

THE CONSTRUCTED SELF

IDEAS ON MASQUERADE, SURFACE,
IMITATION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Introduction

The human face is the first and predominant point of connection when establishing an interaction or a relationship with another. We learn to read faces and expressions from an early age; it is ingrained in our biology and essential to our social development. We use the expressions on others' faces to ascertain their emotional and psychological state, and to judge how they are reacting and responding to us. However "for all our familiarity with the face, there is always the possibility of deception. Rather than offering the signs of some inner truth of the person portrayed, the face presented to us might be a façade or mask."¹

Similarly, the face we present to others may also be false. The word "persona" comes from the Latin word originally meaning "mask". What others see on our faces may not be a truthful reflection of what is inside; it may be a constructed persona, a version of ourselves that we wish others to see: a metaphorical mask.

This construction is only possible if it is convincing, and indeed in our daily social interactions we do believe that others are fully convinced by this mask we present to them, and we do not constantly analyse others' for evidence that what we see is a deception. The sociologist Erving Goffman wrote in 1959 "When an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to

¹ Green, David *Introductory essay to John Stezaker* exhibition Open Eye Gallery 02.11.07 – 19.01.08

believe that... in general, matters are what they appear to be."² Therefore we adopt a kind of Orwellian 'doublethink' which allows us to construct a persona, and accept the persona of another, without feeling we are constantly deceiving or being deceived. "We have learned to live with [masks] on our own faces and on those of our fellow men without being aware of it... We are all mask-makers, who partly prefer and partly enjoy and mainly cannot help living with a masklike make-believe of reality."³

The persona – a metaphorical mask – functions in the same way as a literal disguise or covering of the face. The wearer adopts an expression or appearance that is presented to others, and in doing so also puts on a shield that hides the true expression or appearance underneath. "The mask expresses much, but hides even more,"⁴ and masks give man "the imaginary power to be able to manipulate his own identity"⁵ The wearer reveals only what he chooses, and remains hidden behind his mask. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (1959) Erving Goffman compares the process to the disguise of a stage actor. His 'Theory of Dramaturgy' describes, in terms of the theatre, how each individual presents to his audience a 'front' which is kept separate from the 'back region', in the same way a stage is kept separate from the backstage area. In the 'back region' the individual can step out of character, or take off his mask.

² Goffman, Erving *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* 1959 Anchor Books USA p.28

³ Sorell, Walter. *The Other Face: The Mask in the Arts* 1973 Thames and Hudson London p.12

⁴ Canetti, Elias *Crowds and Power* 1962 Victor Gollancz GB p.375

⁵ Sorell, Walter. *The Other Face: The Mask in the Arts* 1973 Thames and Hudson London p.12

If the face is an open site of expression, revealing our psyche, then the self is exposed and vulnerable if we do not wear any kind of mask, or exercise any control over our expressions. Our persona functions as a protective shield; Julia Kristeva describes it as "a second, impassive personality, an anesthetized skin... providing a hiding place."⁶ Any attack, blame or embarrassment we encounter is received by our persona, from which we can form a detached identity; the self that is hidden underneath is protected from injury. With a mask in place, we can more confidently and boldly express ourselves, safe in the knowledge that we will be protected from any negative response to doing so. "We feel safe behind a mask, and it is most often the mask which best reveals the reality of our self"⁷ or, as Oscar Wilde wrote, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person, give him a mask and he will tell the truth."⁸

⁶ Kristeva, Julia *Toccata and Fugue for the Foreigner in Strangers to Ourselves* 1991 Harvester Wheatsheaf p.6

⁷ Sorell, Walter. *The Other Face: The Mask in the Arts* 1973 Thames and Hudson London p.13

⁸ Wilde, Oscar *Intentions* 1891

I. Photography and Physiognomy

Photography was born into a culture that believed the expressions on our faces could be decoded and deciphered, allowing the face to become a window into the soul and character of man. The idea of physiognomy was becoming increasingly popular. Translated from the Greek words *physis* (nature) and *gnomon* (interpretation) physiognomy involved assessing and interpreting the face in order to discern the character and emotions of the subject. If the proportions and expressions of the face could be decoded, the true person beneath could be discovered. Photography began to play a significant role in physiognomic research by scientists such as Duchenne de Boulogne, who used photography to document himself applying electrical impulses to the muscles of his subjects' faces in order to produce a series of facial expressions corresponding to inner emotions.

One of the first photographers concerned with attempting to reveal truths about the inner self within an artistic rather than scientific context was Julia Margaret Cameron. She wrote in 1874:

*"When I have had such men before my camera my whole soul has endeavoured to do its duty towards them in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man."*⁹

She attempted to show the character of her subjects through carefully posed

⁹ Julia Margaret Cameron "The Annals of my Glass House" Quoted in Angier, Roswell *Train your Gaze* 2007 AVA SA p.13

arrangements and facial expressions that would represent their inner emotions. Her photographs, often in soft focus and closely cropped, explored new ground by suggesting narratives and interactions between the figures in the image. However, it could be said the effect was superficial and not really coming any closer to her aim of "recording faithfully the inner man." The pose and expression they held for the picture was merely a mask, which may or may not have reflected the truth.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the belief that the face held the secrets of a man's inner character was diminishing, and the practice of physiognomy was now seen only as a pseudo science. Instead of endeavouring to uncover the secrets concealed beneath the masks, philosophers and artists began to engage more with ideas about the outer surface and how people presented themselves. The complexities of surface itself began to emerge as a richer subject matter than the idea that something could be revealed from beneath it: an idea that began to appear as simplistic and impossible. The continuity between face and personality, and body and soul, became not only an unlikely but also irrelevant idea for the twentieth century artist. Instead the link between the inner and outer worlds became permanently shattered; the human face no longer a trusted venue of emotions.¹⁰

¹⁰ Sobieszek, Robert A. *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul* 1999 Los Angeles County Museum of Art USA p.193-4

II. Portraiture

*"The mask fascinates and, at the same time, enforces distance... it sets a distance between itself and the spectator... above all, it separates."*¹¹ Elias Canetti 1962

*"In photographic portraits the viewer is faced with a mask. Unlike the human face, defined by its constantly moving and changing features, Elias Canetti remarks that the mask, like the photographic portrait, is defined by rigidity and stillness."*¹² Cecilia Jädemar 2007

In the process of making a photographic portrait there is often a quiet struggle for control between the photographer and subject as each tries to assert their power over the situation; control of the situation means control of the image. The photographer wants the subject to look and behave in a certain way to achieve the image he wants. The subject will try to look and act in a certain way to ensure he is represented in the way he wants. Richard Avedon describes this situation:

"A portrait photographer depends upon another person to complete his picture. The subject imagined, which in a sense is me, must be discovered by someone else willing to take part in a fiction he cannot possibly know about. My concerns are not his. We have separate

¹¹ Canetti, Elias *Crowds and Power* 1962 Victor Gollancz GB p.375

¹² Cecilia Jädemar *Unspeakable Faces in Marriage* Stezaker, John 2007 p.11

*ambitions for the image. His need to plead his case probably goes as deep as my need to plead mine, but the control is with me.*¹³

In this struggle for control, both use masks extensively. Goffman wrote that an important function of masks in society was for the individual to “control the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of him... by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan.”¹⁴

The persona the photographer adopts; how he acts; will provoke a reaction in the subject, and therefore affect the portrait. Avedon also describes how, when making a portrait, “I am observing how he moves, reacts, expressions that cross his face, so that I can heighten through instruction what he does naturally, what he is.”¹⁵ Through observation he is able to gain an understanding of how he can manipulate his subject into what is required for the image. “The photographer’s eye does not seek merely to represent. It looks to persuade.”¹⁶

However, in the same way that the photographer has assumed a persona, the subject may do so too, to protect himself against being manipulated. In his role as ‘subject’ he chooses an appropriate mask according to how he wants to be represented.

¹³ Avedon, Richard quoted in Stallabrass, Julian *What’s in a Face?* OCTOBER Magazine 122, Fall 2007 p.71-90.

¹⁴ Goffman, Erving *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* 1959 Anchor Books USA p.15

¹⁵ Avedon, Richard quoted in Stallabrass, Julian *What’s in a Face?* OCTOBER Magazine 122, Fall 2007 p.71-90.

¹⁶ Angier, Roswell *Train your Gaze* 2007 AVA SA p.5

Elias Canetti writes in *Crowds and Power* (1962) about the power of the mask to separate and enforce distance. The subject may use this separating power to his advantage, to keep the photographer at an arm's length so as not to become too vulnerable.

Larry Sultan's 1992 book *Pictures from Home* included a dialogue between himself and his parents. It illustrates the desire of the subject to distance himself from the photographer and therefore retain some control of the image.

"Every time I try to take a photograph, you give me that steely-eyed look. You know it; penetrating but impenetrable, tough and in control. Or you shove your hands in your pockets and gaze off into some mythical future which for some reason is about 45 degrees to my left. It's like you're acting the role of some heroic executive in an annual report or in a diorama on success. Maybe you're looking for a public image of yourself and I'm interested in something more private, in what happens between events – that brief moment between thoughts when you forget yourself."

"That sounds good but it's a load of crap. If anything, the picture shows how strained and artificial the situation was that you set up."

"Sure, it was a charade. But I'm talking about how the image was read rather than what was literally going on when it was made. There's a difference. Don't you think that a fiction can suggest a truth?"

"Maybe, but whose truth is it? It's your picture but my image."¹⁷

Photographing people who work as professional celebrity look-alikes, I have found that their desire to retain control of the image is especially apparent. Their livelihood depends on their image, on their outer 'mask' and they consider it highly important that this image is tightly controlled. Most look-alikes, whilst bearing a striking resemblance to the celebrity they emulate, cannot be completely identical. The key to their success is their ability to emphasise their convincing features, and conceal or play down anything that may reveal them to be an impostor. Derek Williams, a professional Sven Goran Eriksson look-alike, describes how:

"The very best and most successful celebrity impersonators are talented actors in their own right, but being "type cast" by the quirk nature of their "uncanny resemblance" to an existing celebrity they create a "larger than life" characterisation based upon the appearance they have. A full and totally believable/authentic characterisation with all it's subtlety and precise detail of voice inflection, movement, mannerisms and expression is a highly controlled act."¹⁸

However, in a photograph most of those tools involved in crafting the act are removed. Most look-alikes have developed a repertoire of poses and

¹⁷ Sultan, Larry *Pictures from Home* 1992 Harry N. Abrams New York

¹⁸ Derek Williams 2007

expressions that will make them seem as convincing as possible; photography is a powerful tool to them if they can capture their likeness to the celebrity they imitate. However, they are also strongly aware that without being able to capture the way they speak and move a photograph may capture a detail that will give them away. If it is in fact the photographer's intention to attempt to capture this detail – a moment where the mask slips and reveals the person underneath – then he or she will need to coax, persuade, trick or do whatever is possible to convince the look-alike to relinquish for a moment their highly rehearsed control.

However, portraiture is not always a struggle between subject and photographer, and in many cases is a collaborative process.

Catherine Opie allows her subjects to use figurative masks that lend meaning to the image. In the image *Dyke* (1993) the subject's back is turned, and without being able to see her face the only clue to her identity is a tattoo of the word "dyke" on the back of her neck. The tattoo acts as a mask that gives us a limited amount of information. Elias Canetti writes about the fixed nature of the mask: "The mask is clear-cut, it expresses something which is quite definite, and neither more nor less than this. It is fixed, the thing it expresses cannot change."¹⁹ Opie's image is the perfect illustration of this. All we see and all we know is what the tattoo tells us, and although we know this is not the full picture we cannot see the face below the 'mask.' In this way Opie manages to make a political statement about how the subject is treated in society. That is: all people see is the "dyke" label and nothing underneath it.

¹⁹ Canetti, Elias *Crowds and Power* 1962 Victor Gollancz GB p.375

III. Surface

Charlie Crane's book *Welcome to Pyongyang* (2007) documents his time spent in the capital of North Korea. His images depict the guides appointed to him to supervise his travels around the country and censor his photography, and the approved tourist sites that they took him too. He was not able to get 'below the mask' of the country or of his well-presented guides because of the severe restrictions placed upon him.

*"How do you photograph one of the most secretive countries in the world? For me the answer was simple, photograph what they want you to see. If there is no possibility of getting underneath the surface then the answer was to photograph the surface itself."*²⁰

A viewer ignorant of the history and political situation in North Korea may take his highly constructed, beautiful and precise images at face value. However even a vague common knowledge of the country's troubles will alert the viewer to the fact that there is something lurking below the surface. Susan Sontag wrote in 1977 "What determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness²¹" and this statement is certainly true of Crane's work. The images do not refer to the country's reported troubles with human rights, nor to nuclear weapons, communism, war or famine, but our knowledge of these things inform our reading of the work. By photographing only the mask that was presented to

²⁰ Crane, Charlie. www.charliecrane.co.uk accessed 01.10.07

²¹ Sontag, Susan *On Photography* 1977 Penguin London p.19

him, Crane makes a powerful statement about censorship and masking; how a carefully controlled surface can be just as informative and engaging as what is hidden underneath it.

Welcome to Pyongyang also highlights the relationship between the role of masks and the position of a foreigner. Crane clearly photographs from the viewpoint of an outsider; there is a distance between himself and his subjects that not only allows the viewer to scrutinise the surroundings, which are recorded in great detail by his large format camera, but also suggests a lack of intimacy with the photographer. Their blank faces are expressionless masks that reveal nothing. Kristeva writes about the relationship between foreigners and their hosts:

"For [the foreigner's] scornful hosts lack the perspective he himself has in order to see himself and to see them. The foreigner feels strengthened by the distance that detaches him from the others as it does from himself and gives him a lofty sense not so much of holding the truth but making it and himself relative."²²

This distance does indeed 'strengthen' Crane's work; the space between subject and photographer becomes the space between subject and viewer. As viewers we therefore occupy his detached position, which invites us to bring our own sense of perspective, our political knowledge, and our personal judgement to the image. Ironically the foreigner-host relationship becomes

²² Kristeva, Julia *Toccata and Fugue for the Foreigner in Strangers to Ourselves* Harvester Wheatsheaf p.6

inverted when the work is viewed; it now exists in a western context and the people in the photographs have become the foreigners.

Charlie Crane photographed the surface of North Korea because there was “no possibility of getting underneath it.”²³ This engagement with the surface can be compared to the ideas behind the work of Andy Warhol. Warhol maintained that his bold screen prints and visually simple films contained no deeper meaning or hidden message other than what was obvious on the surface. He wrote: “I see everything that way, the surface of things, a kind of mental Braille. I just pass my hands over the surface of things.”²⁴ He was interested in the public façades of the people he depicted, not their characters or inner emotional states. Photography is, more than any other medium, about surface, and Warhol exploited this characteristic not only in his more straightforward photographic work but also by employing photography as a tool in his paintings and films. His paintings and screen prints used images taken from newspapers and magazines as their source and his films were made in distinctly “photographic” style, for example his consistent use of a fixed camera viewpoint. His *Screen Tests* were effectively photographic portraits that showed the subject over an extended period of time, rather than captured in a fraction of a second. He was particularly fascinated with making pictures of famous stars and celebrities – people whose outer façades were so highly constructed and widely circulated that their faces had become familiar icons and fixed masks. However, at the height of his fame, Warhol himself had

²³ Crane, Charlie. www.charliecrane.co.uk accessed 01.10.07

²⁴ Warhol, Andy Quoted in Berg, Gretchen *Andy: My True Story* Los Angeles Free Press 17 March 1967 USA p.3

become as famous and iconic as the subjects of his art. His public persona was enigmatic and at times baffling – as Ralph Rugoff writes in *Who is Andy Warhol?* Warhol's description of "Eric Emerson as someone who was fascinating because "you absolutely couldn't tell if he was a genius or a retard" aptly sums up his own aesthetic strategy."²⁵ Just as he maintained that 'what you saw was what you got' with his artwork, so it was with his personality. "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it."²⁶

²⁵ Rugoff, Robert *Albino Humour* in *Who is Andy Warhol?* 1997 British Film Institute and The Andy Warhol Museum GB p.104

²⁶ Warhol, Andy Quoted in Berg, Gretchen *Andy: My True Story* Los Angeles Free Press 17 March 1967 USA p.3

IV. Multiplicity and Repetition

*"Under this mask, another mask. I will not finish taking off all these faces."*²⁷ Claude Cahun

Warhol's use of repetition alludes to the notion that the face, or the mask, is multiple and divided. His screen prints of famous faces were often presented in grids, with the same image repeated over and over. Some of the images would be smudged or mis-aligned but there was no clear 'master' image, and no suggestion of the 'real' or original face amongst the copies. Giles Deleuze wrote, on the nature of repetition:

*"Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another, as from one distinctive point to another, from one privileged instance to another, with and within the variations. The masks do not hide anything except other masks."*²⁸

²⁷ Cahun, Claude quoted in Sobieszek, Robert A. *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul* 1999 Los Angeles County Museum of Art USA p.214

²⁸ Deleuze, Giles *Repetition and Difference* 1996, Columbia

Before Warhol, art and photography of the Surrealists and Avant-gardists at the beginning of the 20th century had used literal “masks and mannequins ... as foils or alternatives to personality and for suggesting multiple selves.”²⁹ The mask – “man’s most accomplished visual realisation of our twofold existence”³⁰ – represented not only the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ personalities, but the possibility of several layers of identities within an individual. Elias Canetti wrote “It is true that behind one mask there can be another... as soon as one mask opens another is seen beneath it. But this too is a mask, a separate conclusion.”³¹

Warhol’s 1965 film *Outer and Inner Space* (1966) further explores this idea of multiple, shifting identities and masks within an individual, also by using repetition. *Outer and Inner Space* was an experimental, and, in many ways, groundbreaking piece for Warhol. It was his first use of double-screen projection and considered to be the first ever video art. Essentially a ‘video portrait’ of Edie Sedgwick, the film shows her “seated in front of a large television monitor on which is playing a pre-recorded videotape of herself.”³² Two versions of this were shot, then projected side by side to form four images of Edie’s face. The pre-recorded images of Edie “transform her profile into a flattened, glamorised mask”³³ whereas the second, ‘real’ Edie becomes increasingly and visibly awkward, unhappy and uncomfortable throughout the film. The quadruple images in the final film suggest multiple identities and

²⁹ Sobieszek, Robert A. *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul* 1999 Los Angeles County Museum of Art USA p.210

³⁰ Sorell, Walter. *The Other Face: The Mask in the Arts* 1973 Thames and Hudson London p.11

³¹ Canetti, Elias *Crowds and Power* 1962 Victor Gollancz GB p. 375

³² Angell, Callie *Warhol :Outer and Inner Space* 1998 in *Double Life: Identity and Transformation in Contemporary Arts* Breitwieser, Sabine (ed) 2001 Generali Foundation, Vienna p.214

³³ Angell, Callie *Warhol :Outer and Inner Space* 1998 in *Double Life: Identity and Transformation in Contemporary Arts* Breitwieser, Sabine (ed) 2001 Generali Foundation, Vienna p.214

versions of Edie shifting between her 'inner' and 'outer' spaces. Outer and Inner Space illustrates perfectly the idea that "human personality [is] no longer always thought of as a unified, immutable character; instead it [is] frequently seen as split into multiple emotions and psychic states."³⁴

This idea is central to the work of the photographer Cindy Sherman. She uses herself as a model and adopts disguises and roles in order to explore the "unlimited possibilities and the unlikely people who are concealed in all of us."³⁵ Sherman's work expresses nothing about her or her attitude towards the roles she has chosen to play³⁶; her work could not be described as self-portraiture. "There is no 'real' self, no 'real' Cindy Sherman offered."³⁷ The notion of 'true self' is abandoned and replaced by the concept of multiplicity, dissociation and fluidity. She takes on her characters for the camera and then discards them again, replacing one mask with another. Often taken from stereotypes in mainstream film and culture, they are forms of imitation

³⁴ Sobieszek, Robert A. *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul* 1999 Los Angeles County Museum of Art USA p.190

³⁵ Rainer, Arnulf *Farce Faces* in Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (eds.) *Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists Writings* 1996 Berkeley Los Angeles p. 248

³⁶ Hubbard, Sue *Woman of Parts* in *New Statesman and Society* 9th August 1991 p.34

³⁷ Hubbard, Sue *Woman of Parts* in *New Statesman and Society* 9th August 1991 p.34

V. Imitation and Performance

*"To imitate is no doubt to reproduce an image. But at bottom, it is, for the subject, to be inserted into a function whose exercise grasps it."*³⁸ Jacques Lacan 1964

Imitation, Lacan tells us, is not just the reproduction of an image, the way something looks, but also a reproduction of the function and essence of the imitated thing. However, Elias Canetti describes how "imitation relates to externals, there must be something before one's eyes, which is copied... nothing is revealed about the inner state of the imitator."³⁹ This process of imitation; adopting another's persona and function, enacting a performance, and then discarding it; can be compared to what celebrity look-alikes do. Canetti's statement that "nothing is revealed about the inner state of the imitator"⁴⁰ should therefore ring true for the look-alike assuming the appearance of a popular celebrity, just as it does for Sherman assuming the appearance of a Hollywood movie starlet. But can continuously imitating the same person, assuming the same mask again and again, lead the to a confusion of the imitator and the imitated? Many celebrity look-alikes consider that they have a number of things in common with the person they imitate, other than outer appearance. Lisa Antoinette, a Madonna look-alike, feels she

³⁸ Lacan, Jacques *The Line and Light* 1964 in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Karnac London/New York p.100

³⁹ Canetti, Elias *Crowds and Power* 1962 Victor Gollancz GB p. 369

⁴⁰ Canetti, Elias *Crowds and Power* 1962 Victor Gollancz GB p. 369

is similar to Madonna in that she is also an “extrovert and mainly confident”⁴¹ and that they share “the same Catholic upbringing and schooling.”⁴² Javaun Thompson imitates the rapper Snoop Dogg and feels that they both “laugh, have a ‘don’t care’ attitude, and live a good and happy life with our family [sic].⁴³” Lissa Statham is a look-alike for the actress Angelina Jolie. She writes “I do think a lot like her when I read her thoughts and views on things. I am very spiritual too, and have many tattoos to show this. I think and feel and agree with the things she supports and believes in.” Most celebrity look-alikes also feel a certain degree of respect for the celebrity they imitate, and feel some empathy with them, especially when it comes to harsh treatment in the press. Derek Williams writes “it has embarrassed me a little in the past that the media had such an unfair bloodlust for Sven, when statistics show that he was one of the all time most successful England football managers... I find that I admire his success, determination and dignity in the face of so much media hype and unjustified criticism. ” Lisa Antoinette agrees that she feels empathy with Madonna when she is harshly treated “just to sell papers.”⁴⁴ Interestingly, she finds that when a story about Madonna does appear in a newspaper, “friends and family ask me questions; they believe I would know if it were true.”⁴⁵

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung believed that total identification with the persona could cause us to lose sight of our true selves by becoming “identical with [our] personas... [living] exclusively against the background of [our] own

⁴¹ Lisa Antoinette 2007

⁴² Lisa Antoinette 2007

⁴³ Javaun Thompson, 2007

⁴⁴ Lisa Antoinette 2007

⁴⁵ Lisa Antoinette 2007

biography."⁴⁶ When you work professionally imitating somebody else on a regular basis, does it become difficult to separate your personal identity from your celebrity persona?

The look-alikes I talked to have answered, emphatically, no. Lissa Statham writes "I have my feet firmly on the ground and I know who I am. We are two different people with different lives"⁴⁷ and Derek Williams agrees. "I put on the character like a well fitting mask or a comfy old jacket, do my stuff in front of a live audience or a camera, then revert to my old voice and personality without a second thought. I certainly can't imagine anyone taking on the personality of their celebrity in real life as this is only an acting job after all..."⁴⁸

For both Sherman and the celebrity look-alikes, their imitation is not merely a superficial change to the way they look, but a performance and a persona they act out. Whereas the look-alike's performance usually takes place in front of a live audience, or a video/television camera, Sherman uses photography almost exclusively to facilitate her performance.

She embraces the performance aspect of being photographed; the heightened awareness of the outer mask that the presence of the camera creates. "There is a degree of dramatics in nearly all portrait photography; portraiture is performance, and like any performance, in the balance of its effects it is good

⁴⁶ Jung, Carl G. *Concerning Rebirth* 1940 in CW9, Part I: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious p.221

⁴⁷ Lissa Statham 2007

⁴⁸ Derek Williams 2007

or bad, not natural or unnatural."⁴⁹ Sherman's portraits are consciously performing, engaging with the camera and with the viewer. She is both the image and the image maker⁵⁰ and so a double figure emerges: "artist=artwork."⁵¹ In this way, the imitation and performance become a "first step towards transformation."⁵²

⁴⁹ Avedon, Richard quoted in Sobieszek, Robert A. *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul* 1999 Los Angeles County Museum of Art USA p.176

⁵⁰ Hubbard, Sue *Woman of parts* in *New Statesman and Society* 9th August 1991 p.34

⁵¹ Noack, Ruth *Producing Existences in the Art of the Seventies* in *Double Life: Identity and Transformation in Contemporary Arts* Breitwieser, Sabine (ed) 2001 Generali Foundation, Vienna p.27

⁵² Canetti, Elias *Crowds and Power* 1962 Victor Gollancz GB p. 369

VI. Autobiography and Transformation

*"In so far that this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our true inner self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons."*⁵³ Robert Ezra Park 1950

Masquerade and performance are closely bound to the idea of transformation. To put on and take off masks is to undergo a transformation, albeit a superficial and temporary one. But this is not to say that masks cannot be tools for more permanent and meaningful transformations.

The nature of transformation is addressed by the performance artist Eleanor Antin, who adopts different identities through costume and performance. She refers to herself as a "post conceptual artist concerned with the nature of human reality, specifically with the transformational nature of the self."⁵⁴

Rather than dressing up for a photograph, as Sherman does, Antin plays the part of her alter-identities within everyday life. She says of the process "I am interested in defining the limits of myself. I consider the usual aids to self-definition – sex, age, talent, time and space – as tyrannical limitations upon my freedom of choice. I have four projected selves – The Ballerina, The King,

⁵³ Park, Robert Ezra *Race and Culture* 1950 The Free Press, Illinois

⁵⁴ Antin, Eleanor *Notes on Transformation* 1974 in Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (eds.) *Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists Writings* 1996 Berkeley Los Angeles p.774

The Black Movie Star, and The Nurse.”⁵⁵ Antin is interested in how autobiographical works, and the documentation of them, are forms of transformation. She sees the process of constructing an autobiography as not simply the documentation of facts but a “conceptual creation of events after they are over. All ‘description’ is a form of creation... Autobiography can be considered a particular type of transformation in which the subject chooses a specific, yet unarticulated image and proceeds to progressively define his self with increasing refinement which, in turn, both clarifies and makes precise the original image, while at the same time transforming the subject.”⁵⁶ In this way, the masks we wear become an intrinsic part of the formation of our identities.

This total identification with the characteristics of the mask was one of the aims for early mask-wearers. Primitive and totemistic cultures used animal masks, particularly those of animals that were believed to have special powers. “The masked hunter also controls the figure of the animal he represents... The more often he wears it and the better he knows it, the more of himself will flow into the figure he represents.”⁵⁷ The mask becomes a tool for transformation.

⁵⁵ Antin, Eleanor *Notes on Transformation* 1974 in Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (eds.) *Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists Writings* 1996 Berkeley Los Angeles p.775

⁵⁶ Antin, Eleanor *Notes on Transformation* 1974 in Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter (eds.) *Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists Writings* 1996 Berkeley Los Angeles p. 773

⁵⁷ Canetti, Elias *Crowds and Power* 1962 Victor Gollancz GB p.370

VII. Christianity and Transformation

*"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."*⁵⁸ Romans 12 v 2

As we have seen, celebrity look-alikes do not feel that they are transformed as a result of wearing a mask. It is important to them to keep their celebrity character and their 'real' selves as separate as possible. However, for some people an outer persona can be a useful tool to transform the inner self. In my recent photographic work I have been exploring the world of contemporary Christianity. It is an interesting contrast from photographing look-alikes as they present a very different attitude regarding appearance and transformation. For Christians, outer appearances are not crucial as they are to celebrity look-alikes. However they may change their outer appearances, especially their behaviours and lifestyles, as part of a deeper change they feel happens within. Christians believe that to follow Jesus Christ they must live following the example of Christ's life as documented in The Bible. The Bible says "this is what you were called to do, because Christ suffered for you and gave you an example to follow. So you should do as he did."⁵⁹ "In your lives you must think and act like Christ Jesus."⁶⁰ In this way Christians are adopting the persona of Christ. However, a change in the outer persona is not the goal of a Christian. Jesus says to the Pharisees in Luke 16: "You make yourselves

⁵⁸ Romans 12 v 2 New International Version

⁵⁹ 1 Peter 2 v 21 New Century Version

⁶⁰ Philippians 2 v 5 New Century Version

look good in front of people, but God knows what is really in your hearts.”⁶¹

Instead the mask is a tool for inner transformation.

However, by adopting Christ’s persona, Christians are merely imitating him.

Elias Canetti’s assertion that “imitation is nothing but a first step in the direction of transformation, a movement which immediately stops short...

Transformation, on the other hand, is like a solid body set beside the two-dimensional structure of imitation”⁶² would suggest that transformation through imitation alone is impossible.

Yet Christians do report that almost without exception they felt a transformation inside when they became a Christian. One person interviewed describes how “there were changes to the way I felt. I felt excited about the possibilities for my life and the future before me, despite not really having any concrete plans. I somehow felt confident that God was always going to understand and support me, accept me and use me.”⁶³ Others describe similar changes. “I became more comfortable meeting new people, I was more excited about getting out into the world. I was no longer scared of making mistakes; failure became just an opportunity to try again rather than an end to something. I learnt I could do things bigger than me that I actually couldn’t do, because I had someone with me who could... it made me feel stronger like I could change the world! It made me feel like I was worth something and that

⁶¹ Luke 16 v 15 New Century Version

⁶² Canetti, Elias *Crowds and Power* 1962 Victor Gollancz GB p 370

⁶³ Interview participant 2007

everyone else was worth something also.”⁶⁴ Another writes “I look around at friends and family who don’t know Jesus and realise that I must feel different inside because I don’t feel how they do about certain things. The biggest feeling for me is joy – I grin from ear to ear when I consider how blessed I am. Maybe that is experienced in other people too – but I know a lot of people who couldn’t describe their life in that way.”⁶⁵

There also appear to be longer term, more meaningful changes. One person describes how in the long term “I have certainly become more able to cope”⁶⁶ and another how “I am more patient and less self-centred. I am less anxious and have more faith.”⁶⁷

So why do people change when they become Christians? Is it simply the power of putting on a new mask, adopting the persona of a ‘Christian’? Most Christians spoken to disagree that this is the case, because most feel that they came to believe and started to change inside *before* they started to alter their outer behaviour.

So what is the cause of the transformation experienced by born-again Christians? Could it be the “belonging” to a church or group of Christians, and the influence from their peers that enables the change? Most of the people interviewed say they feel a close connection to the people at their church, transcending barriers of age, interests and outlook. One wrote “I believe Christians will always be able to identify with each other at some level, even if

⁶⁴ Interview participant 2007

⁶⁵ Interview participant 2007

⁶⁶ Interview participant 2007

⁶⁷ Interview participant 2007

they don't share a lot in common. This is a spiritual truth, and one which is only really appreciated when you know it yourself."⁶⁸ "In my church family right now, there are many people who influence me on an ongoing basis... through being encouraging about the choices I make, being good role models, being genuine friends."⁶⁹ However, the reason all of the interviewees cited as being the cause of their transformation was a spiritual intervention from God. The Bible often refers to this as being "filled with the Spirit." The Christian preacher and writer Oswald Chambers wrote "the incoming of the Spirit of Jesus into me readjusts my personal life to God... the idea through all the apostle Paul's writings is that after the moral decision to be identified with Jesus has been made... then the Holy Spirit invades me. He takes charge of everything; my part is to walk in the light and obey all he reveals... God puts the holiness of his Son into me, and I belong to a new order spiritually."⁷⁰ "By being filled with the Spirit we are transformed."⁷¹

Most interviewees described it in a similar way, and emphasised the transformative power of being "filled with the Spirit." "In surrendering your life to Him, there is a freedom for Him to transform you that was not there before. I have had this experience, rarely dramatically, and often privately. I usually know God is at work in this way because I have a sense of calm and peace about things. It restores my perspective on life and I feel close to God i.e. my

⁶⁸ Interview participant, 2007

⁶⁹ Interview participant, 2007

⁷⁰ Chambers, Oswald *My Utmost for His Highest* 1935 Barbour Publishing Inc Ohio p.11/4

⁷¹ Chambers, Oswald *My Utmost for His Highest* 1935 Barbour Publishing Inc Ohio p.23/1

doubts recede and I have an increase of belief.”⁷² “I know that God’s Spirit is at work in me, because I feel different inside as a result.”⁷³

⁷² Interview participant, 2007

⁷³ Interview participant, 2007

Conclusion – the Gaze

I will conclude with a brief discussion that will aim to tie together the strands that I have written about so far. A vital component of masquerade and performance is the gaze of another; an audience that allows them to function fully.

To gaze at something gives it value. To be looked at makes us feel we are worthy of being given another's attention; we are interesting or captivating or beautiful. The gaze of the camera has the same effect; as Susan Sontag wrote "to photograph is to confer importance... there is no way to suppress the tendency inherent in all photographs to accord value to their subjects."⁷⁴ This desire to be seen, and to be photographed perhaps goes some way to explain the value given to celebrities and the famous. People who are famous, those who are gazed upon a great deal, and by many people, and are also photographed the most, are the most celebrated in our society. They are also the people we perceive to be highly false; we expect the persona of famous people to be a mask or façade.

Lacan describes how the 'mirror stage' in a child's development – looking at a reflection of himself in a mirror - allows him to develop an awareness of his own sense of identity. The perception of a mirror-image is an essential stage in the development of self-perception and a sense of selfhood⁷⁵.

⁷⁴ Sontag, Susan *On Photography* 1977 Penguin London p.28

⁷⁵ Macey, David *Dictionary of Critical Theory* 2000 Penguin Reference London p.255

The mirror phase occurs between the ages of 6 and 18 months; a time when a child has little or no co-ordination over the functions his own body. What he sees in the mirror is pleasing, as it shows a “functional unity it has yet to achieve.”⁷⁶ So the child identifies with what he will become, what he wishes to be, rather than what he actually is at that moment of perception. Lacan calls this ideal self the ‘ideal-I.’ The child’s awareness self-perception also leads to an awareness of perception by another; that is, he becomes aware that the image he sees in the mirror can also be seen by another. The gaze of the ‘other’ helps form the identity of the self. For most people, this relationship between our ‘ideal image’ of how we would like to be, and our awareness of how others see us, continues long past childhood. We re-enforce our sense of self-identity by ensuring we ‘look the part,’ so that others perceive us in the same way we perceive ourselves.

For the celebrity look-alike the façade that they construct should be as flawless and convincing as possible. It can be seen as an extreme form of the mask making that we all participate in, as described at the beginning of this essay. The look-alike is concerned with how they appear to others: how they are seen from a secondary perspective. However, the processes of building self-identity and self worth from the gaze of others start to become distorted. The value that comes from being looked at is not directed at their inner self, but at the celebrity character they are playing. Unlike an actor in a play or film, there is no recognition for the ‘real’ person underneath the character, and the self-identity of the actor inside is not re-enforced by the attention they receive. The

⁷⁶ Macey, David *Dictionary of Critical Theory* 2000 Penguin Reference London p.255

only way they can receive the gaze that is directed at their outer façade is to identify with that façade; to identify with the character they are playing.

Ideas about the gaze can also be applied to my discussion of transformation and Christianity. Lacan describes the gaze of the other as ever-present and not dependent on a specific bearer. "I can feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not see, not even discern."⁷⁷ So for the celebrity look-alike the bearer of the gaze is his or her audience, be it real or imagined. For the Christian the ever-present gaze comes from God, who is all-seeing and all-knowing:

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me; your right hand will hold me fast."⁷⁸

Jean-Paul Sartre described how the gaze of another restricts the freedom of an individual by turning them into the object of the look – transforming them from the state of 'being-for-itself' to 'being-for-others.' "Being in the sight of God is the ultimate instance of being-for-others as there is no escape from the all-seeing gaze of the divinity."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Lacan, Jacques *Seminar One: Freud's Papers On Technique* 1988 p.215

⁷⁸ Psalm 139 v 7-10 New International Version

⁷⁹ Macey, David *Dictionary of Critical Theory* 2000 Penguin Reference London p.155

Sartre would describe this constant gaze as a barrier to freedom; most Christians I have spoken to would probably disagree. For them the gaze of God, directed as it is at their inner self, not their outer persona, is a re-enforcement of their identity as a being loved, protected and watched over by God.

It is not for me to conclude whether or not celebrity look-alikes really do manage to keep their own personality separate from their professional one, or whether Christians really do transform because of a spiritual force, rather than any other influence. Look-alikes and Christians are just examples I have chosen to illustrate the nature of masquerade and transformation; they are people who I have studied and photographed, but many other examples would also be applicable. However, in both cases, the individuals involved have an interesting experience of masks and transformation respectively, and they make for a unique comparison.

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