INTERSECTIONAL SELVES: FEMINIST SELF–PORTRAITURE

by: Elizabeth Orcutt & Dawn Woolley , November 10, 2025

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This special issue examines contemporary self–portraiture using feminist, new materialist, queer, crip, and critical race theory, and other theoretical approaches to present the diversity of ontological approaches within the field. It aims to push the boundaries of what constitutes a self-portrait.

Self-portraiture encompasses a diverse and evolving range of practices (Borzello 2016; Battista 2015), extending from embodied and participatory approaches (Luciano & Chen 2015; Hogue 2016; Zivkovic 2022) to disembodied or data-driven expressions (Johnstone & Imber 2020; Piper-Wright 2022). For instance, Susan Morris's *Medication* (2006) and *Mood Swings* (2006) present the self as abstracted through biometric data, operating within what Newman describes as a 'double condition of standardisation and opacity' (2020: 54). These non-representational portraits convey no likeness or narrative coherence but offer a temporal trace of embodied life. Other works, such as Lorna Simpson's photographic fragments (2020) and Sophie Calle's *Take Care of Yourself* (2007), challenge conventional expectations of self-depiction by foregrounding multiplicity and collaboration. Meanwhile, Jenny Holzer's *Truisms* (1977-79) offer a disembodied form of self-articulation through textual aphorisms that displace personal voice into public discourse. Other practices raise critical questions about representation politics, particularly regarding race, gender, and visibility, exemplified in Zanele Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama* [*Hail the Dark Lioness*, 2018] (Al-Maria 2024). They also engage with theoretical critiques of representationalism, as proposed by Karen Barad (2007), where selfhood is contingent, material, and relational.

An artist's impulse to work with self reflects an urgent need to explore, assert, and reimagine it, to ask, 'Who am I?' but also, 'Who have I been told I am?' Whether through visual art, performance, writing, or digital media, self-representation becomes a method of inquiry into gender, race, class, sexuality, and their intersections, not as fixed categories but as evolving experiences. As Coessens, Douglas, and Crispin argue in *The Artistic Turn* (2009), *techne* denotes a form of embodied knowledge that emerges through artistic practice itself, a knowing-in-doing that complements epistemological knowledge. This mode of inquiry aligns with many of the self-portrayal practices discussed in this issue. And for many marginalised artists, self-portraiture functions as an act of agency, reclaiming space in histories and images that have excluded or distorted them. This

mode of practice is not always literal; it may fictionalise, archive, politicise, or challenge. Artists work with their image and voice to critique dominant narratives, document personal and collective histories, and speak across time. The result is not merely portraiture, but an expanded field of self-making that is personal, performative, and intensely political.

As artists and researchers, we both feature the self in our work. Dawn Woolley has worked with self-portraiture throughout her creative career, beginning with an examination of idealised representations of femininity in 'The Doll's House' (2004) and 'The Substitute' (2007-8), in which she creates photographic copies of herself and rephotographs them. In 'The Substitute,' the life-size photographic cut-out is a metaphor for the lure of the edited, idealised and sexualised images of the female body that dominate our visual culture, producing unrealistic expectations of how bodies should look. The cut-out implies that when we judge our own and other people's bodies against these impossible standards, we can only be disappointed. As a feminist activist, Woolley creates artworks specifically for advertising spaces to intervene in the visual landscape dominated by misogynistic imagery (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Dawn Woolley, 'The Substitute (Holiday)', Leeds, Billboard, in A Real Woman Exhibition by The Gallery and Artichoke, 2024.

'The Substitute' series uses the specificity of Woolley's body to examine imbalances of power that make visibility an ambivalent experience. When producing and showing her self-portraits, Woolley is repeatedly asked if the cut-outs represent past experiences. Like some of the creative practitioners discussed in this special issue, Woolley feels that it is important to distance herself and her work from interpretations of autobiography. It carries with it an implication that female artists are only capable of making work about their immediate, and often domestic, experiences. However, artists who use their own bodies in their work do so to draw attention to wider subjects, such as the politics of representation. When people interpret 'The Substitute' as autobiographical, Woolley's critique of sexist visual cultures is reduced to being mere reproductions of sexual encounters in which she has no agency or subjectivity.

In this issue, Zelal Berfin Tataroglu examines the problem of self-portrait films by the French actor turned auteur, Maïwenn. She notes that men's autobiographical writing is deemed to use intellectual self-reflexivity to interrogate and illuminate the world, whereas similar works by women 'are perceived as incapable of transcending the concerns of the private self, thereby devaluing their writing.' In an interview, Maïwenn comments that personal stories may appear mundane but are universal and therefore relatable. Similarly, in her interview with Elizabeth Orcutt, Bobby Baker states that she deliberately and cunningly uses domestic and everyday scenarios so that audiences can identify with them. Despite the risk of denigration, some practitioners purposefully embrace autobiography as a method for creating self-portraits. And one of our authors, Madeleine Bazil, further draws on autobiographical details and memories of places to develop 'intricate landscapes of identity and intimacy.' Elsewhere, Leela O'Connor also integrates her personal experiences to populate a feminist bibliography that links everyday autobiography with political theory in a powerful form of feminist praxis. Both

authors express details about themselves in ways that exceed stereotypes of feminine domesticity and express a deeply intellectual engagement with the broader world.

Elizabeth Orcutt (2022) draws a critical distinction between the self-portrait and what she terms the *self-portrayal* (2022). Whereas self-portraiture often depends on resemblance, anchored in physical likeness or personal reflection, self-portrayal is a more fluid, processual, and self-relational practice, as elaborated below. Orcutt's notion of self-portrayal rejects the traditional logic of the portrait. Instead, it proposes a practice that is iterative, unresolved, entangled, and ethical. For Orcutt, self-portrayal is not concerned with representation but with the *materialisation* of the visual self. It operates as a situated, feminist methodology that foregrounds the embodied experiences of looking, making, and reflecting. Orcutt locates her practice within what she calls the 'feminist fitting-room' (2022: 2), a literal and conceptual space in which the self is not fixed but is instead essayed, tried out, and tried on. Within this space, self-portrayal is not merely an image to be looked at but a process of entanglement (Barad 2007) involving artist, space, material, and conception. Crucially, this shift reorients the image away from the logic of the photographic and toward a model of diffraction, another term borrowed from physics via Karen Barad (2007), as a metaphor for interference and relational becoming. In this metaphorical space, meaning arises not from representation but from intra-action (Barad 2007), the dynamic interplay among constitutive elements. Drawing on Barad, Orcutt proposes that the self is not shown but encountered. For her, the visual self resides not in likeness but in the act of 'peering' (2022: 57-93), a prolonged, searching look that is at once self-revealing and self-thwarting, see figure 2. This reframing resonates with broader feminist and new materialist reconfigurations of self-portraiture, where identity is treated not as essence but as contingent, intimately linked to process, and, above all, relational.

Fig. 2. Elizabeth Orcutt, 'Entranced #9b', 2023.

Self–portraiture as Relational Practice

A number of the articles in this special issue examine self-portraiture as an expanded relational practice. For example, Oriana Fox interviews performance artist/comedian Krishna Istha about their *M:otherhood* Project, a relational and community-building enterprise following the progress of a queer family in the making. In *First Trimester* (2023-present), the first part of the three–part project, the artist interviews potential sperm donors and invites them to ask questions. As Fox discusses, the self–disclosing nature of the interviews for both Istha and the potential donors produces a 'collaborative self/other-portrait' aimed towards queer world-making in the most literal sense.

Roxanne Bottomley exemplifies the intrapersonal nature of self-portraiture in her reflection on participatory identity design with a queer grassroots football team that she

joined during the pandemic lockdown. By viewing participatory feminist design as a form of identity construction, the article challenges conventional understandings of self–portraiture, 'showing how collective and situated knowledges intertwine to tell stories that are deeply personal yet also shared.' These design practices are collaborative, enabling marginalised communities to express a collective sense of self as an expression of resistance and communal joy. Kheyzaran Esmaeilzadeh also examines a collective form of visual culture and meaning-making in images that were taken and shared during the Jina uprising protests in Iran. Following the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini, a young woman arrested and killed by the morality police for wearing 'bad hijab,' women in Iran produced photographs that document their everyday lives, record moments of defiance, and outpourings of grief. Esmaeilzade theorises these photographs as self-portraits, performances and participatory installations, enabling women to 'produce their own aesthetic regimes' in defiance of the un-aesthetic homogenisation policies, such as compulsory hijab. They are reinserting themselves into visual culture on their own terms, creating gestures that overwrite the image of the women clad in black fabric. She writes that their protest self-portraits are a demand for physical space, visual presence, and aesthetic agency. As a relational practice, each shared image acts as a protest, a challenge to authority and a call to action.

The vulnerability of some bodies in public is also the focus of Oriana Fox's article 'No Innocent Bystanders: Confrontations with Hate Crimes in the Work of Nando Messias and Cassils,' in which she examines how each artist re-enacts homophobic hate crimes in performances that incite the audience to discuss their involvement. As activist artworks, the performances call on audience members to view their actions critically. As Fox states, they each 'enact a highly social implementation of the self-portrait that exalt their audiences to grapple with their own complicity in the face of violence, entreating active, ethical responses.'

Archiving, Citation & Writing into History

Self–portraiture may function as personal or social archives that record moments of history, reinscribe previous experiences of impotence with creative potency, and fill in some of the gaps in social and art histories. For example, Kheyzaran Esmaeilzade interprets photographs produced by women during the Jina uprising in Iran to consider how making female bodies visible in public spaces can be a courageous and radical act. They shared their photographs on social media so that their protests and the violent backlash against their actions are not erased from global news media and the historical record.

Feminist artists have also used self–portraiture to write themselves into art history. Assunta Ruocco examines how artist Alison Lloyd used 'feminist auto–citation' in posts on Instagram to insert her artwork into art discourses while also creating an accessible archive of photographs that would otherwise remain hidden from view. Lloyd included hashtags such as #editingarthistory and #insertingmyselfinarthistory to explicitly draw attention to the limitations of the art world, in which a few feminist artists gain international recognition while the majority work for decades with little attention. Lloyd and Bobby Baker, who Orcutt interviewed in this special issue, were included in the *Women in Revolt*! Exhibition (Young 2023) at Tate Britain, resulting in acquisitions and a place in the canon, somewhat late in life.

Citation is also used as a feminist praxis by O'Connor when she creates subversive metadata that links feminist political theory with personal experience and also offers an intersectional feminist bibliography to counter the male-centric theoretical frame still favoured by academia.

While some of the articles we present here examine practices that aim to raise the profile of female and feminist artists and authors, others highlight how problematic the categorisation of female and feminist art can be. In her discussion of young female photographers in Japan, Federica Cavazzuti demonstrates that sexist notions of 'girl art' are used to denigrate successful artists while also grouping their works in an attempt to diminish their political intentions. Similarly, the aforementioned Zelah Berfin Tataroglu argues that Maïwenn, an actor turned director, uses the self in semi–fictional narratives to express the sexist narratives that limit female creatives in the world dominated by men. Her self-portrait films are an attempt to claim her place as an auteur by exposing sexist notions prevalent in the film industry.

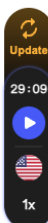### Expanded Definitions, Blurred Boundaries
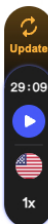
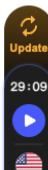Feminist self-portraiture has long grappled with the politics of visibility and subjectivity. Still, recent work blurs notions of authorship, embodiment, and gender by employing new media and embracing digital fragmentation and virtual space. Keni Li's study of Sophie Kahn's glitch-based 3D sculptures argues this shift, positioning her twisted, fragmented female figures as feminist self-portraits that resist norms and challenge the objectifying logic of traditional representation. For Li, Kahn's sculptures (that employ bodies that are not her own) are not likenesses but material expressions of lived, gendered experience; a self-portraiture defined by technological embodiment that strays into the digital realm, blurring the boundary between the actual body and the computer code wrangled to describe it. Marissa Willcox also examines how feminist self-portraiture circulates in digital and social media spaces, focusing on the Instagram practices of Hanna Shafi (@fizzkidart) and particularly Theo Grimes (@ggggrimes). Willcox argues that these artists create politicised self-images that blur the line between art, identity, and activism. Their work disrupts normative expectations of representation through colourful visual languages and bold textual overlays that centre queer, trans, and racialised experiences. For Willcox, the Instagram grid itself becomes a feminist site of self-portraiture, one defined by community, refusal, and reclamation rather than visibility on dominant terms. And Madeleine Bazil takes this expansion further by situating feminist self-portraiture within the lyric mode. Her poetry explores identity through feminist psychogeography, ecological mourning, and postmemory. Her self-portrayal poems are affective and spatial, smudging the boundaries between body, memory, and environment. Drawing on scholars like Marianne Hirsch and Ramona Beltrán, Bazil frames her poems as a feminist self-reflexivity: an archival, affective mode that registers landscape and memory as integral to self-construction.

This reframing invites a broader understanding of feminist authorship, one that could include artists who do not identify as women. Ed Atkins, for instance, who currently has a survey show at Tate Britain (Staple 2025), constructs melancholic avatars in high definition that interrogate the territory between articulation/voice, body, and emotion. Although not claiming a feminist position, Atkins' work can be read alongside feminist critiques of masculinity and digital subjectivity. His avatars expose the instability of all identities, evoking the kind of disembodied embodiment as theorised by N. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Amelia Jones (2006). Similarly, artists like Jesper Just (*It Will All End in Tears*, 2006) and Zach Blas (*Facial Weaponisation Suite*, 2014) perform aesthetic disruptions of masculinity and visibility that echo feminist and queer visual strategies. Sara Ahmed (2017) cautions us to consider feminism as an active, lived practice that involves continuous self-examination and a commitment to challenging systemic inequalities (2017). Although Ahmed does not outright reject the idea that men can be feminists, her writing suggests that such identification must go beyond labels and involve a deep engagement with the realities of privilege and oppression. In this special issue of *MAI*, Amber Moore's analysis of the Netflix show *Sex Education* presents a compelling account of the character Aimee Gibb's self-portraiture, which is crucially encouraged by the teachings of disabled Isaac Goodwin. Although guided by a teenage man, Aimee's self-portraits become a feminist practice of healing, asserting subjectivity in the wake of trauma through creative self-making. In the relationship between Aimee and Isaac, Moore identifies a pedagogical encounter where feminist self-portraiture emerges not from static self-resemblance but from care, relationality, and witnessing.

These practices embrace what Legacy Russell named glitch feminism (2020 [2013]): a refusal of normative coherence and a celebration of the self as a site of speculation, flaw, agency, and encounter. This aligns with what Li identifies in Sophie Kahn's embrace of digital error, rendering the self as an evolving, unstable construct. As with Bobby Baker and Alison Lloyd's feminist auto-citations, or Krishna Istha's queer family-building project, what defines feminist practice is less the identity of the artist than their mode of engagement: ethical, relational, critical, and exposing of prevailing narratives.


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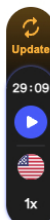
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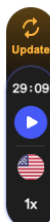
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