

Who Am I?

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Eva



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Mutiny



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Holding On



Mayura



Cascade



Inner Child



First Contact



Ocean Floor



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Abstract

My thesis examines the nature of self through personal contemplation, shared knowledge, and self-portraiture. I will talk specifically about identity, ego, change, self-portraits, and the process behind my series. Many claims will be based on personal observations; meanwhile, some will have references. I will mostly focus on the philosophy behind my series rather than discuss art in general. I believe that there are many misconceptions about the nature of the self, and it is essential to address them.

The self-portraits are a part of my self-exploration; I look different and unrecognizable in every picture. The distorted pictures denote the impermanence and the questionability of identity. I want to give a concrete demonstration of the elusive nature of self through these photos. My love for surrealism is also expressed through the aura of strangeness in my photographs.

EXAMENSARBETE

Författare: Jon-Sebastian Wikström

Utbildning och ort: Bildkonst (YH), Jakobstad

Inriktningsalternativ/Fördjupning: Fotograf

Handledare: Lars Rebers och Emma Westerlund

Titel: Who Am I?

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självpporträtt, identitet, jaget, ego, bok, filosofi

Abstrakt

Mitt examensarbete undersöker självets natur genom personlig kontemplation, delad kunskap och med hjälp av självporträtt. Jag kommer att prata specifikt om identitet, ego, förändring, självporträtt och processen bakom min serie. Många påstående kommer att basera på personliga observationer; medan vissa kommer att ha referenser. Jag fokuserar mest på filosofin bakom min serie än att diskutera konst i allmänhet. Jag tror att det finns många missuppfattningar om jagets natur, och det är mycket viktigt för mig behandla dem.

Självporträtten är en del av min självutforskning; jag ser annorlunda ut och är oigenkännlig i varje bild. De förvrängda bilderna betecknar identitetens obeständighet och tvivel. Jag vill ge en konkret demonstration av självets svårfångade natur genom dessa bilder. Min kärlek till surrealism uttrycks också genom den konstiga atmosfären i mina fotografier.

OPINNÄYTETYÖ

Tekijä: Jon-Sebastian Wikström

Koulutusohjelma: Kuvataide (AMK), Pietarsaari

Suuntautumisvaihtoehto/Syventävät opinnot: Valokuvaus

Ohjaajat: Lars Rebers ja Emma Westerlund

Nimike: Who Am I?

Sivumäärä: 55

Kieli: Englanti

Avainsanat: valokuvaus, taidekuvaus, surrealistinen valokuvaus, abstrakti valokuvaus, surrealismi,

omakuva, identiteetti, minuuus, ego, kirja, filosofia

Tiivistelmä

Opinnäytetyössäni tarkastellaan minuuden luonnetta henkilökohtaisen mietiskelyn, jaetun tiedon ja omakuvien avulla. Puhun erityisesti identiteetistä, egosta, muutoksesta, omakuvista ja sarjani takana olevasta prosessista. Monet väitteet perustuvat henkilökohtaisiin havaintoihin; ja joillakin on viitteitä. Keskityn enimmäkseen sarjani taustalla olevaan filosofiaan sen sijaan kuin puhuisin taiteesta yleisesti. Uskon että minuuden luonteesta on olemassa paljon väärinkäsityksiä, ja mielestäni on tärkeää puuttua niihin.

Omakuvat ovat osa itsetutkisteluaani; näytän erilaiselta ja tunnistamattomalta jokaisessa kuvassa. Vääristyneet kuvat ilmaisevat identiteetin väliaikaisuutta ja kyseenalaisuutta. Haluan antaa konkreettisen esityksen minuuden epämääräisestä luonnosta näiden valokuvien avulla. Rakkauteni surrealismiin tulee myös ilmi valokuvissani niiden omituisen auran avulla.

Introduction

I have been unaware of myself and my identity for most of my life. It is quite recently that I started to question who I am and what is my position in the world. This might seem like an obvious question from a societal context, as we know our names, place of birth, and so forth. But what is left beyond all these descriptions? I think self-discovery, the journey within, is the most important thing we can do in this lifetime.

I will investigate further about self, identity, ego, self-portraits, and change. This dissertation will contain a lot of personal interpretations based on contemplation around information regarding these topics. Talking about the self is very important to me since I believe many misconceptions are surrounding the nature of the self. Understanding what we are not is an important step of self-seeking. This text is supposed to raise more questions than to answer them. I hope that it will inspire the reader to start the journey within.

Theory

I believe that everyone is searching for themselves in a different way or another. This might happen consciously or unconsciously; we cannot avoid learning more about ourselves and the world. It is through our relationship with the world that we learn more about ourselves. I think it would be difficult to know anything about us without any relative context. It seems to me that in human society, we are often told who we are; our identities are formed by our family, education, country, heritage, religion, and so forth. But these are only definitions within the artificial world created by us humans. What we are is a mystery, a mystery that probably no human has ever understood.

My artistic journey has been a lot about self-discovery. Because I do not know myself, I gravitate towards things that resonate with me. My whole life has been about trying different things and seeing what lasts. It is through this reducing process that I get closer to the core of my individuality. I do not expect to arrive at a certain goal where I can proclaim "now I am myself," I rather see this as an ongoing process. It is an ongoing process because I am constantly changing; all my values, preferences, and interests change. This change can be fast or slow, but I am still changing.

I try to view my life as a constant work in progress, never coming to definitive fruition. I do not want to limit myself by believing that I already know myself. If I thought I did, I would stop being receptive. When I admit that I do not know, I become open to receive and see what is taking place.

Identity

The word identity comes from French *identité*, which derives from the Latin word *identitatem*, meaning sameness. (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.) It is interesting how the etymology of identity is about similarity, yet generally, identity is all about being different. Cambridge Dictionary defines identity as follows, "Who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others." So the word identity is used to designate differences between individuals. According to American Psychological Association, personal identity is equal to:

An individual's sense of self defined by a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles. Identity involves a sense of continuity, or the feeling that one is the same person today that one was yesterday or last year (despite physical or other changes). Such a sense is derived from one's body sensations; one's body image; and the feeling that one's memories, goals, values, expectations, and beliefs belong to the self.

Meanwhile, in cognitive development, object identity means, "Awareness that an object is the same even though it may undergo transformations. For example, a coffee cup remains the same object despite differences in distance, size, color, lighting, orientation, and even shape." (APA, n.d.) The fact that something can change completely and remain the same seems like a paradox to me. Object identity seems to me like a convenience rather than a truth because a coffee cup has no inherent identity. A coffee cup is made out of non-coffee cup elements, so a coffee cup is just a label. It is convenient to label things, but convenience can become a trap. If we see objects as substantial, then this labeling can become a trap, according to my way of thinking.

Freud had his own idea of how the mind worked:

"According to Freud's psychoanalytic framework, the mind was composed of the id, driven by instinct and desire, the superego, driven by morality and values, and the ego which moderates the two and creates one's identity. Many features contribute to ego functioning, including insight, agency, empathy, and purpose."

(Psychology Today, n.d.)

Sigmund Freud created psychoanalysis; he believed that most humans were dominated by subconscious impulses. Psychoanalysis therapy was a way to become conscious of the unconscious in order to release repressed emotions.

This psychoanalytic framework of the mind represented by Freud demonstrates the inner conflict that every human is going through. We are in conflict because we have different sides in us that do not seem to work together. They do not work together because they are perceived as separate; separation is the cause of conflict, in my opinion. To see the observer and the observed the same is the end conflict.

From my point of view, identity or self-image is synonymous with the ego. My concept of ego is more than just an inflated sense of self-importance. This differs from the Freudian concept of the ego, in which the ego functions as an operating force. I see the ego as a false sense of self; it is the thinking mind that identifies itself with name, form, personality, thoughts, and emotions. It is the thought creating the thinker and not the thinker who thinks thoughts. This self-image causes suffering because we have so much emotional attachment to our image of ourselves, and if anything happens to that image, it feels like a personal loss. But the losses of this self-image are fictitious; they are just mental activity, nothing is really lost. It is like a child with a toy; when the child's favorite toy is taken away, it will feel intense grief. But if the child gets a new favorite toy, the old toy has no value anymore. This is because the old toy is no longer a part of the child's sense of self. I believe that this similar kind of identification continues in our adulthood and gets more complex and conditioned. The thought of having no permanent and existing "ego" might frighten some people. But every morning, we wake up as a different person, we are constantly changing, but this fact does not scare us. If our identities would be absolute, we could never change. Consider how dramatic life would be if we always stayed the same.

There is a famous thought experiment called "The Ship of Theseus" which is used to question the permanence of identity. The simplified version written by S. Marc Cohen from Washington University goes as follows: "Theseus completely rebuilds his ship, replaces all the parts, throws the old ones overboard. Does he arrive on the same ship as the one he left on?" For me, this demonstrates the illusion of a seemingly unchanging identity. As mentioned, the ship still exists, but all its parts have been changed. Similarly, our bodies change. "According to researchers, the body replaces itself with a largely new set of cells every seven years to 10 years, and some of our most important parts are revamped even more rapidly." (Opfer, n.d.) So the whole structure has been completely changed during our lifetimes several times. This fact does not seem to bother or affect us in the slightest way. So it seems that there is a continuity of a pattern; however, this pattern is fundamentally never the same. As Heraclitus supposedly said, "It is not possible to step twice into the same river." (Graham, 2007)

This is how I understand the Buddhist doctrine of anattā or anātman, which is essential to their teachings. Anattā or anātman can be translated as "not-self" or "non-self" and is commonly misunderstood as "no-self," which is not really the original meaning. The doctrine of anattā teaches that there is no separate, permanent and unchanging soul. The self is seen as an agglomeration of five aggregates; form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. The self is, therefore, not a being but a focal point of experience. This conclusion is brought forth by meditative self-analysis, in which every part of our being is analyzed and eventually seen as impermanent and lacking self-like quality. (New World Encyclopedia, n.d.)

From my perspective, this does not mean that there is nothing besides our physical bodies, like materialists claim. In an oversimplified sense, from what I have understood, what goes on is the mind or the stream of consciousness. This stream of awareness continues after death, but it is not a fixed entity, nor is it a thing; it is a changing system; thus it is not a self. It could be seen as a soul (life force), but it is unlike the normal concept of a soul in which the soul is a separate and unchanging being. Even if the soul would exist, every idea that we make about the soul is just a concept to cling to. Concepts like "my consciousness" would be wrong because that means that there is something that possesses that consciousness.

This teaching can seem contradictory; if there is no self, then what is reborn? In the New World Encyclopedia, this problem is explained very well in my opinion:

Some Buddhists take the position that the basic problem of explaining how 'I' can die and be reborn is, philosophically speaking, no more problematic than how 'I' can be the 'same' person I was a few moments ago. There is no more or less ultimacy, for Buddhists, between the identity I have with my self of two minutes ago and the identity I have with the self of two lives ago.

(New World Encyclopedia, n.d.)

It is clear to me that Buddhism tries to approach truth through negatives instead of positives. This approach is not for everyone, but I think it is effective to make faster spiritual progress. I see this teaching of anattā as a method to detach from the sense of self, which is the root of our problems. Seeing the ego as illusory will diminish its influence over us and make our life better. Even though the ego is an illusion, it is very persistent and hard to realize. Trying to get rid of the ego just reinforces the illusion that it even exists. I believe that the only way to transcend the ego is to become more conscious of it.

I do not think there is any separation between us and the external world; we exist in accordance with each other. This is very similar to the concept of "dependent origination" of the Buddhists. It teaches that phenomena arise in dependence to each other; for example, the word "up" has no meaning if there is no "down" and vice versa. A seed of a tree cannot grow without soil, water, and sunlight. (Feldman, 1999)

It is only through the mirror of our relationship with the world that we can learn to know about ourselves. If you take away a mirror, you cannot see yourself anymore. Similarly, if you take away the external world, you cannot know anything about yourself.

It is the symbolism of a mirror that fascinates me; I have always been fascinated by reflective surfaces. Reflective surfaces are not interesting per se, but I like surfaces that slightly distort the shape and color of the reflection. Symbolically, any kind of mirror is interesting because it can symbolize a multitude of things.

Self Portraits

There are two prominent reasons why I started taking self-portraits; I could adjust myself exactly the way I wanted to create a specific mood. I was able to express myself and release suppressed emotions.

The fascination of the self can easily be seen as self-indulgence. I never thought about it in that way; since I was a child, I was curious about everything; I view things from an objective standpoint. This allows me to observe and analyze without getting tangled by the subject; in this case, that is me. Understanding one thing will be the key to understand every other thing. Liz Wells, in her book *The Photography Reader* states that "The reality is that any attempt at critically examining a concept of self in a wider social context is treated as taboo, as self-indulgence." (Wells, 2002, p.411) It is always risky to talk about yourself, even from an objective standpoint. If you do not explain yourself thoroughly from many perspectives, you risk yourself being ridiculed. In the end, we cannot control what other people think about us.

There are many occasions where I felt like Narcissus from Greek mythology, who famously became in love with his reflection in the water. (Britannica, 2019) I could not avoid this feeling of self-indulgence while posing, so I used irony as a coping mechanism. Photographing yourself can easily become phony and inauthentic; self-awareness takes away sincerity and spontaneity. I believe that self-awareness can become an obstacle in any field of life. This is why a state of flow is paramount; when you are completely immersed in something, the sense of self disappears. The mind will not waste energy in conflict anymore, so there will be a lot of extra energy. The flow state is just another example of the positive effect of the selfless state.

Process

My photographic process is often out of control; nothing is thoroughly planned in detail. I only have a vision or a feeling that I want to share. My work is mostly spontaneous, and I work together with chance. It is more about allowing chance to take place instead of opposing it.

I could describe it as controlled non-control. I let the process control me; it is a mixture of control and letting go. If I controlled the whole process, the result would be somewhat artificial and bland. The result of relinquishing all control would not be good either.

I cannot recreate my photographs because I rarely remember exactly how I took them. It often feels like that the pictures are not mine since they just manifest out of spontaneous activity.

The fact that I do not know what to expect in my photoshoots is what makes it very enjoyable. It is always a surprise, no matter how good or bad the result is. I do not like orchestrating everything myself; I feel more connected to the world when I let go of control. What I can create myself is very little, but through spontaneous activity, I can do things that I could never do.

There are so many things that I have no control of; the more I embrace the lack of control, the more I can work in harmony with it. It is more like the art of sailing; instead of using brute force, you use the wind for your aid.

The more I embrace the so-called flaws and imperfections and use them instead of fighting against them, the better it looks and feels. It is like Jackson Pollock and his "drip" technique, which seems like random, messy lines on a canvas, yet behind all that chaos seemed to be a pattern and a mastery. Roberto Zenit, senior study author and a professor in Brown's School of Engineering said, "Like most painters, Jackson Pollock went through a long process of experimentation in order to perfect his technique," (Strickland, 2019). This clearly states that it took time to master his technique. If making good abstract paintings would need no control, anyone could make them. But because they require a good eye and some technique, only some artists can make good abstract art. It is yet again about the balance of control and letting go.

This photographic style in my series came first and foremost from the year 2015 in Karjaa, Finland. It was part of a school assignment; our task was to photograph anything at a social event. This was my first time using a DSLR camera, and I was experimenting a lot. I came across this carnival section which had a funhouse mirror. After fooling around for a while, I realized that taking a photo of the reflection would be interesting. I took this photo below; I was happy with the result since I love surrealistic art. This picture set out the direction for my experimental photography.



Untitled.

It was easier to find interesting subjects for photography when I was not filled with technical prejudice. I could use the analogy of a cup for this occasion; when a cup is full, it cannot be filled. From my perspective, emptying your preferences, habitual tendencies, techniques, and points of view is the next step of mastery. One of my inspirations for this series, Pablo Picasso, was known for unlearning his technique:

There is an old anecdote that tells of Picasso, who, upon emerging from an exhibition of drawings by young children, says, "When I was their age I could draw like Raphael, but it took me a lifetime to learn to draw like them."

(Harris, Zucker, n.d.)

Picasso's self-portraits were a source of inspiration for my series; I saw an image on the internet which gradually showed his self-portrait style change year by year. The older he got, the more distorted the self-portraits were. This symbolized the instability of the self for me. My distorted pictures are supposed to convey this. The distortions are quite extreme just to make the changes and differences seem more dramatic, in hopes that they would leave a deep impression on people.

At the same time, it is the exploration of my visual identity and how easily my visual identity can be warped and modified. The distorted pictures also symbolize how we can distort the world through our perceptions. We are like deformed mirrors when we have a lot of ideas and biases about the world. Instead of having a clear reflection about the world, we distort the image.

A slight distortion can make the reflection unique, which is a beautiful thing in itself. But seeing the world as it is will help us avoid the disappointments of wishful thinking.

There is a mist of melancholy and despair in my pictures; the path of self-discovery is often commenced by tragedy. We rarely change by ourselves; it is usually difficult moments that force us to change. There is a tremendous potential for positive change in apparent negative situations. If we do not get carried away by misfortune, we can transmute the situation into something good.

What inspired me to continue to take surreal photographs was a sculpture made by Eero Hiironen in Pietarsaari, Finland. The name of the piece is Yhtenevät virrat in Finnish, meaning "converging currents." His sculptures were mostly made of shiny reflecting metallic pieces with a lot of wave-like forms. Water and lakes were his sources of inspiration, and his sculptures depicted movement and reflections. (Leiwo, 2018)

I have always been troubled by my inability to communicate linguistically, so my art is about communication. It seems that words cannot describe what I try to convey, maybe in a very superficial way, but it lacks so many elements. This could be just my lack of poetic skills, but I like to blame it on the limitations of language. Every time I express myself through speech or words, I get a silly feeling. I wish I could send telepathic messages, but for now, art will suffice.

I want to keep the exact process of how I took my photographs as a mystery. I cannot replicate them myself anymore, but I encourage people to come up with their own approach. You get the most out of something when you do it by yourself.

Analysis

I wanted this photo series to be the culmination of my photographic work at Novia University of Applied Sciences. I applied all the things I had learned and gathered so far. I think the most important thing was the maturation of my visual taste. This helps me to have a clearer vision of what I want visually. It is easier to deliver when you know what you want. Another thing that I have become better at is the handling of colors. Colors are very important to me; they set up the mood of the picture. Being able to correct and create custom colors is difficult and tedious; it is something I will continue to learn. Training the eye is very important since it enables us to see what colors fit together and what hue, tint, and tone to choose. There are still many things I need to become better at, but I feel like this series is a step in the right direction.

Summary

I believe that knowledge cannot reach a satisfactory conclusion about the world and the world within. Giving names to things does not mean that we know those things. This desperate attempt to get all pinned down is just to make everything feel safe and secure, which is a common anxiety. Because I believe there is no closure, it is fundamental to let go and become in terms with the unknowable nature of reality and the self. If this is done successfully, then we can see the world more carefully without imposing mental projections all the time. I have concluded that it is about becoming secure with insecurity, which is difficult to achieve but worthwhile.

Our identities seem so elusive that we should not assume or expect to grasp a tangible identity. This fleeting quality of identity gives us the freedom to be anything we want to be. But freedom is used best reasonably; thus, we should avoid extremes. Being too serious or frivolous is neither good. I believe that it is crucial to find the balance between all things.

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