

Fiona Bailey

Professor Verderber

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The Self Portrait and the Mirror Stage: How Artists Sculpt Themselves

Psychoanalytic theory and artistic practices have long been connected to one another. Art is a vital aspect of the human experience, and human creativity exists as a result of sublimation, which is the transformation of desire into intellectual activity. Throughout history humans have always created works of art, and psychoanalysts often use these works as a way to explain the inner machinations of the human mind, body and spirit. And while artistic practices vary wildly through global history, one consistent artistic idea has been that of the self portrait. Humans are drawn towards representing themselves artistically, through self- portraiture, and this urge is often seen as a way of capturing one's own likeness as a way to be preserved long past one's death. However, the psychoanalytic connection which I am proposing is different. The self portrait exists as a direct consequence of the Mirror Stage, a phase of early infantile development which is vital in creating the idea of the ego, and is the artist's attempt to return to the ego formed during this period.

The concept of the Mirror Stage is one which is outlined in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Between the ages of six and eighteen months, an infant child is at some point placed in front of a mirror by a parent or other adult. When the child sees his own image, he will begin to move his limbs wildly, since he is still too young to walk. When the reflection mimics his movements, the child connects the reflected image back to his own. This seemingly small

understanding marks a big transformation within the child: he is able to spatially identify his own body, which allows for the creation of basic self-awareness and the distinguishing of the child's inner world from his surroundings. The excitement the child experiences from connecting his reflection and body forms what Lacan refers to as the "Primordial I," also known as the ideal ego, which exists before language. And much like language, the Mirror Stage is one of the factors which separates humans from animals. While an animal may see a reflection, it will quickly become disinterested and move on. The excitement that a human child feels when seeing his own reflection illustrates a self-awareness that animals lack, and this fundamental awareness is what has allowed humans to be creative and artistic beings.

The formation of the ego during the Mirror Stage is extremely important. This ego becomes the "ideal ego," or the "ideal I," and becomes the basis of all further identifications throughout a person's life. I am proposing that this "ideal I" is the basis for the artistic practice of self-portraiture, which serves as a way of re-identifying the artist with the original, infantile version of their own identity. Perhaps the most basic fact that supports this argument is the use of the mirror in the creation of the self-portrait. An artist will usually view his own image in a mirror as he is working, carefully inspecting and translating to the canvas the same reflected image that he saw as an infant. The level of interest in one's own reflected image required to produce accurate portraiture can only be matched by the interest with which an infant views himself in a mirror. By staring at his reflection the infant is forming his "ideal I," and in the same way the artist creates a representation of himself on a canvas free of exterior impositions or societal pressures.

The fundamental separation between the inner and exterior worlds which occurs during the Mirror Stage can also be represented in the process by which a self-portrait is actualized. We can track the process of this separation through a psychoanalytic lens by studying the backgrounds in the final portraits in comparison with preliminary sketches. Take, for example, the Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer. The sketch *Self-Portrait With a Pillow* (1491-1492) is an early study for his later piece, *Portrait of the Artist Holding a Thistle* (1493). In *Self-Portrait With a Pillow*, Dürer renders his face, hand, and the pillow in great detail, but only makes the briefest indication of his torso, which blends into the background as a result. In relation to the Mirror Stage, this equates to the initial moment at which the infant is set down and sees himself. The focus in the sketch is primarily on the face and hand, the two initial parts of the reflection with which the infant would first identify (since the infant can't move himself, and is only able to wave his arms and hands wildly). However, the background hasn't been rendered because the connection hasn't been completely made yet, which is especially evident when compared to the final piece. In *Portrait of the Artist Holding a Thistle*, Dürer renders his own figure and the object in his hand with great specificity, leaving the entire background (except for the date and his signature) pitch black. This represents the point of apperception in the Mirror Stage; the separation between the self and the outside world is complete, and the "ideal I" has finally been formed.

I'm not trying to argue that Dürer experienced the Mirror Stage in his twenties instead of as an infant. Instead, I want to investigate the idea that perhaps Dürer used the medium of self-portraiture as a way to realign himself with his "ideal I." The Mirror Stage occurs before humans develop the ability to use language, and language is in psychoanalytic theory believed to be the

reason that the drive toward an unattainable thing exists in the first place. I am proposing that Dürer wanted to realign himself with the inner world that existed before the trauma of language and societal pressure created the “I ideal” that others and society expected of him, by using the self- portrait as “Object A,” through the process of sublimation.

Sometimes, the dichotomy between the inner and exterior worlds is evident in a single work of self- portraiture. One such example of this is Edvard Munch’s *Self Portrait in Hell* (1903). Munch painted multiple self- portraits throughout his time as a working artist, and *Self Portrait in Hell* is by far the most illuminating. The painting depicts Munch standing naked in front of an abstracted red background, while a large black shape looms menacingly over his shoulder. The black shape behind Munch can be interpreted as a visual depiction of the duality of the “ideal I” and the “I ideal”; he is burdened by the expectations placed on him by exterior forces, but through the very act of creating a self- portrait is also reconciling with the earliest form of his own self- identification. Munch has rendered himself as a reflection, accurate to how he sees himself in the mirror, and placed himself in front of a background entirely ungrounded from reality. By disconnecting his figure from his surroundings, Munch is placing himself back before the point of apperception in the Mirror Stage as a way of accessing the Primordial I which wasn’t burdened by the unconscious constant search for Das Ding that results from the trauma of language.

In order to ground this theorization in previously developed psychoanalytic theory, I will now turn to a work of self- portraiture created by Leonardo Da Vinci. Sigmund Freud analyzed Da Vinci extensively, and primarily focused on his childhood through the lens of a childhood memory, and the sublimation which resulted from his sexual drive. While Freud’s analysis began

from Da Vinci's sparse diaries, here I wish to focus instead on *Portrait of a Man in Red Chalk* (1512). While not every art historian believes it to be a self-portrait, the likeness to other images of the artist makes me believe that it is one. The portrait is very light, having been drawn only with chalk, and the figure almost disappears into the background in multiple places. Interestingly, although it was done by Da Vinci at the age of sixty, the portrait seems to depict him as a much older man. Both of these facts can provide a window into Da Vinci's unconscious when viewed through the lens of the Mirror Stage. The figure, by disappearing into the background, illustrates Da Vinci's difficulty with reconciling his inner and outer worlds. The "I ideal" imposed on him by society and his parents has interfered with his understanding of his innerworld and his surroundings which occurred during the Mirror Stage. I believe that this faulted understanding is the reason that Da Vinci portrayed himself as so much older than he was. All the youthful excitement he felt during the Mirror Stage has been absent, and this great burden aged his unconscious past his actual age. This faint chalk portrait was also the final product; there is no later painting which reflects this piece as a preliminary sketch. This aged, lightly executed portrait provides us with an indication of Da Vinci's own self-identification issues, despite his lifelong efforts at sublimation.

So far, the theorization I've established between the Mirror Stage and self-portraiture has been primarily focused on the relationship between the figure being portrayed and the background of the image. I would now like to turn to an entirely different facet of the Mirror Stage: the gestural aspect. When an infant is placed in front of a mirror, the way he connects himself to his surroundings is through gestures; he will flail his arms wildly, unable to do much else. He then interprets these gestures as a pattern, and, according to Lacan, his ability to

recognize them as such illustrates the permanence of the ego. A prime example of an artist whose work embodies this gestural facet is that of Vincent van Gogh. Specifically, Vincent van Gogh's 1887 painting *Self-Portrait with a Straw Hat*. Van Gogh is known for his use of large, contrasting brush strokes, and I believe that this very application shows the same gestural intuition developed during the Mirror Stage. The brush strokes that van Gogh made on his figure are directional; they follow the contours of the face in order to create a likeness. However, the background strokes go in every direction, and many of them curve inwards towards the figure's eyes, drawing the outerworld inwards.

At this point, it's important to understand not only what self-portraits represent, but also why artists create works of self-portraiture in the first place. Sublimation, as Sigmund Freud theorized it, exists as a creative alternative to repression. The artistic object which is created is then given the status of *Das Ding* in the unconscious of its creator, and can then be referred to as "Object A." Sublimation, therefore, channels the Drive in a way which doesn't create pressure on an organ the way that repression does. Artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Edvard Munch, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Vincent van Gogh were sublimating the entire time they created art. The self-portraits that they made were the result of this sublimation, yet these works also allowed the artists the opportunity to bring the unconscious back to the "Primordial I" that existed before the trauma of language.

The Mirror Stage is not the only Lacanian concept to be so intrinsically tied to the medium of self-portraiture. Lacan also worked with the model of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary, three concepts which he viewed as a way of representing the multi-faceted interactions between areas of the psyche. Since the infant child experiencing the Mirror Stage

lacks motor skills, his sight becomes the primary sense for understanding the signifiers- which are the depictions of ideas in the psyche- which make up his life. The infant is able to, through the Mirror Stage, make connections between the elements which make up his world with each other along with and his own mind. Prior to this stage, the infant is unable to disconnect elements in the environment from one another, and once he has learned to speak, he will forever be driven toward the elusive Das Ding. Of course, all of the works discussed here were made when the artists were fully grown. But the very activity of creating a self- portrait engages with these concepts developed as an infant. Works of self- portraiture, even those which are representational, include Imaginary elements which engage the senses, while the Symbolic elements are those which can be experienced or discussed by those who view the piece. Once again, the reason for the creation of self- portraiture can be connected to this theorization; the creation of a portrait allows the artist to not only revisit the “Primordial I,” but also the simplicity of the earliest connection between the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary.

Human beings are fundamentally structured to be dissatisfied. As a species that develops speech and language abilities, we feel as though we are missing something from the time before we could speak: Das Ding (or The Thing). The Mirror Stage occurs in infants before the development of language, and the ego which develops at this point is free from the burden of constantly seeking something which never existed in the first place. Human beings are also structured to create through the process of sublimation, which is why we produce art in the first place. My theorization is that sublimation through the specific process of the creation of a self- portrait not only satisfies the Drive, but can bring the artist back to the mental state before the Drive existed in the first place. Sublimation in other forms is a way of seeking fulfillment of the

drive, yet sublimation through self- portraiture allows artists the opportunity to revisit the innerworld which existed after the Mirror Stage. The goal of a self- portrait is therefore not only to create a lasting image of oneself, but to achieve the satisfaction of the Mirror Stage after the trauma of language had already occurred. Self- portraiture allows us a window into the unconscious of an artist in a deeply intimate way, because it allows us to see not only how the artist sees himself, but also how he wants to see himself.

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