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Ben Nicholson, *Ben Nicholson taking a photograph of Barbara Hepworth* (c.1932)

In today's culture, photographing oneself or being photographed has become almost as common as eating and sleeping. Social media timelines flow like visual autobiographies, sharing and commenting on a life lived. We perceive our online life on Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook as nearly-real-time visual accounts of what we are doing and what we look like on that day. Although what we post might be carefully chosen, filtered and performed, our online identity is more commonly seen as an outward gesture of our personality and identity and of how we wish to present ourselves in the wider world.

In this picture (left), the British painter Ben Nicholson (1894–1982) is photographing the sculptor Barbara Hepworth. With Nicholson just in view at the right-hand side of the frame, the photograph could also be read as a self-portrait with his wife-to-be. He is already in Hepworth's life, but not entirely. The mirror is a common strategy for self-portraiture – but can it tell us anything more about ourselves than how we actually look at that moment? Mirrors and windows as metaphors litter the history of photographic self-portraiture, supposedly reflecting, and giving access to, key elements of our identity onto the paper.

Today, the mirror has become ubiquitous in 'selfie culture'. While the selfie is a relatively new form in terms of photographic genres, the inclusion of the mirror in the frame is part of photographic self-portraiture and its history, which is commonly understood to have, to a certain extent, a 'truth-telling' or testimonial function. When considering the selfie as it is today, cultural trends and preoccupations must also be considered – such as the rise of the personal blog and with this the ability (and intention) to record and distribute personal information to a potentially large audience.

It is the element of dissemination and response that differentiates the selfie from the traditional self-portrait, the latter typically made by artists for use by a gallery, and less commonly for the personal album. What sets selfies so dramatically apart from earlier analogue snapshots (self-portraits or not) is the reliance of the online community upon a communal understanding of norms and conventions. This codifies and crystallises selfie culture as a very specific movement in contemporary photographic culture. The use of hashtags, tagging and emoticons/emojis, and extended multivocal commentary, is completely new to photography, allowing photographs to be experienced in a fluid dynamic with an emphasis on grouping, categories and taxonomies.

How we see ourselves does not necessarily come from who we really are but from how we believe other people see us. This idea comes from the American

sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, who developed the 'looking-glass self' theory – the cornerstone of the theory of socialisation – which states that we shape our self-concept based on our understanding of how others see and evaluate us. This concept cuts to the core of the selfie, where affirmation is a key expectation. As long as we interact with others, we are vulnerable to our own self-image being damaged or inflated. Contemporary studies show that we are not shaped just by how others see us, but also by the creation of a collective social identity that contrasts us against relevant others. A selfie thus also shows your network that you are one of 'them', a peer, which helps establish confidence.

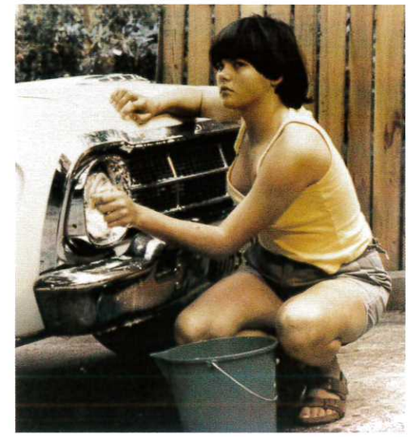
These ideas are tested out in the 1994 series *Scarred for Life* by Australian artist Tracey Moffatt (born 1960). The text for the image from the series entitled *Useless, 1974* (opposite, top) reads, 'Her father's nickname for her was "useless"'. When looking at the picture, we have to speculate. We cannot know what she is thinking, but we can see she does not look particularly useless. She is working and her gaze is strong. This is not straightforward documentation – Moffatt casts actors and sets her photographs in the past, dismantling photography's affiliation with truth-telling, which traditionally has been at the heart of many explorations of identity in art or literature. Neither can the viewer be sure whether Moffatt is making autobiographical references or intending a more general work, dealing with the politics of identity, be that through race or gender. Moffatt's works often question established norms and positions of power using a wide range of photographic techniques and methods of presentation.

Questions of self and identity have long concerned artists, and are intensified as digital lives become ubiquitous and an aspect of performance becomes the norm in terms of modes of behaviour. Identity can be explored through the body or through portraiture, as we discussed above, but also through the use of objects or landscape. The identity being explored does not necessarily have to be personal; it can also be cultural, political or national.

Photographers often try to avoid archetypes, stereotypes and exclusivity. So why does British artist Keith Arnatt (1930–2008) pigeonhole people in his series *Gardeners* (1978–9; right, bottom)? We can ask what gives these people the identity of 'gardener' – the title that designates them as such, or their location and signifiying props? Would they still be gardeners if they were not photographed in their gardens? Their photographic performance (and the 'stage') is key. Some photographers such as August Sander and Irving Penn have set out to capture trade identities – is that what Arnatt is doing here? In reality, very few people are professional gardeners, and the man here does not look like he makes his living in this way. So here the identity is not a professional one, but a mixture of self-identification and the photographer's projection.

Arnatt's series explores sociological and national aspects of a particularly British cross-section of society while simultaneously raising questions about photography's role in shaping or making that collective identity. Examples like these highlight the close relationship photography has always had with dealing with issues of identity – from those of the famous who manipulate it and try to control the way they are seen to those who take matters into their own hands through photo sharing and social networking sites.

Many contemporary artists focus on the fluidity of identity in a world where both the mass media and social media are omnipresent. As our culture comes to rely on photographs more and more, how we present ourselves through those pictures comes as a stand-in for our 'true' self. This in turn becomes more informed by the way those photographs are received. As our connections to the world and the daily choices we make define us, our identity is a complex affair that is in constant flux – a never-ending efflorescence of layers, experiences and images.



Tracey Moffatt, *Useless, 1974* (1994)

Keith Arnatt, from *Gardeners* (1978–9)

Tracey Emin (born 1963)
***Outside Myself (Monument Valley)* (1995–1997)**

Tracey Emin works across a range of media, often incorporating several within a single artwork. For example, the artwork here can be said to comprise the performance of reading, the book she has written, and the chair she has embroidered and sits on, as well as the photograph that contains the other three. It was taken on a road trip in the USA. Driving from San Francisco to New York, Emin would stop and read from her book *Exploration of the Soul* (1994). Her boyfriend, who was accompanying her on the trip, photographed her. The book, written in ten days, is an intense autobiographical reflection on her life.

Is this picture a self-portrait or a portrait of Emin? Issues of authorship often arise with self-portraits. In many instances it does not matter who pressed the button, as it is the artist who has conceived the idea, and to whom credit must thus be given. Here, Emin is presenting a persona: she is performing being an artist while simultaneously being an artist. This raises questions about what the 'self' is in a self-portrait, and where it is located. When artists conflate their lives with their art, they might exaggerate their experiences for the sake of making better art, just as someone writing a memoir might emphasise certain details and omit others in order to make a better story. In art, a self-portrait has traditionally been understood as an outward expression of inward emotion, but with the advent of post-modernism it is hard to look at a picture such as this and see Emin's inner existential being. That is not the point of the work here – instead it is a mixture of self-regard, self-memorial – a marker of being near the iconic mesas in the background – and self-revelation all created for the camera.

Peter Hujar (1934–1987)
***John Heys in Lana Turner's Gown (II)* (1979)**

Peter Hujar was a crucial figure in photographing New York City's gay subculture during the 1970s and 1980s. However, he is best known for his portraits of the people of the downtown art scene, including Susan Sontag, William Burroughs, Fran Leibowitz, Andy Warhol and John Waters. He captured his subjects in tender black and white and his prints are sumptuous in their exquisite quality of texture and tone. This approach deeply influenced the slightly younger Robert Mapplethorpe, who became considerably more well-known and successful.

Because many of Hujar's portraits were of friends, there is an intimacy to them and a feeling that the subjects could be whoever they wanted. There is no superficiality to these pictures, and they were not made for commercial or narcissistic purposes. The real attraction and authenticity of feeling between sitter and artist gives a depth and connection that can be felt by those witnessing the intensity of the photographs. This is especially so in this portrait of the film director John Heys wearing the actress Lana Turner's gown. The knowledge that the gown once belonged to one of Hollywood's most glamorous and notorious actresses adds a sense of melancholy to the scene. But the drama that followed her is not held mimetically in her dress, and her history is not translated to the film director when he wears her clothes. Heys does not 'act the part'. Instead, he is entirely himself and absolutely in the moment of having his portrait taken.

Relatively unsung as an artist during his lifetime, Hujar was overshadowed by his more provocative artistic peers such as Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin, who gained popularity during the politically heightened time of the AIDS crisis that they documented. Hujar's more erotic work was not shown or collected regularly, and although artists such as Diane Arbus had exhibited images of men in drag, it was in the context of otherness rather than with the tenderness and inclusivity that we see here.

Martin Parr (born 1952)
***Sand Bay, England* (1997)**

This photograph comes from a series about Britain titled *Common Sense*. This title suggests a rather satirical comment on the famous British pragmatism – a value much vaunted by traditionalist sectors of the country. Martin Parr taps into this and works with stereotypes. A simple cup of tea is never just a picture of a cup of tea; it is a lightning rod that says something about a nation. He revels in cliché – fish and chips and tea represent British culture and values, just as hamburgers and coke are shorthand for America. We get this instantly, with both a smile of recognition and a sigh of frustration at this perpetuation of stereotypes.

The tea here is not only about literal taste but also cultural and personal and class taste (Parr is rumoured to have two jars of tea bags in his studio – one labelled 'posh' the other 'peasant'). No other photographer understands the intricacies and subtleties of class and aspiration like Parr. It is telling that he chose to have his tea in a Willow pattern cup and saucer, a Chinese-inspired design that first became popular at the end of the 18th century and has connotations of a lost empire, rather than in a mug. The effect is one of prissiness or perceived conformism even though the tea is served with milk, which has rather more workaday connotations in comparison with the elevated way tea is served in the East. The red-and-white gingham tablecloth on which the tea is served is also significant: those who can read the signs and signifiers know instantly that this tea is being served at a village fête or café, and not in the home.

Don McCullin (born 1935)
***Shell-shocked US Marine, The Battle of Hue* (1968)**

Photography for the British photographer Don McCullin is feeling rather than looking, as he has said several times: 'If you can't feel what you're looking at, then you're never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures.' This desire to empathise and identify with the subjects in front of his lens made him depict this US Marine not only as a soldier fighting in the Vietnam War, but above all as a victim: His hands are clasped around the barrel of his weapon, not so much in belligerence but because this is the only thing he can cling to. His staring eyes, gazing into nothing, are a hallmark of shell shock, a form of war trauma. The sitter's identity as a soldier is at once asserted and undermined by his closeness to the frame – he is up front and in our face, but humanised as well.

McCullin's experiences as a veteran war photographer – one who narrowly avoided being struck by a bullet when it hit his camera instead – traumatised him. When printing his negatives, he relived the atrocities he had witnessed over and over again. In an attempt to restore peace to his life, he decided to photograph landscapes for a while. In 2012, however, at the age of 77, and sick of witless news reporting and images of celebrities in the media, McCullin travelled to Syria to record the unfolding war.

McCullin has received many awards and has been knighted, but the greatest recognition of the power of his work perhaps came when the British Government successfully tried to keep him away from the 1982 Falklands War, by telling him that he could not travel to the islands because the warship was already full.

James Mollison (born 1973)
***Rod Stewart – Earls Court, London, 20th December 2005* (2005)**

Finding our tribe is vital to forming our identity: being among like-minded people, with certain norms of dress and appearance to adhere to, gives us the criteria by which we can measure ourselves. Over a period of three years, James Mollison attended concerts around the world photographing fans outside venues for his *Disciples* series. For these panoramic views he stitched together the fans as if to make a 'family', highlighting how fans copy their hero's/heroes' identity to make it their own. The photographs capture people as they relive their youth, both celebrating and gently sending up their efforts, revealing how individuals like to see themselves and the gap between that self-image and how the world might see them.

With the Rod Stewart fans, Mollison shows the struggle of the individual between his own identity and that of his idol. These men all have bleached hair that has been carefully blow-dried to give the right wild, rock-and-roll look. However, they are no playboys with fashion-model girlfriends, but British blokes in badly fitting jackets, who look like they've just returned from a holiday in the sun or perhaps just a drink down the pub. This group portrait might make you chuckle, but Mollison has made sure that he gives the men their dignity. By using a low camera angle, he elevates them from average guys to heroes. They look down on us proudly – half themselves, half Rod.

Seydou Keita (1921–2001)
***Family with Two Guitars and Amplifiers Outside the Studio* (c.1960)**

The inclusion of props is a long-used device in the history of Western portrait painting and photography. If we see an 18th-century painting with a man holding a violin, we know he was a musician; a woman with a palette must be a painter. The props in this photograph might be thought to have a clear significance, then, but are things so clear cut? Are the family, or at least the man and woman, members of a band? We assume (perhaps incorrectly) that the guitars and the amplifiers belong to the man, because he holds one so protectively. However, the photographer, the Malian Seydou Keita, kept many props in his studio – accessories such as hats and glasses, which were signs of modernity for a newly decolonised Mali – so the guitars might feasibly have belonged to another sitter or indeed to Keita, and have nothing to do with this family.

Keita's photographs represent a new, young nation, and they are full of hope and exuberance. He made studio photography that was particular to Mali, free from the Western canon and the traditions of colonial photography. His subjects are not represented for the curiosity of Western eyes, but have a great sense of freedom and personality. His studio, which he operated in Bamako, the Malian capital, between 1948 and 1962, was enormously popular, and he took as many as 40 portraits a day, both inside the studio using traditional Malian cloth as backdrops, or outside, as we see here, to make the most of the bright natural light. His sitters' obvious enjoyment of having their picture taken is a theme that runs throughout his work, and there is a wonderful humanity and joyousness in his portraits.

László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946)
***Untitled (Self Portrait)* (1926)**

One of the great photographers and thinkers on photography of the 20th century, the Hungarian artist and Bauhaus professor László Moholy-Nagy, claimed: 'The enemy of photography is convention, the fixed rules of "how to do". The salvation of photography comes from experiment.' As the work of many interwar artists shows, experiments in photography were rife, and it was a time of great technical, theoretical and artistic development.

In this image, Moholy-Nagy has created an image of such abstraction that we might question whether it is really a self-portrait at all. However, it is titled as such, and a faint outline of the artist's trademark glasses can be seen, so the viewer must trust what the artist tells them, and consider only what he means to say about himself. He has used a camera-less photographic process that involves exposing objects on light-sensitive paper to create what he dubbed 'photograms'. In this instance, he may have used objects that stood in for his face or even somehow wrapped the photographic paper around his face. Perhaps, in offering the viewer such an abstract, X-ray image of himself, he is suggesting an interior, hidden world. Or, more realistically, he is attempting an impossible image – as one can never see oneself as others do. The self here then could be seen as both self and other (both literally and figuratively).

As many other photographs in this book indicate, objects can stand in for identity. An object can become freighted with the identity of a person, or a place, as is the role of souvenirs. All these strategies of abstraction, objects and experiment are investigations into the dismantling of an authentic, unitary self that had gone before theories of postmodernism, which instead introduced ideas of multiple selves. Photography is ripe for such explorations, as it is not so tied to traditional art genres and their associated symbolism.

Nancy Burson (born 1948)
***First and Second Beauty Composites* (1982)**

It is said that time heals all wounds, and sometimes this applies to photography, too. Anyone who has trouble with the outward signs of ageing can find solace in photography: a photograph that at the time of its taking startled you by mercilessly confronting you with your age can, ten years later, amaze you by revealing how young you actually looked.

The apps that now instantly transform your portraits into younger versions of yourself would probably not exist without the pioneering work of American artist Nancy Burson. In the 1980s she developed technology that made it possible to picture how children's faces age, resulting in portraits that helped the FBI find children that had been missing for years. She also did the opposite: she reversed the ageing process and created sham baby portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley.

In the series *Composites*, which she worked on from 1982, she morphed together existing portraits of other famous people, world leaders or, in the work *Androgyny* (1982), men and women. In the examples shown here, she combined the faces of Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren and Marilyn Monroe (top), and the faces of Jane Fonda, Jacqueline Bisset, Diane Keaton, Brooke Shields and Meryl Streep (bottom). By combining the faces of female movie stars from the 1950s and the 1970s, respectively, she shows how our ideals of beauty are shaped and change over decades. The lack of actresses of colour in the composites is striking, but equally telling. For her work *The Human Race Machine* (2000), she used race morphing technology in an interactive tool for the resolution of the world's racial issues, suggesting that the notion of race is social rather than genetic.

Nick Hedges (born 1943)
***Irish Immigrants Recently Moved to Moss Side* (1969)**

Almost every society in the world includes groups of people who are overlooked and almost invisible to the majority of its citizens. These people tend to be society's poorest: the homeless, and those living in precarious economic situations. In 1968, Nick Hedges was commissioned by the UK housing charity Shelter to document the living conditions of the poor in the UK. Over a period of four years, Hedges photographed people in slums in major British cities such as London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow. While criss-crossing the UK, he also captured street scenes and the countryside. This makes Hedges's Shelter archive not just a series showing the misery and squalor found in housing estates around that time, but also an eminent social document, comparable to the photography programme of the Farm Security Administration in the United States (see page 96). Apart from showing decay and disconnection, as well as beauty, Hedges's poignant work records a momentous part of Britain's past (and present), and it gives a face to those who are so frequently ignored.

The fact that we see the face of the father in this photograph is rare, and the absent mother is significant. Many fathers declined to be photographed as they felt responsible and ashamed for their families having to live under such conditions. The wallpaper is partially peeling off the walls, owing to mould and damp, and on it are pasted torn-out pages from magazines and calendars, showing pictures of boxing heroes and pin-up models. The son is an echo of his father in the way he poses in his chair, unsmiling. His younger sister, who stands between them, looks into Hedges's lens with a tilted head and her chin down. She seems to practise her budding identity by copying the pose and look of the pin-up girl behind her on the wall.

Fifty years on, Hedges's Shelter archive is a major, yet still relatively unsung part of the Great Britain's history and national identity.