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DOI: 10.35765/pk.2023.4203.16

## The Visual Culture of the Selfie from the Perspective of ‘Visual Identity’: The Issues of the Selfie within Contemporary Art

### ABSTRACT

The essay attempts to outline the issues of the visual culture of the selfie from the perspective of “visual identity” that has referred to contemporary art. In this paper, I analyze examples of the following artworks: *The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN* by the French artist ORLAN, the Bodies© INCorporated website, designed by Victoria Vesna, *The Little Revenge from the Periphery* by José Bedia Valdés, *The Chief: He Who Sold Africa to the Colonists* and *Autoportraits* by Samuel Fosso. In addition, this paper is focused on an analysis of the “biopower” concept which refers to Michel Foucault’s “docile bodies.” This concept is based on the neoliberal power process over the production of living beings and exercising control over them is an updating of the development of political, democratic, and economic institutions, as well as information and biocybernetic technologies. The “docile bodies” concept strengthens the conviction of the bodies must become the object of biopower interventions for the “perfect body” concept to act upon the strictly defined appearance of the body consistent with the standards and norms of “beauty” adopted by visual culture. In this situation, the selfie and photographic images produce homogeneous images, which function as “ideological texts” making our “visual identity” and self-image. This concept is given a lot of considerable space in this paper because the selfie can be regarded as an “personality identity” shaping the visual appearance of our bodies. In the essay’s conclusion, I claim that the visual culture of the selfie seems to be an aesthetic phenomenon shaped by a visual medium such as digital photography. However, photography does not is the key medium of the selfie. My analyses were aimed at showing that this role plays an “image,” no matter how it can be understood.

**KEYWORDS:** visual culture, contemporary art, the selfie, ORLAN, visual identity, the biopower concept, the docile bodies, an image

**Suggested citation:** Chmielecki, K. (2023). The Visual Culture of the Selfie from the Perspective of ‘Visual Identity’: The Issues of the Selfie within Contemporary Art. © ⓘ *Perspectives on Culture*, 3(42), pp. 201–225. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2023.4203.16

Submitted: 03.10.2022

Accepted: 30.08.2023

## STRESZCZENIE

Kultura wizualna selfie z perspektywy „tożsamości wizualnej”: problematyka selfie w sztuce współczesnej

Esej jest próbą nakreślenia problematyki kultury wizualnej selfie z perspektywy „tożsamości wizualnej”, która odnosi się do sztuki współczesnej. W niniejszym artykule analizuję przykłady następujących dzieł sztuki: *The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN* francuskiej artystki ORLAN, strona internetowa Bodies© INCorporated, zaprojektowana przez Victorię Vesna, *The Little Revenge from the Periphery* José Bedia Valdésa, *The Chief: He Who Sold Africa to the Colonists* i *Autoportraits* Samuela Fosso. Ponadto niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się na analizie koncepcji „biowładzy”, która odnosi się do „podatnych ciał” Michela Foucaulta. Koncepcja ta opiera się na neoliberalnym procesie władzy nad produkcją istot żywych i sprawowaniem nad nimi kontroli. Jest aktualizacją rozwoju instytucji politycznych, demokratycznych i ekonomicznych, a także technologii informacyjnych i bio-cybernetycznych. Koncepcja „podatnych ciał” wzmacnia przekonanie, że ciała muszą się stać przedmiotem interwencji biowładzy, aby koncepcja „ciała idealnego” oddziaływała na ściśle określony wygląd ciała zgodny z przyjętymi przez kulturę wizualną standardami i normami „piękna”. W tej sytuacji media i obrazy fotograficzne wytwarzają jednorodne obrazy, które funkcjonują jako „teksty ideologiczne” tworzące naszą „tożsamość wizualną” i obraz siebie. Koncepcji tej poświęcono w tym artykule bardzo dużo miejsca, ponieważ selfie można traktować jako „tożsamość osobistą”, kształtującą wizualny wygląd naszych ciał. W podsumowaniu eseju twierdzę, że kultura wizualna selfie wydaje się zjawiskiem estetycznym ukształtowanym przez medium wizualne, jakim jest fotografia cyfrowa. Fotografia nie jest jednak kluczowym medium selfie. Moje analizy miały na celu pokazanie, że funkcję tę pełni „obraz”, bez względu na to, jak może być rozumiany.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** kultura wizualna, sztuka współczesna, selfie, ORLAN, tożsamość wizualna, koncepcja biowładzy, podatne ciała, obraz

## Introduction

In this paper, the issues of the selfie will be considered in the example of contemporary artworks embedded in the context of visual identity which occurs in the visual culture area. In my opinion, the visual culture of the selfie is assisted by computer vision technology based on the vision machine in the digital image processing (DIP). Joanne Finkelstein, in *The Art of Self Invention: Image and Identity in Popular Visual Culture*, writes about how visual media work in the shaping of the identity process.

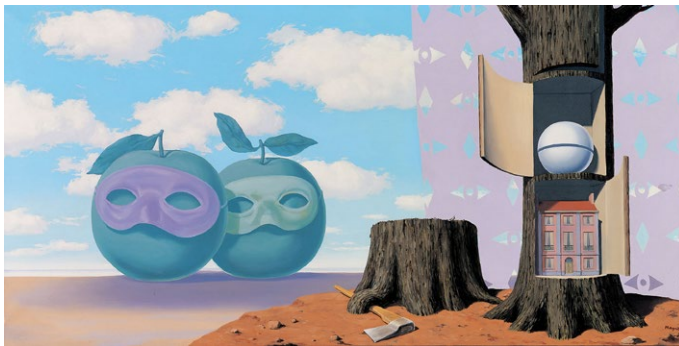
She refers to the concept of self-identity, in the historical process which has a cosmopolitan aspect. As the author also claims:

Indeed, the term has no simple and reliable definition, but it does have the important function of bringing focus to how we conduct ourselves in the public domain and how we pursue pleasures and cultivate tastes (Finkelstein, 2007, p. 112).

In order to explain how the self-identity concept can be regarded, Finkelstein recalls the surrealist image by Renè Magritte entitled, *The Enchanted Domain* (1953) (Fig. 1), and she claims:

In this image, the pieces of fruit are identical (perhaps like us), even in their choice of the mask as a device for concealment. The (party – note K.C.) mask itself, small, covering only the eyes, is totally inadequate as a disguise yet it usefully alludes to the confident way we employ objects to express aspects of ourselves to others in the world (Finkelstein, 2007, p. 95).

Figure 1. Renè Magritte (1898–1967), *The Enchanted Domain*, French: *Le Domaine Enchanté* (1953), an oil painting reproduction, The Albertina Museum in Vienna: The Batliner Collection



Note: This image has been used in this paper with permission and thanks to the courtesy of the Albertina Museum in Vienna.

However, Finkelstein considers that these party masks are a summary of many questions that can be raised by explorations for an identity and meaning definition, and she suggests that “The question of what is accomplished with the wearing of the mask remains – what exactly is being concealed and what is being revealed?” (Finkelstein, 2007, p. 95). Magritte leaves these questions unanswered. Thinking about the idea of these masks, we have drawn ourselves in the various examples of the many

theoretical issues that are always accompanied by the visual identity concept in the understanding of feminist and queer theory, which was proposed by Amelia Jones and discussed in her book entitled *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts*. This issue is described in reference to an “identity politics” concept which offers a history and theory of “identity,” “post-identity,” and “identification” in visual arts from a viewpoint of different perspectives of “seeing and reconceiving difference” within the contemporary visual culture (see Jones, 2012, pp. 218–243).

### Selfies in ORLAN’s performances, self-portraits of the artist on the ORLAN Official Website

The role of an image component in creating and shaping visual identity can be discussed on the example of *The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN* (Fig. 2) the project by the French artist ORLAN (born in 1947), who has been transforming her face through a series of plastic surgery. This project is the source of selfies because ORLAN creates her self-portraits in that way. However, the issue of the selfie in referring to ORLAN’s art is rarely considered. In her performances, ORLAN makes attempts that do not involve striving for an “ideal” of beauty of a woman’s face, sanctioned by the patriarchal system but are inextricably associated with the issue of visual identity and the post-biological perspective of gender. On the one hand, it may seem that ORLAN wants to create a new identity, based on iconic representations, which in Western European culture refer to the most famous instances of a “beautiful” body, pictured in classical art. On the other hand, at the same time, ORLAN’s project corresponds to the behaviors that can be observed in popular culture. What is questionable, therefore, are the countless plastic surgeries undertaken for the body giving it a strictly defined appearance, mainly by extension, of the “perfect body” concept in line with the standards and norms of a “beautiful” body adopted by visual culture. These tendencies are associated with the issue of the “biopower” concept,<sup>1</sup> regarded as a set of mechanisms leading up to

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1 The “bio-power” concept was coined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault who referred to it as the practice of the modern nation-states within regulating a life of human beings that are subjected to power mechanisms. According to Foucault biopower relies on the premise that modern Western societies assimilated the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. See different models of this concept in his works in chronological order: “Hence there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, making the beginning of an era of ‘bio-power’” (Foucault, 1990,

the inclusion of human biological features into the area of power strategy which assumes the management of a human population through regulating and controlling human life processes (Foucault, 2009, p. 1).

Figure 2. ORLAN, *The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN*, (1990–1995) performances, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris



Note: These photographs has been used in this paper with the permission of the artist and thanks to her courtesy.

However, ORLAN's project relativizes the adopted standards and norms of beauty because her face was not created in any semblance to circulating images in visual media. As previously stated, ORLAN has attempted to create a new person, who will have arisen by series of plastic surgeries, and her face will be conceived as a computed composite merging the artist's face with a choice of facial features borrowed from figures exemplifying the examples of the canon of Western European classical art. After the project's completion, ORLAN's face will be comprised of the chin of Sandro Botticelli's *Venus*, the eyes of François Gérard's *Psyche*, the mouth of François Boucher's *Europa*, the nose of Diana the Huntress from the School of Fontainebleau, and the forehead of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (Fig. 3) (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 117–118). In this sense, ORLAN's face may be recognized as a selfie because it includes artworks stylized as selfies that appeared in them. The Da Vinci Face platform uses artificial intelligence and complex algorithms to transform our selfies into artworks. Each of them is covered with layers that create a sfumato effect which is characteristic of the artworks of Leonardo. Sfumato is one of the canonical

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p. 140) and "What does this new technology of power, this biopolitics, this biopower that is beginning to establish itself, involve?" (Foucault, 2003, p. 243).

painting modes in the Renaissance and is a painting technique used for softening the transition between colors, mimicking an area beyond what the human eye is focusing on, or the out-of-focus plane. Leonardo was the most prominent practitioner of sfumato, based on his research on optics and human vision, and his experimentation with the camera obscura. He introduced it and implemented it in his famous painting of the *Mona Lisa* which was repeatedly used by Art Selfie.

Figure 3. ORLAN's face is a composite of selected representations from Western European classical art: (Venus, Psyche, Europa, Diana the Huntress, and *Mona Lisa*)



Note: This image has been used in this paper with the permission of the artist and thanks to her courtesy.

As the only one, ORLAN has made plastic surgery a means of artistic expression. Each of the operations was documented photographically, and in 1993 she began the broadcast live performances that could be seen in art galleries and on online satellite television. ORLAN creates her “blasphemous” art and defines it as “carnal art,” which is a self-portrait in the classical sense, yet realized by the digital technology of its time, and she has made her body “a living sculpture.” In this sense, ORLAN’s self-portraits are prototypes of selfies. According to “Carnal Art Manifesto,” ORLAN’s artistic activity is against the conventions of youth and beauty carried by plastic surgery. She has said that her art is not body art, but “carnal art,” which lacks the suffering aspect of body art.

Ryszard W. Kluszczyński<sup>2</sup> argues that ORLAN’s project exceeds reality limitations, remaining within the boundaries of its metaphysical references. He also claims:

2 Ryszard W. Kluszczyński refers to “...the awareness of ‘corporality’ as an aspect of perception [which – note K.C.] began to develop, grounded in the knowledge of physiological conditions

Its space stretches from the real, biological body to the virtual one, from nature to technosphere, from commercialized patriarchal culture to cyber-feminism (Kluszczyński, 2005, p. 91).

The artist aims at virtualization of her body, creating a new project of visual identity and body in her artworks, reclaiming and transcending it in forms that do not exist in any other characters outside of it. Thus, ORLAN's visual identity changes under the influence of images, while her body's transformation is engineered with the participation of visual representations taken from Western European classical art. "ORLAN's project apparently an attempt at reclaiming one's own body, lost at birth – poses essentiality questions concerning the individual's attitude towards their 'own' corporality, as well as the philosophical and social contexts of the issue" (Kluszczyński, 2005, p. 91). ORLAN also creates relationships to "own" visual identity within different contexts and the produced meanings as the concept of a "body without organs."

However, at least two aspects of ORLAN's performances (Fig. 4) call for circumspection and deliberation in formulating any assessments because those ventures of the body of transformation through a series of plastic surgery procedures do not belong in the post-biological area but deal with the visual identity issues. However, the direct object of their actions is the physical or biological body. The first of them is the origin of form towards which ORLAN has turned in her artworks, tackling body transformations. This form is immanently associated with the issue of visual identity and looking for a new image both within the canons of aesthetics and the patriarchal system. In this case, we are dealing with technological mediation that is combined with an artistic concept and its concretization in the artworks. The second issue is much more important because of the post-biological character of ORLAN's project that presented the immanent conviction implying that the body is an entity subjected not only to natural, and biological processes, but can also be processed artificially in "virtualization as reclaiming and transcending the body" (see Kluszczyński, 2005, pp. 89–92). ORLAN's project undergoes diverse treatments shaping its properties and transcending its natural destiny on the way to its own vision of visual identity which will guide it to a "visual journey."

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determining the process" (Kluszczyński, 2005, p. 85). This conclusion is based on the book entitled *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* in which Jonathan Crary, proclaims that the "subjection vision" concept, points that the human body is dependent on perception, in this sense that gives the observer an autonomy and productivity of vision and simultaneously allows him on forms of standardization in the control for a seeing subject (cf. Crary, 1992, pp. 67–96).

Figure 4. Drawing lines on the face. The 7th ORLAN's medical performance in a series of plastic surgery entitled *Omnipresence*, which available at the website URL address: <https://dublin.sciencegallery.com/perfection-exhibits/omnipresence>, November 21, 1993, New York, Cabrachrome (in the Diasec mount) in the dimensions 65 x 13-inches is available at the website URL address: <https://www.orlan.eu/works/photo-2/>



Note: This photograph has been used in this paper with the permission of the artist and thanks to her courtesy.

The various artworks referring to corporality, such as the gestures of artists full of violence toward their own bodies, undertaken previously by many artists (e.g., the self-destructive performances of the Viennese Actionists), have been realized only in relation to the physical and biological body. The value of such endeavors, as well as the meanings produced and provoked thereby, remain within the post-biological area. However, ORLAN's project exceeds those limitations (Kluszczynski, 2005, p. 91). ORLAN's artworks through the artist herself are understood, on the one hand, as a penetration of feminist thought (a perception of women in Art History, discussion of male-imposed standards of beauty and appearance), and on the other hand, as simultaneously touching on the issues of the body's sanctity and intransigence, addressing cultural taboos within visual culture, and using technological threats. For ORLAN, "virtualization as transcending the body" is taken by a specific dimension. Often it is emphasized by transformations of the body, including the ORLAN's facial anatomy, who also plays with her visual identity evoking its fluidity. ORLAN, combining elements of several faces in her own, gives up her own identity (personality), becoming a "computer hybrid" which symbolizes the repressiveness of ideas about the ideal of a female body. Readable in ORLAN's performances, the element of negating her own visual identity becomes apparently noticeable in her relationship with asceticism, on the very surface. Continuing the topic of visual identity issues in further inquiries, one could say that in the case of ORLAN, the term "visual



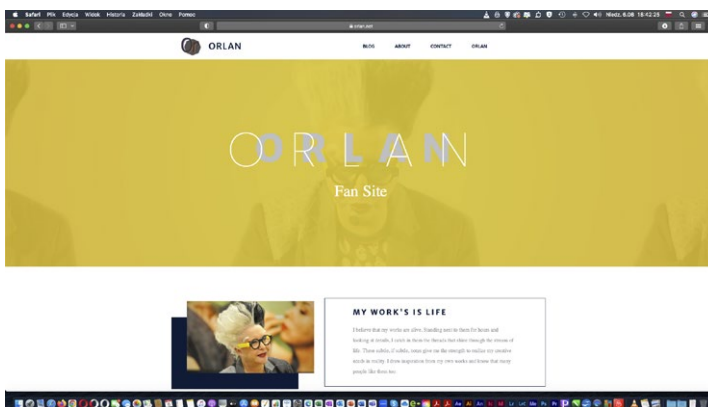
identity” refers to the person of the artist herself and his self-images and self-portraits may be treated in this case as selfies. Like the self-portraits of Cindy Sherman in her collected artwork entitled *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980), ORLAN uses her face as a malleable tool for shifting identities that find their place in her artworks. ORLAN has been the first artist who uses plastic surgery in another context – not to appear younger according to the patriarchal model of culture – but to disrupt social norms of visual identity.

Figure 5a. The ORLAN Official Website (French: *Site Officiel d'ORLAN*) which is available at the website URL address: <http://www.orlan.eu/>



Note: This photograph has been used in this paper with the permission of the artist and thanks to her courtesy.

Figure 5b. The ORLAN Official Website (French: *Site Officiel d'ORLAN*) which is available at the website URL address: <http://www.orlan.eu/>



Note: This photograph has been used in this paper with the permission of the artist and thanks to her courtesy.

Figure 6. Self-hybridization between women (act 2: ORLAN, Weeping Women Are Angry No. 9, 2019) is presented on the Musée Picasso, Paris website, which is available at the website URL address: <https://www.museepicassoparis.fr/en/orlanweeping-women-are-angry> and <http://www.orlan.eu/works/photo-2/>, photographic print Epson P20 000 on the Hahnemühle William Turner 210 g. in the dimensions (40.15 × 59.05-inches). This artwork was exhibited in 2022 at the Picasso Museum in Paris, and in 2023 at the Rocio Santa Cruz Gallery in Barcelona. In this way, ORLAN takes over a series of paintings and drawings by Pablo Picasso entitled Weeping Women (1937)



Note: This photograph has been used in this paper with the permission of the artist and thanks to the courtesy of the Picasso Museum in Paris.

On the ORLAN Official Website<sup>3</sup> (Figs. 5a and 5b), we can see many self-portraits of the artist stylized as Pablo Picasso's paintings, e.g., *Weeping women are angry* (i.a., Fig. 6) which looks like Art Selfies. The French artist understands that watching the image of her face for the first time, during visiting her website, can be a repulsive view, like a feeling analogous to disgust that accompanies watching freaks of nature, causing embarrassment and a defensive reflex that is being pushed away. Meanwhile, it seems that ORLAN's artistic practices concerning her physical body and her artworks are a peculiar response to the challenges posed by corporeality in the contemporary visual culture. They are a kind of commentary on consumer attitudes promoted by mass culture, that is the cult of youth, the "beautiful" and "perfect body" as well as its superficial affirmation, especially regarding the ever-increasing more and more popularity of plastic surgery

3 See the ORLAN Official Website (French: *Site Officiel d'ORLAN*) which is available at the website URL address: <http://www.orlan.eu/>, accessed 30 April 2023. During the COVID-19 pandemic on the ORLAN Official Website appeared a message: "ORLAN's masks are coming" (French: *Les masques arrivent*). At the same time the website works on a different principle, and it has been rebuilt. The website is constantly changing its image and is being rebuilt and supplied with new ORLAN's self-portraits, which can be seen as prototypes of web selfies. Additionally, the ORLAN Official Website itself, currently, works under two other websites URL addresses: <http://www.orlan.net> and <http://www.orlan.eu> (Figs. 5a 5b).

and aesthetic medicine in the present social reality, which aims to achieve these effects. The self-portraits, stylized as paintings of Pablo Picasso, from the project entitled *Weeping Women Are Angry* by Woman with head(s) (2019–2020), encourage intentions coming from the implementation of the inscription that appeared on the ORLAN Official Website in the following content: “Discover my face. Do not be afraid to touch my face.”

### Selfies as Self-portraits and Self-identity in Samuel Fosso’s and José Bedia Valdés’s Artworks

Another particularly an interesting artwork I want refer to here is *The Chief: he who sold Africa to the colonists* (1997) (Fig. 7) by Samuel Fosso (born in 1962). This photography shows a dark-skinned person – the chief – dressed in a “hybrid costume” constituting a mixture of Western elements and those belonging to the African culture who holds a bouquet of sunflowers instead of a scepter (Mirzoeff, 2009, p. 214). The artist taps into the concept of “visual identity” because this artwork is at the same time a self-portrait and a representation of his personality (a self-identity). Fosso uses his physical body and identity to conceptualize the theme of “selling Africa” through the visual consumption of Africa. This hybrid “visual identity” is a strategy that is severed from cultural purity, directed at drawing patterns from Western European culture by comparing them with the values of native communities (see Loomba 2005, pp. 145–153).

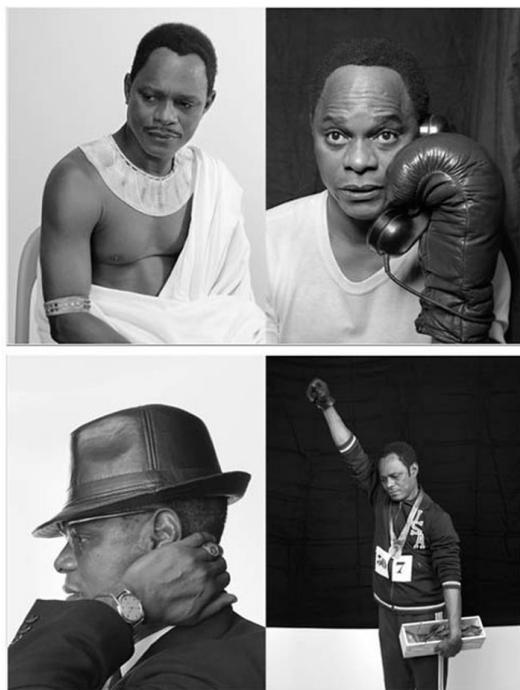
Figure 7. Samuel Fosso, *The Chief: he who sold Africa to the colonists* (1997), photography, the Jean-Marc Patras Gallery, Paris



Note: This photography has been used in this paper with permission of the artist and thanks to the courtesy of the Jean-Marc Patras Gallery.

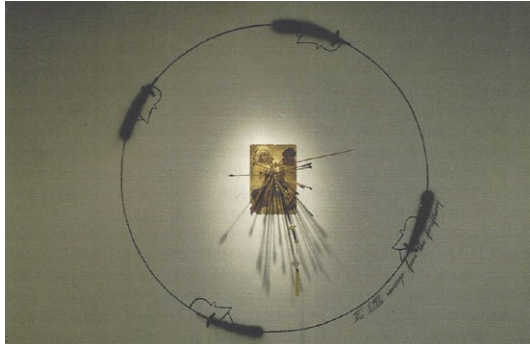
Fosso's photography has shown that everyone has their own visual identity. In contrast to varying costumes, which the artist has used, Fosso shows that identity is also determined by things beyond human's lack of control. His artwork has therefore also been characterized as disclosure of how humans can in fact create their own visual identity. Fosso made a series of *Autoportraits* (2008) (Fig. 8) that also involved shaping and creating processes of visual identity. In his self-portraits, the photographer plays with a pleasant form of narcissism, common in adolescence. Wolfgang Welsch assumes the assumption that we must deal with the construction of hybrid "transcultural identity networks" (in relation to the artworks of artists who use visual media). The transformations of social life are the source of many ethnic and cultural hybrids which constitute one of the levels of transculturality (see Welsch, 2002, pp. 85–94). The notion of transculturality appears in relation to works of visual artists.

Figure 8. Samuel Fosso, *Autoportraits*. © Copyright by "African Sprints" (2008), Jean-Marc Patras Gallery in Paris



Note: These photographs have been used in this paper with permission of the artist and thanks to the courtesy of the Jean-Marc Patras Gallery in Paris. Fosso's *Autoportraits* is available at the Samuel Fosso African sprints website on the website URL address: <https://samuelfosso.com/works/african-sprints-series/>

Figure 9. José Bedia Valdés, *The Little Revenge from the Periphery* (1993), mixed media: charcoal pencil, laser print, found objects, The George Adams Gallery, New York



Note: This image has been used in this paper with the permission of the artist and thanks to his courtesy.

Mirzoeff gives the example of the Cuban artist José Bedia Valdés (born in 1959), who worked in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States of America, thereby confirming his transcultural identity. Bedia claims that the transcultural process is also taking place in indigenous cultures. He speaks of himself as a person with roots in Western Europe, who aims to bring together and establish a transcultural dialogue with various cultures he has experienced. In the artwork *The Little Revenge from the Periphery* (1993) (Fig. 9), Bedia addresses the problems of racism. He recognizes the importance of air travel in constructing the global world. The faces of people placed in the symbolic circle represent the nineteenth-century classification of four races (black, yellow, red, and white), which shows an Indian, an Asian, an African, and a monkey orbiting around the white man. The eponymous “little revenge” comes from the fact that numerous arrows and a stone ax pierce the white figure placed in the center of the image: the tools that cause tension between the modern “city” and its antonym – “the primitive periphery.” His strategy for this artwork is based on creating a new cultural map in space and time, which does not circulate around the white man. In this sense, the transcultural identity is the experience of the periphery, which offers a new understanding of “culture” as something which is always subject to transformation. However, the inscriptions indicating the races in Bedia’s artwork are in English, just like the title of the artwork itself. In this way, the artist tries to emphasize the role and popularity of English in the transcultural world and outside of it (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 131–132). Ivo Mesquita, quoted by Mirzoeff, writing about Bedia’s artworks, recounts how transculture’s work “...resembles that of a traveler who, traversing different landscapes, describes routes, points out passages, establishes landmarks, fixes the boundaries of a specific territory”

(Mesquita, 1993, p. 19 as cited in Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 132). This description resembles colonial narratives from the nineteenth century, which represent colonized territories as “empty spaces” awaiting the arrival of Europeans – the colonizers, who only then would make them true “locations of culture.” A key question seems to be the role of visual culture in redefining constantly changing experience of transculturality devoid of any boundaries.

Ana Peraica in *Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture*, writes about “the selfie as a visual paradox,”<sup>4</sup> and she builds her argumentation, claiming that

Self-portraits are the purest visual paradoxes that can be solved only adding a time dimension (originally missing in two-dimensional media) to interpret a displacement between subject or the author seeing himself as an object simultaneously as the viewer sees him. So, to understand this spatial paradox, I translate a simple Lefebvrian grammatical structure into a visual schema and throughout this book draw spaces, I imagine that I travel to, inside these pictures (Lefebvre, 1992 – note K.C.). Analyzing the visual grammar of these photographs, different relationships can be found among subjects, objects, and viewers in spaces defined for and by them (Peraica, 2017, p. 15).

This Peraica’s conclusion is an attempt to find historical connections and technical differences among self-portraits and selfies, and the ways they produce different discourses. This attempt of depicting the selfie by its origins in art and visual culture boils down to a discussion on a “visual paradox” that focuses on space in self-portraits, shared between the self-portraying person and the viewer, and the space merging the real space of the author and the viewer, which points towards Henri Lefebvre’s “spatial paradox” or “space paradox.”<sup>5</sup>

4 In this concept, Ana Peraica (2007) “will be analyzing as the place of the Echo in the paradigmatic myth about Narcissus, but also the photographer in production of visual imagery (...and – note K.C.) will continue with the division of spaces, defining the three spaces provided in the image in general, as viewer’s, object’s and subject’s as well as their common space; social space in photography in which viewer, object and subject communicate the message among themselves” (p. 15). This conclusion Peraica construes according to Lefebvre (1992).

5 In his book, *Production of the Space* Lefebvre analyses urban space in a “(Social) space (which – note K.C.) is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder” Lefebvre, 1992, p. 73). This paradox of social space can be understood as the “spatial paradox” which is both a toll for an experience and action, a means of production, control, and power (see Lefebvre, 1992, p. 68–168). Ana Peraica (2007) writes that her book, *Culture of the Selfie: Self-Representation in Contemporary Visual Culture* “...will be focused on space in self-portraits, shared between the person self-portraying and the viewer, and this space – merging the real space of the author and real space of the viewer, meeting in the image will be presumed as ontological, defining the self in relationship to the perceiving self, a viewer already imagined by the author, or author imagined by the viewer” (p. 15).

## Selfies as Visual and “Textual” Identity Under Copyright on the Bodies© INCorporated Website

The selfie can be referred to as the category of “visual identity” based on the representations on the Bodies© INCorporated (1993) website (Fig. 11),<sup>6</sup> designed by Victoria Vesna (born in 1959). Nicholas Mirzoeff considers visual representations from the perspective of the issues of visual identity shaping in Internet-mediated communication. However, on the Bodies© INCorporated website, visual identities are “textual” subject to copyright. On the website, the users can create visual representations of his or her own body, which become telepresent. As a user result of the user’s choices, the “body” acquires a certain psychological visual identity, sex, sexual orientation, and age (0–999 years) as well as an “image” which we can be seen in “The most dramatic space (which – note K.C.) is known as “Showplace!!!” (Fig. 10 – note K.C.) where the user’s ‘body’ is displayed for all to see” (Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 113–114). In this section of the Bodies© INCorporated website (Fig. 11) the users can look and choose the way in how they wish their bodies will be stayed “live” or “dead.”

Figure 10. The “Showplace!!!” from the Bodies© INCorporated website which is available at the website URL address: [http://www.bodiesinc.ucla.edu/showplace\\_his.html](http://www.bodiesinc.ucla.edu/showplace_his.html)



Note: This image has been used in this paper with permission of the artist and thanks to her courtesy.

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6 See the Bodies© INCorporated website (Fig. 11) that is available at the website URL address: <http://www.bodiesinc.ucla.edu>, accessed 30 April 2023. As the part of a collaborative project concerning the issues of the selfie from the perspective of “visual identity” shaping in Internet-mediated communication, Nicholas Mirzoeff and Victoria Vesna consider the visual representations on the Bodies© INCorporated website in the context of net art and the database aesthetics (see Mirzoeff, 1999, pp. 112–114, and also Vesna, 2007, pp. 3–38).

Choosing a sex for the body, we act according to the performative paradigm, which Judith Butler inscribes these beings into a fixed model of identity (See Butler, 1988, pp. 519–531, and also Loxley, 2007, pp. 117–120). If we give the bodies a particular sex and sexual orientation, it is not because they are essentially “male” or “female” but because we refer to the opposition of gender, a particular socio-cultural order, and the conventions of the social roles which we wish to bestow on the bodies. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler describes the first medical interpellation, “the initiatory performative, ‘It’s a girl!’ [which – note K.C.] anticipates the eventual arrival of the sanction, ‘I pronounce you man and wife’” (Butler, 2011, p. 232). The pronouncement does not relate to a fact but in a performative manner brings into existence a creature with a fixed sex identity. The “bodies” brought to “life” on the Bodies© INCorporated website (Fig. 11) acquire their identity on a similar principle. Moreover, their identity is, from the very beginning, subject to the power which the users have over their bodies. This power has its limits, however, for the bodies are given “life” cannot be deprived of it. Victoria Vesna describes how in the early version of the website it was not possible to take the “life” of a body away (Vesna, 2007, p. 14). After pressure from the website users who managed their bodies, such an option became available, although it is very difficult to implement.

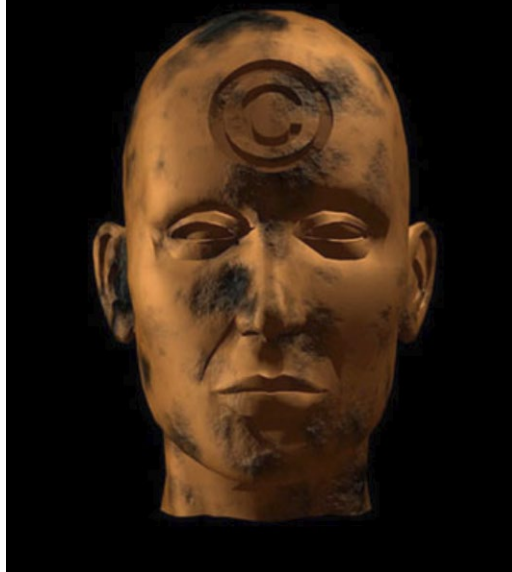
The example of the Bodies© INCorporated website (Fig. 11) points to the fact that Internet-mediated communication integrates aspects of visual identity with bodily representations. However, as Vesna claims,

The title Bodies© INCorporated is a play on words. “Bodies” is accompanied by a copyright symbol and “INCorporated” draws on the Latin root “corpus,” while alluding to a corporation – bodies are incorporated into the Internet and their information is copyrighted. The logo of the project is a bronze head with a copyright sign on its third eye (Fig. 11 – K.C.), signifying the inherent contradiction of efforts to control information flow with the New Age idealism of interconnectedness (Vesna, 2007, p. 12).

On the Bodies© INCorporated website the bodies are treated as “texts” under copyright. They can thus be “read” but they can also be “cited” and incorporated into other bodies. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” Judith Butler (1988, pp. 519–531) refers to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of embodiment derived from his book entitled *The Phenomenology of Perception* which has of special importance also for the philosophical moment within Visual Studies. Butler constructs an identity concept on its bodily basis, referring to the one part of entitled “The Body” and quoting the statement that “Man is a historical idea, and not a natural species” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 174).



Figure 11. The Bodies© INCorporated website with the Head Logo which is available at the website URL address: <http://www.bodiesinc.ucla.edu>



Note: This image has been used in this paper with the permission of the artist and thanks to her courtesy.

The visual identity of the bodies on the Bodies© INCorporated website as “Wood Women” (Fig. 12) is thus shaped by “performative acts.” In this sense, the process of embodying identity, as mentioned by Butler, resembles “a script (which – note K.C.) may be enacted in various ways, and and interpretation” (Butler, 1988, p. 526). The performative identity is also constructed in the context of linguistic theories by John L. Austin (1975), and the concept of iterability by Jacques Derrida (1985, pp. 307–330). Similarly, the bodies on the Bodies© INCorporated website (Fig. 11) and their identities are shaped textually, which is seen in the textual descriptions which tell us what they are called, how old they are, or what their sex and sexual orientation are. Perhaps this situation results from the fact that the bodies exist on an Internet-based hypertext system, which is a text structure, however, these performative texts are simultaneously giving access to “visual identity” based on pictures.

Figure 12. The “corpuses” (as the “Wood Women”) coming from the Bodies© INCorporated website are available at the website URL address: <https://edicionesholobionte.com/cuerpos-s-a-por-victoria-vesna/>



Note: This photograph has been used in this paper with the permission of the artist and thanks to her courtesy.

In this sense, the Internet can be understood as a visual medium.<sup>7</sup> Mirzoeff believes that the future of the Internet consists in creating new forms of visuality that are based on textual forms of communication, but exhibit a tendency to picture them in iconic representations. The share of flash animations present on some websites can be mentioned as a determinant of the development of the type of this tendency. According to Mirzoeff, the main driving force behind the evolution of the Internet as a visual medium was the popularity of commercial erotic and pornographic websites which in statistical surveys turned out to be the most frequently visited web domains (Mirzoeff. 1999, p. 108).

### The “Surveillance Gaze” of Biopower in the Shaping Process of Foucault’s Concept of the “Docile Bodies” within the Appearance of our Body as the “Perfect Body”

In *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright enunciated the concept in which currently, the search for the sanctioned “surveillance gaze” by biopower takes place using visual

7 The evolution of the Internet as a visual medium determined the increasing presence of digital photographs, video clips, flash animations, and webcam broadcasting transmissions (from private to public space).

media and photographic images (see Sturken & Cartwright, 2017, pp. 109–113). From this viewpoint, researchers quote *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* where Michel Foucault presented exercising power and control methods as “the basis of a political technology of the body” which is a fundamental thesis of this work presented “in what way [*assujettissement*, that is – K.C.] a specific mode of subjection was able to give birth to man [*sujet* – K.C.) as an object of knowledge for a discourse with a ‘scientific’ status” (Foucault, 1995, p. 24). In this context, Sturken and Cartwright refer to the “docile bodies” concept<sup>8</sup> introduced by Foucault who wrote that

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power,’ was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies (Foucault, 1995, p. 138).

Sturken and Cartwright think that the disciplinary procedures make the “surveillance gaze” of biopower (see Sturken, Cartwright, 2017, pp. 109–113) and it refers to Foucault’s concept of the “docile bodies” in which the bodies are operating in disciplinary institutions such as prisons, hospitals, factories, military regiments, and schools. In order to construct the “docile bodies,” disciplinary institutions must be able constantly to observe the bodies under control methods and ensure the internalization of disciplinary individuality in these bodies. It means that a discipline must take place without undue force by putting the bodies under control into proper form through careful observation methods (see Foucault, 1995, pp. 135–169). This requires a specific form of institution an example of which is Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon as an institution always watching the convicted. Cartwright and Sturken claim that

Photographic images have been instrumental in the modern state’s production of what Foucault calls ‘docile bodies’ – citizens who uphold a society’s ideologies and laws by participating in an economy of discipline, internalizing conformity and improving themselves as a way to maintain the state (Sturken & Cartwright, 2017, p. 112).

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8 The “docile bodies” concept strengthens the conviction that “the body had become the object of such imperious and pressing investments; in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations” (Foucault, 1995, p. 136). Foucault argues that discipline must be positioned in the order of the “docile bodies”, for the logic of power to act upon them (see Foucault, 1995, pp. 135–166.)

In this viewpoint, visual media and photographic images have commonly been used by the popular visual culture which results in the popularization of a visual understanding of the surrounding reality and sensory information that reveals itself as the conceptualization of abstract concepts (Mitchell, 1992, pp. 59–60). These images produce homogeneous images which function as “ideological texts” making our visual identity and self-image (see Jones, 2006). This means that aesthetic norms and standards of “beauty” that these images establish, such as the desired look and a thin body type, are the part of a “normalizing gaze” that the spectators turn on themselves (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 111).

Sturken and Cartwright argue that citizens participate in the ideologies of society through the mechanisms of biopower, biopolitics, and disciplinary procedures in which

the body had become the object of such imperious and pressing investments; in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on its constraints, prohibitions, or obligations....These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called ‘disciplines’ (Foucault, 1995, pp. 136–137).

For this reason, we are subjected to mechanisms of biopower that can lead to exclusion. If we want to avoid this, we can cooperate and try adapting to the ideologies of society by adopting a conformist attitude. The indicated mechanism includes social media that become an “identity media” because they create an appearance in our body through biopower. This process is particularly evident “in the vast array of media and advertising images that produce homogeneous images for us of the perfect look, the perfect body, and the perfect pose” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, pp. 110–111).

Within the biopower mechanisms, Foucault mentions control over the proportion of births and deaths (Foucault, 2003, p. 243). The “biopower” concept operated in the basic process of neoliberal power over the production of living beings and exercising control over there, which is an updating of the development of political, democratic, and economic institutions, as well as information and biocybernetic technologies. It enables the management of reproduction, sexuality, and genetic manipulation. In the age of biocybernetic reproduction, as Mitchell claims,

The body becomes the site of increasingly drastic intervention at the same time that populations are reduced to databases. But the most dramatic and symbolic innovation of this sort has been, ... the invention of (an image – note K.C.) cloning, which combines the revolution in information science with

the one in biotechnology to inaugurate an age of 'biocybernetic reproduction,' one that promises to literalize and technologically realize many of the pre-monitional fantasies of biopower and biopolitics (Mitchell, 2011, p. 71).

This concept is given a lot of considerable space in my paper because the selfie can be regarded as the "personal identity"<sup>9</sup> whereas social media is "identity media"<sup>10</sup> because it shapes the appearance of our body to improve the figure and create our visual identity.

## Conclusions

Peraica (2017), in *Culture of the Selfie*, writes that "The culture of selfies is visual, rather than literary, and therefore primarily ahistorical, non-narrative and non-critical" (p. 57). In this sense, the concept of "the visual culture of the selfie" seems to be an obvious aesthetic phenomenon shaped by a visual medium such as digital photography. However, photography does not seem to be the key medium of the selfie. My analyses were aimed at showing that it is an "image," understood very broadly in the visual context as the painting, mixed-media, photography, performance, or website. Therefore, in this paper, the most important word is the noun "image," no matter what medium is associated with it. From this viewpoint, I reflected on the selfie from the perspective of "visual identity" which functions in biopictures not resembling representations or simulations but rather replicas – "living copies" that are an effect of image cloning, created with the help of information sciences and biocybernetics.

According to Mitchell image cloning on the level of image creation, this innovation can be compared to the invention of "biodigital pictures", which are an agency of biopictures for the categories of biopower and biopolitics. Mitchell does believe that

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9 In order to describe this term Ana Peraica writes that "According to theories of identity, time inevitably changes a personal identity, so self-portraying that captures these changes on the physical level also re-constructs a personal identity, narrating changes, thus building a 'narrative self,' a self that is told through time, but on which narration can follow up even the disappearance of the self (and at that place, precisely, photography stands for; a memento)" (like the concept employed by Greenblatt, 1980, as cited in Paraica, 2017, p. 59).

10 This term focuses on analyzing private collections of photos from Facebook in which can be showed the social impact of visual identity in visual communication (cf. Uimonen, 2013, pp. 122–135). As Paula Uimonen claims: "This article explores visual identity in Facebook, focusing on the use of profile photographs in the performance of digitally mediated selfhood" (Uimonen, 2013, p. 122). This visual identity in Facebook indicates a visual turn in digital and social media (cf. Mirzoeff, 2009, pp. 89–93, as cited in Uimonen, 2013, p. 122).

However, Mitchell understands biopictures as “living things” and “performing images” in which “The particular form of life is not (...) analogous to an acting individual agent or subject” (Fenske, 2007, p. 23) and he believes that The foundational trope of the biopicture has obvious resonances with what Michel Foucault called “biopower” and “biopolitics,” the transformation in politics that he associates with the governmental control of bodies and populations. When modern nation-states move toward a concern with enhancing and controlling the “life” of their populations (as distinct from the traditional negative power of the sovereign over the instruments of death), we have entered, argues Foucault, into the age of biopolitics (see Foucault, 2008, pp. 227–229 as cited in Mitchell, 2011, pp. 70–71).

Contemporary mechanisms of biopower and biopolitics have taken the following forms in which

...population constitutes the combination and aggregation of individualized patterns of existence to a new political form. It follows that “individual” and “mass” [which – note K.C.] are not extremes but rather two sides of a global political technology that simultaneously aims at the control of the human as individual body and at the human as species” (see Foucault, 2003, pp. 242–243 as cited in Lemke, 2011, pp. 37–38).

In this conclusion, Thomas Lemke examines how our understanding of humans as an individual body and species, the organizing of populations and the need of “government” individuals and collectives lead to practices of social exclusion, normalization, as well as discipline which are associated with Foucault’s “global political technology” combining two poles of governance that emerge in Western societies, the discipline of the body through imprisonment and bodily force, as well as the management of populations through discourses of health and social control. The discipline of individuals and the regulation of live populations are not extremes but rather two sides of the same phenomenon (Lemke, 2011).

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