instance, Manovich and Tifentale’s prominent book on the selfie, *Selfcity: Exploring Photography and Self-Fashioning in Social Media* (2014), presents quantitative research of self-fashioning in social media using photographic images. Another prominent book, James Hall’s *Self-Portrait – A cultural History* (2014), uses the lens of art history but focuses to self-portraits. Amelia Jones’ *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* (2006) explores contemporary self-images with a focus to new technologies and their impact on the presentation of the selfie. In contrast to all these works, Peraica – who is an art historian and a photographer – includes different histories (including artistic self-portraits and popular self-portraits) to depict the selfie through its origins in art and culture.

‘Preface’ introduces the selfie and its appearance as a contemporary trend, and the ‘Introduction’ tells a beautiful personal story. Peraica’s father and grandfather were also photographers; she compares their self-portraits and enriches (our understanding of) her work by sharing deeply personal feelings and insights. In ‘Histories of Self-Observation’

✉ Penesta Dika
mail@penestadika.at

¹ Kunstuniversität Linz, Linz, Austria

² University of Business and Technology in Prishtina, Prishtina, Kosovo

Peraica analyses posing in front of a mirror through the lens of “narcissist delight” (18) and explores the history of the mirror, its materials, used technologies, functions, shapes and meanings. Moving on to consider selfie-making technologies, she begins with camera obscura and asserts that it is very hard to prove whether it was used for self-portraying. Yet, with the invention of the photo camera, and with the arrival of devices such as shutter release and self-timer (1918), self-portraying has definitely become possible (20). Peraica chronologically exposes the invention of various cameras such as Agfa, Kodak, Polaroid, digital camera, and finally the mobile phone. She concludes: “After thousands of years, it was only with mobile phone technology, that for the first time all social classes had a tool for self-reflection, self-presentation, and self-promotion.” (20).

Next chapter, ‘History of the Self-presentation’, analyses early artistic self-presentations: sculptures of Egyptian pharaohs Akhenaten and Bak, self-presentations mentioned in ancient Greek literature, and medieval portraits of Christ. The latter are particularly interesting, because it was believed they were made with no awareness from the artist; thus, they were interpreted as divine self-portraits. Peraica then skips to the sixteenth century, where court painters such as Albrecht Dürer, Andrea Mantegna, Leonardo da Vinci, and Rembrandt van Rijn used self-portraits as proofs of their existence and as tools for self-gratification. In the period between the Renaissance and Postmodernism, Peraica’s research is founded on Giorgio Vasari’s two types of self-portraits: self-portraits made using convex mirror, and self-portraits made using flat glass (22). Moving on to Mannerism, she discusses the artworks of Parmigianino based on the rules of Euclidian geometry. Further, she explores the first photographic self-portrait – ‘Self-portrait as a Drawn Man’ by Hippolyte Bayard (1887) – which represents a dead-looking person, who represents himself as alive.

Peraica discusses self-portraits of Oscar Gustave Rejlander, who posed himself in staged historical live tablets (*Tableaux Vivants*), and self-portraits of Edward Steichen, made in changing environments. She interprets Premodern self-portraits as depictions of the self that were not based on performance, and Modern self-portraits influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis as depictions of the “true self” (24). Splits, multiple pictures of a single person, and the futurist arts of (bodily) distortion are discussed using Marcel Duchamp, Umberto Boccioni, Fortunato Depero and André Kertész. In Modernism, doubling of identity, identity crossing, and even “photographic personality disorder” are shown on examples of Duchamp, Man Ray, El Lissitzky, and Claude Cahun (25). This analysis ends with the ‘Postmodern Self-Obsession’ and its notion of the dynamic self, constituted in temporary processes of deconstructions and reconstructions.

Peraica asserts that other media for self-recording such as audio, video, 3D cast, DNA, magnetic field, body temperature, eye dioptré and more, also produce self-portraits. She notes: “though they do not look like the mirror image of the face being based on higher levels of symbolization” (29), and presents examples such as Mona Hatoum’s recordings from inside of the body with micro cameras, Herbert W. Franke’s implemented diagnostics software, and Marta de Menezes’ brain activity measured with MRI scanner. She points out that media artwork, emphasizing interactivity and participation, has pushed a completely new definition of the self via interface surfaces thus depersonalizing the author. Thus, in interactive artwork of people such as Jeffrey Shaw and Alba D’Urbano, the “public is self-portrayed” (29). Alongside standard names in art history and media art histories, this chapter also includes some lesser

known examples of Bosnian art. For instance, Šejla Kamerić's self-portraits speak simultaneously of the massacre of Muslims from Srebrenica and contemporary Bosnian women, and Tanja Ostojić's self-portraits describe the inability to get EU visa because of war.

In 'The World in front and the World behind our Back' Peraica explores mediated space between the author and the audience. She distinguishes between the real, represented, and imaginary spaces as residences of objects, subjects and viewers. She discusses natural and artificial perspectives, rules of Euclidian geometry, and the example of Filippo Brunelleschi's linear perspective. She moves on to another famous painting that includes a mirror-image, Arnolfini's 'Wedding Portrait of Jan van Eyck', in which a small round medieval mirror is visually posed atop the hands of the couple, before discussing additional examples such as Velásquez's 'Las Meninas' (1656) (a popular example for analyzing the perspective), Gustav Courbet's 'Painter's Studio' (1854–1855) (which includes the artist from his back) and Parmigianino's self-portrait in convex mirror (in which we see the arm of the author inside the frame). Peraica also discusses contemporary examples, such as the known image of Josef Koudelka (displaying the time on his clock, with his arm stretched inside the frame), and the series of photographs by Arno Rafael Minkkinen (where his arms enter the viewing space of the photograph, producing a strange angle and positions in the landscape set in front). Contrary to Koudelka and Minkkinen, whose arms are real and deictic, these days we have "artificial arms" functioning as selfie sticks (42). Thus, concludes Peraica,

Mobile phone culture, in which everyone is an artist, and media art, in which the audience participates in art, both close the space similarly as in times of medieval ages, before the invention of geometric perspective, by imprisoning us within the media loop, and denying our own position as separate agents in the process of communication. (43)

In 'Narcissus and his Evil Twin' Peraica interprets the mirror as an extension using the works of Marshall McLuhan and discusses the knee of Narcissus entering viewers' space in Caravaggio's painting. She chronologically arrives to his postdigital counterparts, 'Online Narcissuses', and points the importance of temporary existence (the 'now') in self-presentation (50). In 'Echo's Point of View' she engages with works of Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Derrida, and the inevitable Michel Foucault. She points towards an important characteristic of the selfie: while recording, it is already possible to see the end-result. Peraica's analysis of implementation of photography into psychotherapy (and also self-therapy) is followed by examples. 'Between Moodiness and Madness' treats feelings often expressed via self-portraits using Vincent van Gogh's and Frida Kahlo's paintings, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's sculptures, Hippolyte Bayard's photographs, and Sanja Iveković's videos. Peraica discusses advantages and disadvantages of the self-portrait and the self-preoccupation, pointing out that self-portraying can amplify certain aspects of depression, enforce alienation from communication, enforce dissociation, or raise enormous frustrations towards digital acceptance of postings (69).

'In the Mirror of Perseus' deals with death, dead persons, cadaver, and funerals, and explains the relationships between death and photography. Peraica treats historical

examples from Rembrandt van Rijn to Romanticism and Victorian Age. Speaking of contemporary selfies, Peraica does not hide her surprise about selfies with dead corpses – where people are portrayed laughing like ‘psychopaths’ (78). The book proceeds to a detailed chronological description of recording technologies of recording and arrives towards conclusions. Here, Peraica defines that the portrait of the self is an: ‘internal reflection, while the self-portrait is the result of an external mirroring’ (100).

Ana Peraica’s *Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture* is an outstanding source for art researchers and students, photographers, humanists, and media theorists. It contributes to diverse fields including but far from limited to cultural studies and psychology. It reaches beyond a chronological overview of analyzed phenomena and analyses the contemporary condition through theory and artwork. Technical aspects are depicted in detail and supported by excellent examples. Published in open access, *Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture* is an exceptional book about selfies and self-portraits, and it is bound to make a profound impact on future researchers in the field.

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