Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38597

Death, Self-Existence and Personal Identity in Contemporary Art: The Limitations of Portraiture in Representing the Unity of Identity and the Specificity of Self-Portraiture

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Abstract. This paper examines whether a portrait can capture the identity of an individual, specifically whether a portrait captures a person's external appearance or the diachronic continuity of their identity. The paper begins by tracing the development of theories of identity in philosophy, from the view that identity is an inherent quality waiting to be discovered, through skepticism regarding a stable self, to the concept of generative identity. Building on this foundation, the paper reconsiders the relationship between identity and the portrait, and further discusses the distinctions between portraits, self-portraits and selfies, specifically their differing roles in the construction of identity. This paper argues that identity is not a fixed object that can be fully reproduced. Consequently, a portrait cannot capture a person's complete identity. However, the function of a portrait extends beyond mere documentation, on the contrary it involves the subject's ongoing participation in the construction and negotiation of identity as time progresses.

Keywords: Portrait, Self-Portrait, Personal Identity, Art

1. Introduction

Portraiture has long been regarded as a central medium for representing individual identity. However, when we ask "what exactly does a portrait represent?", a fundamental question emerges, does a portrait capture the external attributes that enable a person to be "recognized", or the internal continuity that enables a person to 'become themselves'? This question pertains not only to art history but also to the philosophical issue of personal identity, how a person remains the same person over time. This question takes on greater significance at the intersection of themes such as death, bodily decay and self-representation. This essay will center its discussion around this core issue.

In the context of contemporary art, portraiture is no longer confined to traditional painted or sculpted portraits. Contemporary portraiture often encompasses a broader range of media, through which artists explore identity, subjectivity and self-representation. Whereas traditional portraiture served as a means of documentation, commemoration or representation, contemporary practice has expanded this concept to encompass more conceptual and experimental forms of expression. Although all works of art may bear traces of the artist's identity, even a landscape painting might

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38597

reflect a part of the artist's identity. However, what distinguishes the portrait from the self-portrait , whether traditional portraits, self-portraits or selfies, is that from the very outset of their creation, their purpose centers on the questions: who is a particular person, and how are they perceived? Consequently, the understanding of portraits and self-portraits in this paper encompasses works that intend to explore, construct or represent the identity of the self or others through various media.

This paper will first examine the various philosophical debates concerning personal identity, as well as theories of portraiture. Secondly, it will introduce a relational, generative understanding of identity, drawing on the theories of Taylor, Foucault, Hall and Tagg to illustrate how portraits participate in the production of identity rather than merely representing it. In the third section will against this backdrop, discuss the relationship between portraits and self-portraits, including the specific nature of self-portraits and the distinction between selfies and self-portraits. Finally, two contemporary art cases will be presented to demonstrate the practical application of this theory.

2. Philosophy and portraiture

2.1. Different viewpoints on the philosophical controversy surrounding the concept of "identity"

In the history of portrait painting, physical resemblance has generally been regarded as the primary criterion for identifying a subject. However, philosophical debates concerning personal identity suggest that physical appearance alone is insufficient to explain why a person remains "the same person"over time. In fact, the concept of "identity'" itself has been the subject of a long-standing and unresolved controversy in the history of philosophy, whilst various theories draw upon different foundations, such as the body, memory, consciousness or psychological continuity to address this question, the basis of identity remains undetermined to this day. This issue is significant to this paper because the subject or identity is precisely the object of portraiture, and indeed the very premise upon which portraiture is founded. If identity is so difficult to define, then the act of depicting who a person is' loses a definite object from the very outset. So, what exactly does a portrait depict? Therefore, before delving into the discussion of portraits and self-portraits, this paper first needs to examine the principal philosophical perspectives and debates surrounding the question of personal identity, in order to clarify exactly what "identity", the very object with which the portrait engages actually signifies.

We typically assume that an object retains its identity over time. However, in the "Ship of Theseus" paradox, if all the ship's components are gradually replaced, is it still the same ship? When this question is applied to humans, it directly touches upon the core issue of portraiture and self-portraiture, namely whether it captures a series of changing outward forms or characteristics, or it captures the inner continuity through which a person maintains their identity over time. To explain 'personal identity', philosophers have successively attempted to address this question by positing the continuity of consciousness, the mind, or the body as the bearers of identity.

In her study of the Western Christian tradition of bodily resurrection, Bynum points out that 'the idea of the person, bequeathed by the Middle Ages to the modern world, was not a concept of the soul escaping the body or the soul utilising the body, it was a concept of the self in which physicality was integrally bound to sensation, emotion, reasoning, identity and therefore ultimately to whatever one means by salvation'. This implies that the resurrected body must maintain continuity with the body from before death. Otherwise, the resurrected being would not be the original person, yet it must also transcend the decay of matter, otherwise the resurrection would lose its sacredness. The medieval Christian insistence that "the same set of material particles must be resurrected" was

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38597

rooted in the belief that no substitute, however identical in form, could truly become "I". This demand itself contained a paradox: material continuity is both the guarantee of identity and yet almost impossible to fulfil strictly [1].

Against this background, the arguments of Descartes and Digby took a different turn. Rather than focusing on the continuity of matter itself, they shifted the foundation of continuity to the invisible soul. Digby invoked the concept of 'substantial form' to argue for the identity of the body: just as in the case of Theseus's ship, although the material components are constantly replaced, it is the persistence of the form that ensures the ship remains the same ship. The identity of the body is guaranteed by the soul as the formal principle, consequently, the resurrection of the body is logically possible. In his letter to Mesland, Descartes further distinguished between two concepts of the "body", the body as a specific collection of matter, and the body as a 'whole united with the soul'. He pointed out that the reason why a person's body remains "the same body"'from infancy to adulthood is not due to the continuity of matter, but because it is constantly united with the same soul. "But when we speak of the body of a man, we do not mean a determinate part of matter, or one that has a determinate size, we mean simply the whole of the matter which is united with the soul of that man." This position appears to resolve the paradox in Bynum's research, because the soul does not decay. However, it also shifts the very foundation of identity entirely into an ethereal realm. This foreshadows the limitations of portraiture, if identity is attached to the invisible soul, how can any visual representation possibly capture it? [2]

Therefore, Locke chose to bypass the concepts of the soul and substance, turning instead to "consciousness" itself to redefine identity. John Locke believed that personal identity stems from the continuity of consciousness. In "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding", Book II, Chapter XXVII, Identity and Diversity, he first outlined two levels of "identity". The first is "same substance" (material identity) , as long as the material particles constituting an object neither increase nor decrease, it remains the same. The second is "the same man"'(the identity of a living being) for example, an oak tree growing from a sapling into a mature tree, or a horse maturing from a foal into an old horse. Although their material composition has long since been entirely replaced, they are still regarded as the same living being, because what sustains their identity is not matter, but the continuity of specific organisational structures and life processes. Locke's most significant innovation lies in his proposal of a third aspect "same person". In Locke's view, what determines the identity of a "person" is neither the soul nor the body or material structure, but rather 'the continuity of consciousness'. 'This may show us wherein personal identity consists not in the identity of substance, but, as I have said, in the identity of consciousness.' For Locke, "personhood"is a concept in the legal and moral sense, a "forensic term", concerning the attribution of responsibility for actions and the legitimacy of rewards and punishments. Provided that your consciousness extends to a particular past action, that is provided you can recall and acknowledge that the action was "done by me" you are the same person as the agent who performed that action. If you have no awareness of a particular action, punishing you would be tantamount to punishing an innocent person. However, he also acknowledges the impact of interruptions in consciousness, such as during sleep on personal identity. In such cases, the same person may constitute a different person in different states. Replacing the soul with consciousness has not resolved the problem of the unity of the self across time [3].

The questions left by Locke have been further unpacked in contemporary analytical philosophy. In his "Dialogues on personal identity and immortality", Perry through the voice of the fictional character examines in turn theories of the soul, memory and the body. Regarding the theory of the soul, Weirob's criticism directly targets its lack of an empirical foundation: "Of course, if by "soul"

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we simply mean "person", there is no problem." But if we mean, as I did yesterday, some other thing whose identity is already understood, which has to be the same when people are the same, we are merely deceiving ourselves with words. Weirob's core criticism of theories of the soul lies in the fact that we have never been able to observe the soul directly, therefore we cannot establish an empirical link between 'the same body and the same soul', which renders such theories inconsistent. Cohen's theory of memory offers an alternative: personal identity lies in the continuity of consciousness, that is, the ability to recall past experiences. To remember or more plausibly, to be able to remember the thoughts and feelings of a person who was conscious in the past is precisely what it means to be that person. However, Perry reveals an inherent difficulty with the memory theory, namely that the distinction between "true memories" and "false memories" itself presupposes identity, thus falling into circular reasoning. Finally, the identity of the body seems to be more reliable. The author actually emphasises that the identity of consciousness and memory cannot be separated from bodily identity. Perry did not provide a definitive answer regarding personal identity. Neither the theory of the soul, the theory of the body, nor the theory of memory can independently prove identity without presupposing it. This philosophical dilemma is directly relevant to the argument concerning portraiture, if philosophy itself cannot determine the vehicle of identity, then the foundation of a portrait's claim to present a "complete" or "true" self is already undermined" [4].

Although the above theories have proposed different criteria for personal identity, they all base their discussions on fundamental questions of whether there exists a basis for the self that can maintain unity across time. Regardless of whether it be the body, the mind, consciousness or some other form of enduring existence, each theory attempts to find a stable and sufficient foundation for it. However, they all inevitably encounter counterexamples and must demonstrate the existence of such unity without presupposing a unified subject. Against this backdrop, philosophers such as Hume and Parfit began to question the assumption that identity is a pre-existing, stable premise. If the self is not a fixed entity from the outset, then 'identity' should perhaps not be understood as a pre-existing fact at all, but rather as something continually generated through relationships and practice.

Locke sought to find the basis of personal identity in memory and consciousness, whilst Hume went further to question whether such a unified personal identity truly exists. A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, Part IV, Section VI: 'Of Personal Identity'. Hume argued that we do not gain an impression of an unchanging self through perception, we can never be directly conscious of the "self itself", but only of what we are experiencing at any given moment. So called identity is constructed by the imagination and association from a succession of perceptions. Hume therefore concludes that we have no experience of a constant and unchanging self. The what is called unified self is more like an effect produced by imagination linking together constantly changing perceptions. He proposes memory as the vehicle for this. However, memory does not create identity, rather it enables us to discover the continuity of identity. Memory helps us to perceive the continuous relationship between perceptions [5].

Parfit adopted Hume's view that the self is a bundle of perceptions, and in Part Three: Personal Identity of his work Reasons and Persons, he further challenged traditional notions of personal identity, arguing that psychological continuity is of paramount importance in existence. Through the 'fission' thought experiment in which the two hemispheres of the brain are transplanted into two separate bodies, with both survivors retaining your memories, intentions and personality traits in their entirety, he argues that psychological continuity can still exist even without a unified "Self" therefore, personal identity is not necessarily the most important factor. Identity itself may not be what is truly important in 'survival', what is truly important is what he terms "Relation R"

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(psychological continuity and psychological connectedness). Parfit concludes from this that, strictly speaking, a person never truly survives from one moment to the next. Since none of the candidate criteria for the persistence of identity can consistently yield reasonable results, we should perhaps abandon the presupposition of a persisting self [6].

Looking back over this section, from Bynum's religious fixation on 'material continuity', to Descartes and Digby shifting the foundation of identity to the invisible soul, to Locke's attempt to replace it with consciousness , which exposed its own flaws to Perry's demonstration that theories of the soul, memory and the body cannot prove themselves without presupposing identity, and finally to Hume and Parfit's fundamental questioning of whether that "unified self" ever existed in the first place. It is evident that the foundation of identity has continually shifted from "external, visible matter" to "internal, invisible soul", then to "consciousness and memory accessible through introspection yet fragile and easily severed" and has ultimately been called into question as a fixed entity that has never truly existed. To this day, the history of philosophy has failed to reach a consensus on the "vehicle of identity", whilst Taylor and subsequent social theorists have further demonstrated that the Self itself may be a historical, narrative and relational product, rather than a fixed core that pre-exists, awaiting discovery or representation. If the Self is itself historical, social and relational, then Identity need not be understood as some kind of fixed essence [7].

2.2. From personal identity to the question of portraiture

A portrait may bear a striking resemblance to a person's appearance, enabling the viewer to "recognize" who it is, yet "recognising a person" is not the same as "knowing that person". I might recognise a public figure in countless photographs yet have never had any direct contact with her. What I "know" is, in fact, a second-hand image pieced together from news reports, images and social narratives. Even "knowing" a person does not necessarily resolve the question of what that person's identity actually is. Therefore, "recognizing", 'knowing' and 'identity' are not issues on the same level.

This also reveals an often-overlooked function of portraiture, it does not always reproduce an "object'" that is already known, rather it sometimes participates in the construction of that object in the viewer's mind. Considering an ordinary person in the Middle Ages who had never seen the king in person, their entire conception of 'what the king looks like' might have come from a portrait. For them, this portrait was not a "representation of a person already known", but rather the very starting point from which their conception of that person was constructed. Portraits may therefore not only provide visual information about a person but also play a part in determining how that person is perceived, imagined and understood. This suggests that the relationship between a portrait and the subject it "depicts'" is far more complex than mere "reproduction"or "recreation".

At the same time, recognition itself does not depend entirely on the content presented in the image. An abstract work devoid of any facial features and consisting solely of colour and line may still evoke the precise feeling of "that is him" in a viewer who has deep, first-hand experience of the person depicted, whereas to a viewer with no such experience, the same painting might convey only universal emotions such as sadness, anxiety or loneliness, without allowing it to be anchored to any specific individual. This indicates that "recognition" in a portrait sometimes derives not entirely from the image itself, but also from the pre-existing relationship and experience between the viewer and the depicted person.

Therefore, the problem faced by portraits is not merely how to make a person "look like themselves", but a more complex question, when "who this person is"cannot be defined by a definitive standard, through what means does a portrait enable a person to be recognised and

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understood? This question also necessitates a further examination of how art theory and portraiture practice define the function of the portrait.

3. Identity in art

Freeland conducted a systematic analysis of portraits in Portraits and Persons: A Philosophical Inquiry. She proposes three essential conditions for a portrait: a recognisable physical body, the representation of the "inner self", and the subject's participation in the creative process. Freeland's framework is significant because it explicitly incorporates the "inner self" into the definition of portraiture, thereby transcending the simple standard of physical resemblance. She cited Barthes's concept of "air" in "Camera Lucida", pointing out that a successful portrait captures not mere resemblance, but an indescribable quality that bridges the physical body and the soul. The feeling that the audience gets when facing a portrait, that they "recognize this person", stems from this. It is necessary here to make a distinction from Benjamin's concept of "aura", concerns the authenticity of the object itself, it is objective and historical, serving to distinguish the original from the reproduction, while Barthes's "air" concerns the emotional recognition between the viewer and the subject at that moment, it is subjective and relational. Also, because "air" is is essentially subjective and relational, although it offers a description of "how the inner self is captured", it can never be objectively verified in the same way as physical resemblance. This mirrors the predicament encountered in the history of philosophy regarding consciousness and memory as vehicles of identity [8-10].

However, Freeland also points out that the very concept of the "self" has disintegrated in contemporary society. Drawing on Baudrillard's concept of the "simulacrum", she argues that in an era of mass circulation of images, the subject depicted in a portrait has "withdrawn", leaving behind only a floating image. This observation reveals the fundamental dilemma of the portrait's function: it attempts to represent a complete, unified and continuous self, yet the very existence of such a self is now called into question in the contemporary context. Gorichanaz offers a complementary perspective from the standpoint of document theory. He conceptualises the self-portrait as a form of self-documentation and, through etymological analysis, points out that the word "portrait" derives from the Latin "*protrahere*", meaning "to draw something out of a latent state and bring it into existence". "So, we are invited to think of today's act of drawing a picture in the light of this history: it is not a question of mechanical duplication, but of realising something that was latent in the world. Likewise, we should recognise that the portrait, in its primordial sense, is not a matter of depiction or representation. Rather, it is a matter of revealing, of bringing something into being. It is not that there is a pre-existing self being duplicated or even represented on paper, but that the self is being constructed, coaxed into existence, drawn out, as the self-portrait unfolds." Consequently, a self-portrait is not a reproduction of a pre-existing self, but rather the gradual construction of the self through an ongoing creative process. This theoretical framework fundamentally challenges the traditional representational theory that "portraiture reproduces identity", if the self-portrait is itself a process of self-construction, then its distinction from other portraits lies not in being "depicted more accurately", but in the conscious participation of the creator, which endows it with a different ontological status. However, Gorichanaz also acknowledges that even in the case of self-portraits, the capacity for profound self-construction depends on time, effort and skill, conditions that have largely disappeared in the immediacy of selfie [11, 12].

If identity is constructed gradually, then the subject can never be fully fixed at any single moment. Yet a portrait necessarily freezes the subject in time, once the image is complete, it can only present the subject's state at that specific moment, whilst the living subject continues to change

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38597

thereafter. In this sense, portraiture is perpetually attempting to catch up with a subject who has already moved on. Even a series of consecutive portraits can only extend this process of representation to a limited period of one's life, once the representation ceases, all subsequent changes in the subject lie beyond the confines of the image. Roman Opalka's "From 1 to Infinity" is a particularly striking example of this tension. By continuously counting, painting and photographing himself, he sought to allow the representation to follow the subject forward indefinitely. Yet this creative endeavour never reached the infinity to which it pointed, death put an end to the subject's ability to participate in this generative process. This brings to mind Montaigne's reflections in "On Philosophy, or the Art of Dying" regarding death as the boundary of life, death does not merely bring an identity to a close, nor does it determine how a person will be remembered thereafter, rather it marks a tipping point beyond which the subject can no longer continue to change or undergo further becoming. Consequently, the portrait forever lags behind the living subject it seeks to capture [13, 14].

3.1. The concept of relational identity and portraiture

Locke, Hume and Parfit understood the issue of identity as the identity of the person across time and sought to find the conditions for the continuity of the person. However, mainly answered the question of "what makes a person remain the same person at different points in time", whilst paying less attention to how the subject understands itself. In "Sources of the Self", Taylor shifts the focus to selfhood as a temporal form of self-understanding, arguing that identity derives its meaning from a life narrative characterised by continuity across past, present and future, rather than relying solely on psychological or physical continuity. For portraiture studies, this implies that portraits do not merely involve the representation of personal identity but also concern how the subject understands and expresses themselves within specific cultural and social contexts. Taylor further points out that our understanding of the self is always situated within "webs of interlocution'", it is only through ongoing interaction with others that we can understand and situate our identity. In other words, a person's understanding of the self is both temporal and relational. Identity is not a fixed essence but is understood as being continually constituted through the frameworks within which one is situated, the relationships and dialogues in which one participates, and the direction in which one understands the self.

At the same time, Taylor also discusses how this dialogue is not limited to exchanges with the living, but also includes departed prophets, thinkers and writers. He describes this relationship as "indirect confrontation": although we cannot communicate face-to-face with the deceased, by reading their writings we engage in an indirect dialogue with their ideas, this indirect dialogue likewise contributes to the formation of our own language and self-understanding. This structure also holds true in the realm of portraiture: when the subject in a painting is deceased, the viewer, whilst unable to communicate directly with them, may nevertheless form an indirect understanding through the act of viewing.

Parfit undermined the metaphysical foundations of the stable self, in "The Subject and Power" , Foucault shifted the focus to the historical and social dimensions, stating explicitly at the outset that his true concern was "the ways in which human beings are made into subjects in our culture". The question is no longer "whether the self exists", but "how the self is produced". For Foucault, this process of production always takes place within relations of power [15].

Stuart Hall, in the first chapter, "Meaning and Language", of "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices", emphasises right at the outset that meaning does not exist naturally, but rather that "we construct meaning, using representational systems concepts and signs".

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38597

In quoting Foucault, Hall transposes Foucault's theories on power, knowledge and the subject to the fields of visual culture and representation studies. Foucault argues that the subject is not a self-possessing a fixed essence but is continually constructed within specific discourses. Knowledge, power and the body are always intertwined, power shapes the ways in which people understand the world and themselves through various social institutions, norms and networks of discourse. Consequently, the subject is both the object of power's action and the medium through which power operates, rather than the absolute source of power and meaning [16].

To illustrate this viewpoint, Hall draws upon an analysis of "Las Meninas". Foucault argues that Velázquez's painting "Las Meninas" does not possess a fixed, singular or definitive meaning. Through the complex spatial relationships between the mirrors, the figures in the painting, the painter and the viewer, it constantly shifts the position of the gaze and continually alters the position of the subject. Whilst the viewer appears to stand outside the painting, they have in fact long been incorporated into its visual structure, becoming part of the process by which the work's meaning is generated. Who the subject is, who is looking, and who is being looked at all these constantly shift as the position of the viewer changes. Consequently, the painting depicts not merely reality itself but also demonstrates how representation organises the act of looking, constructs the subject, and continually generates meaning through the interplay of presence and absence, and of looking and being looked at. It means that the identity carried by the portrait may not be determined by the artist or the person being painted but is instead continually generated through the interaction between the artwork, the viewer and the specific cultural context. Therefore, a portrait is not a simple reproduction of identity, but a field in which identity is constantly interpreted, constructed and negotiated. The same artwork may evoke different meanings of identity depending on the viewing position, the historical context, or even the medium through which it is presented. For example, when a traditional painting is recirculated through photography, digital imagery or online platforms, its mode of representation changes, correspondingly, the process of identity construction is also changed. This understanding provides the theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis of how contemporary artists utilise new biotechnologies, such as DNA and microorganisms, to reproduce portraiture and identity.

Hall uses "Las Meninas" to illustrate how meaning is constantly generated within the relationship between viewer and viewed, and how the position of the subject shifts accordingly. If we apply this logic to the specific medium of photography, the question becomes how does the technology of photography itself participate in the production of the subject? Building on Foucault's analysis of power, John Tagg argues that photography creates subjects through a whole system of institutionalised visibility, portrait photography is not a neutral representation of identity, but rather a technique for classifying, disciplining and producing identity. In other words, identity in portraiture is constructed through systems that organise and interpret this visual information [17]. This logic will be discussed in Section 4 through the specific case study of the artwork "Stranger Visions", by Dewey-Hagborg [18].

Traditional philosophical understandings of identity generally regard it as something preexisting, static, and awaiting discovery. The relationship between a work of art and identity is primarily one of representation and being represented.

However, the aforementioned discussion of identity based on relationality and intersubjectivity indicates. Firstly, that it conceives of identity as dynamic and generative. It is a process continually produced, negotiated and reconstructed within power relations, relations of gaze and discursive practices. In the process of identity formation, the portrait serves as a materialised manifestation of identity within this process or a concrete expression at a specific moment in time. In other words,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38597

the representation depicted in the portrait is itself an integral part of identity. How a person chooses to represent themselves through a portrait constitutes a practical act through which they understand and position themselves at a given moment. Even after a person's death, the portrait remains a residual part of the subject's identity relationship, continuing to contribute to subsequent understandings of that identity.

This understanding also changes the relationship between the portrait and identity,as well as the relationship between the painter and their own identity. From this philosophical perspective, identity is no longer merely a pre-established, ready-made entity awaiting discovery and description. Instead, it is an open entity in which the painter participates in its formation, reflecting upon and adjusting it throughout the creative process. This is why self-portrait, as a category of portraiture, deserves particular attention.

3.2. Theoretical developments in portraiture and self-portraiture

Freeland's analysis of portraits of Queen Elizabeth I and the Empress Dowager of the Qing Dynasty provides an important starting point for understanding how portraiture construct's identity. These two portraits, drawn from different cultures, different eras and different media, are highly similar in structure. Both utilise clothing, posture and symbolic elements in the background to convey power and status. She uses this comparison to illustrate that portraiture is not merely a record of physical appearance, but rather a visual construction of a social narrative concerning the subject. (For the subject, portraiture involves an act of posing or of self-representation. When people have their portraits made, they are aware of the process and typically have a desired outcome.)

She goes on to propose three essential conditions for portraiture, the third of which is the subject's participation in the creative process that is "posing". She points out that the sitter is not a passive object but actively intervenes in the manner in which they are portrayed. This participation distinguishes portraiture from surveillance footage or candid shots; it is a conscious act of self-presentation. On this basis, I believe that the subject's participation should not be understood merely as striking a physical pose, but rather as a series of choices regarding symbols and visual presentation. Choices regarding what to wear, where to stand, the background and even the lighting are, in themselves, the subject's way of negotiating their identity. These decisions actively define "who I am" and "how I wish to be seen". Identity in a portrait is thus constructed from the very outset through the subject's process of self-presentation.

However, even when the subject actively chooses their attire, posture and background, the meaning of these visual symbols is not entirely determined by the subject. How they are ultimately interpreted also depends on the viewer's knowledge, experience and the specific cultural and historical context. Here, Nelson Goodman's discussion of artistic symbols and meaning in "Languages of Art" offers further insight into this issue [19].

Goodman argues that works of art do not convey meaning through representational similarity, but rather through "exemplification" that is the work itself becoming a specimen of the properties it embodies. "Exemplification is possession plus reference. To have without symbolising is merely to possess, whilst to symbolise without having is to refer in some other way than by exemplifying. The swatch exemplifies only those properties that it both has and refers to." Works of art are not understood because they contain a fixed meaning, but rather through the continuous generation of meaning within a symbolic system. The attributes exemplified by a work do not manifest automatically, rather during the act of viewing, they are continually identified, connected and interpreted as the viewer draws upon their own knowledge, experience and cultural context.

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This perspective establishes a further connection with Freeland's understanding of the portrait as a social narrative. If the subject actively participates in the construction of identity through attire, posture and other visual symbols, then the meaning generated by these symbols is, in turn, reorganised during the act of viewing. In other words, the identity-related meaning in a portrait is not fully determined at the moment of its creation but is continuously generated in the interaction between the work and the viewer. Consequently, the same Renaissance portrait of a monarch may evoke entirely different identity-related meanings across different historical periods. To subjects of that era, it might symbolise legitimacy and divine right to rule, whilst to today's viewers, it may be more closely associated with colonialism, class or power. The visual traces within the portrait remain unchanged, yet the meanings that constitute identity are constantly reorganised in accordance with the historical context in which the viewer finds themselves. A portrait is not composed of a single symbol but rather constitutes a narrative network concerning the subject's identity. Consequently, each act of viewing not only reinterprets a particular symbol but also reorganises the entire narrative of the subject's identity.

Goodman elaborates further on the openness of artistic meaning, noting that 'Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time.' The attributes exemplified by a work are not fixed but depend on the frame of reference brought by the viewer. The understanding of a work of art is never complete, for every act of viewing is a process whereby the viewer reenters that system of signs through their own current experiences and knowledge. "The application and classification of a label are relative to a system, and there are countless alternative systems of representation and description. Such systems are the products of stipulation and habituation in varying proportions." This implies that the relationship between a portrait and the viewer is not a unidirectional transmission of information, but rather a bidirectional negotiation of meaning. When a contemporary viewer gazes at that Renaissance portrait of a king, they do not merely receive information about the king's identity, they also bring their own understanding of power, legitimacy and history to bear, engaging with that frozen narrative field and thereby re-participating in a negotiation of identity in the present moment one that concerns both the king and the viewer themselves.

3.3 The difference between selfies and self-portraits

Gorichanaz distinguishes between self-portraits and selfies on three levels: time investment, content orientation and modes of circulation. The former is a process of 'drawing out' the self through sustained temporal and physical labour, this process itself forms part of the construction of identity. It focuses on inner life and contradictions, and is typically private, constituting a substantive dialogue with the self. The latter, by contrast, is fleeting, oriented towards external contexts, and almost always shared, its function being closer to that of maintaining social connections.

Gorichanaz further points out that a selfie is not an isolated image but is embedded within the logic of platform tags and metadata, as Wendt mentions that selfies inherently include metadata, including hashtags and timestamps. So, selfies are seen not merely as images, but as embodiments of relationships. From this perspective, the uniqueness of the selfie lies in the fact that it remains the 'self-same' across numerous iterations on various screens and devices, wherein the self is articulated anew in each image, consequently, each selfie is also 'self-similar' to other selfies", meaning that every selfie is structurally similar to one another (self-similar).

I believe that the traditional distinction between self-portraits and selfies relies on the medium: painting and sculpture are self-portraits, whilst photographs taken on mobile phones are selfies. However, this classification has become obsolete in the contemporary context. To put Gorichanaz's

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38597

view another way, the reason selfies present a mode of identity construction distinct from that of self-portraits is not due to the medium of photography itself, but because they have entered a circulation mechanism jointly shaped by platform dissemination, tagging and online relationships. Would a self-portrait, once placed within the same circulation structure, exhibit the same characteristics? Looking from the perspective of selfie towards the self-portrait, a digital image that has undergone extensive retouching, repeated scrutiny and is intended for self-exploration already approaches the self-portrait in terms of the time invested and the level of self-reflection. Although this does not mean it has completely shaken off the aesthetic disciplines inherent to selfie. Even if it is not published, the act of retouching itself remains embedded within the disciplinary logic of 'what constitutes a presentable self-image'. Cindy Sherman's work demonstrates how this tension is actively addressed, she employs the technique of self-staging too, transforming aesthetic discipline into an object of scrutiny and parody, rather than one of compliance. This illustrates that the ability to activate self-portrait style "self-negotiation" does not depend entirely on the duration of editing or whether the image is published, but rather on the structures of circulation and viewing into which the image enters [20].

Once "Girl with a Pearl Earring" entered social media and was shared by countless people, it did not 'become' a selfie, rather, when it entered the circulatory structure of social media in the form of a two-dimensional image, the layers that this structure could activate were consistent with those activated by selfies within the same structure. However, this does not preclude the possibility that, at the very same moment, viewers might still regard and discuss it with a museum-style gaze. In other words, it is the "selfie-like dimension" that is activated, rather than the painting's entire meaning being replaced or erased. Artistic materials be they oil paints, a shark preserved in formalin, or a bust cast in blood are inherently semantically open, they cannot be fully exhausted, and each viewing activates different dimensions. The distinction between a self-portrait and a selfie does not lie in the material. The material does not determine the nature of the work, but it does determine which layers are capable of being activated.

This perspective resonates with Barthes's argument in "The Death of the Author" [21]: meaning is not inherent in the work but is generated in the process of the reader's encounter with it. However, this paper wishes to go further and point out that the reader always encounters the work within a specific medium, material and circulation structure, and it is precisely this structure that determines which meanings are capable of being activated.

4. Contemporary case studies: the production and negotiation of identity

The theoretical framework outlined above has already been put into practice in contemporary portraiture.

Selin Balci's work supports this view from a microbiological perspective. She photographs her subjects using a Polaroid camera whilst simultaneously collecting samples (hair, skin, swabs) from them, which she then uses to cultivate microorganisms on photographs. Bacteria grow on the photographic paper, "growing" a new face for each person. As each person's micro biome is unique, identity is no longer merely a face, but rather the sum of those invisible life forms with which one lives in symbiosis. The image is not fixed at the moment the shutter is released, or the brush is set down, as these microbes from the subjects gradually grow upon the image, the face changes or becomes obscured. This process of transformation challenges the notion that a portrait records a fixed state of a person's identity. Consequently, in this work, identity is not merely an intrinsic personal attribute, but rather the result of continuous interaction between the individual, their environment, microorganisms and time, the portrait serves as the arena in which this negotiation

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takes place." [22] However, even though the portrait depicts these relationships and changes, it still cannot represent the subject's entire experience or identity. As shown at the end of the work, fungi gradually cover the face, making it impossible to recognise who it is with the naked eye. The work also reveals only one aspect of the individual.

Dewey Hagborg's "Stranger Visions" further expands upon this concept. In this project, there is no subject facing the camera, instead, a face is constructed from biological data through scientific and technological means. The artist collected hair, chewed gum and cigarette butts from the streets, public toilets and waiting rooms of New York City. Extract DNA from it and analysed from these samples, based on genomic research, these portraits depict what these individuals might look like. By utilising traces inadvertently left behind by strangers, the project aims to draw attention to the emerging technology of forensic DNA phenotyping, as well as the potential implications of a culture of biomonitoring and the tendency towards genetic determinism. In this work, the individual is no longer involved in the representation of their own image,but instead DNA is extracted as data, analysed and transformed into a hypothetical face. Visualises the authoritative knowledge systems that construct the subject.

Although these two works use completely different materials and technologies, they both point to the issue of identity attribution. Portrait here is not a record of a pre existing, fixed identity, but rather a participant in the process of identity formation. In Selin Balci's work, identity is generated through the continuous interaction between the face, microorganisms and time. In"Stranger Visions", identity is reconstructed through scientific data and authoritative systems. Whether the portrait is allowed to change over time or inferred from additional biological data, increasing the amount of information does not necessarily close the gap between the portrait and the subject.

Therefore, regarding the question posed at the outset, whether a portrait can capture 'identity", if identity is not understood as a complete and fixed object of representation, then a portrait cannot fully present it. But this does not mean that a portrait can only bear its signifier or simply reproduce. Portraits as a materialised expression of 'identity' at a specific moment, the portrait participates as part of the network of the subject's identity formation and exist in the viewing structure to continuously participate in the understanding of the subject by future generations after the subject's death.

5. Conclusion

This paper starts from the question of whether a portrait can truly carry and embody a person's identity. It first traces how philosophy has understood personal identity, from the search for a stable, specific anchor for identity to doubts about whether a stable self exists at all. It then turns to art, looking at studies of portrait-making and at the differences between portraits, self-portraits and selfies, and tests these ideas against two contemporary cases. First, philosophy has never found a stable subject to carry identity, so a portrait cannot have a fixed object that it could fully reproduce. Second, if identity is regarded as relational and generative, continually constructed over time through narrative, power relations and the gaze, then portraits and self portraits are more than records， the choices of the subject and the painter in a portrait, the viewer's interpretation, and the structure of circulation all take part in constructing meaning. A portrait is not just a record, but continually constructs and negotiates identity, even after the subject has died, it continues to take part in this process through its audience.

Therefore, the difference between self portraits and selfies lies in time, orientation and mode of circulation, not in the medium itself. Third, the two cases reveal this from different perspectives:

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38597

Balcı's work lets identity change with microbes and time, while Dewey Hagborg's work exposes the system that constructs a subject from data.

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