Stuff Matters:

How objects help define self identity within portraiture.

Rachel Ratten

91694635

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Objects matter - they need to be recognised as symbolic, representative and have cultural significance. They are now acknowledged to be global and even into other dimensions – virtual. Possessions are a major contributor to, and the reflection of, our identities, and, either consciously or not, people regard their possessions as part of themselves, and that other people, places or possessions all contribute to create the extended self. Woodward (2007) describes what constitutes an object: "Things, artefacts, goods, commodities and actants are important because of the context in which they exist. Things need to be able to be seen and/or touched, and ranging in size from 'discrete' items, to cars and shopping malls" (p.15). At one stage an object can originate as commodity but as time passes it evolves into an artefact. Becoming a cherished possession (but maybe worthless in a monetary sense) will affect its 'title' (value). Within the format of portraiture, objects play an essential role in exposing the sitter's identity. Art historian Richard Brilliant described portraiture as "relying upon representation to make reference to the individual portrayed, but denies exact equivalence, thereby preserving the representation itself as a distinct, artistic entity" (Kent 2006 p. 29). In a nonverbal mode of communication, a portrait needs to visually describe uniqueness and personality. In this essay, three areas of identity forged through the depiction of objects within portraiture will be covered. A historical investigation into a sitter's status, with of the use and type of object is examined. Satire, using photo college techniques utilise disparate depictions of objects to render political or social protests. Finally, self portraiture, from the literal interpretation to a more contemporary approach by use of props, digital manipulation and costumes to assume multiple identities both real and imaginary.

Aesthetics and functionality of objects, alongside our attachment to them is interlaced with identity behind ownership of such objects. Historically, taste has been assigned to one's objects in a binary fashion: as either 'good' or 'bad', depending on societal ideals. These ideals are determined philosophically, and culturally, through consumption, to have become so ingrained they are now become normalised. The idea that possessions are part of one's self is not new. In 1890 William James stated:

> A man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down – not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all. (Belk 1988.p139).

The subjectivity of possession preferences is borne out in historical depictions of individuals ranging from sovereigns to the bourgeois. (Kleine *et al.* 1995, Schultz *et al.* 1995, & Irmak. 2010), showed certain objects can assist in conceptualising an individual's life story. Existing research explores differences between strong and weak attachment, and how objects are used to capture various roles, including past, present, and anticipated future selves. Campbell (1996) explains that an individual approaches potential 'narrative-creating' objects with the intention of finding conformation of an existing image, rather than searching for a new one (p.102). How people literally acquire their things has meaning. Objects come and go in the life journey, and so create a tangible residue of past, present and possibly anticipated future identity development. Kleine *et al.* (1995) state: 'By their very nature,

concrete material things help us to maintain a personal archive or museum (p.341). A possession's potency for self significance arises indirectly via its link to a meaningful life narrative episode. Possessions are not literally the self, but instead artefacts of the self, meaning more favoured objects have a stronger capacity to capture desirable connections with others (affiliation) , or reflect disconnection from a part of one's self (self change). Received gifts are connected with affiliation, as well as being associated with self- continuity seeking reflected in a past-to-present temporal orientation. By contrast, gifts bought for one 's self are much more likely to be rewards for accomplishment, self comfort, or to reinforce a self image of worth and competency. Kleine, *et al.* (1995) state: "Attachment is not the property of either the individual or object *per se*, but rather represents an intersection or joining of the two" (p.359). They then value these belongings not only for their functionality, but also for their symbolic representation of the past, present and future. Involuntary loss of possessions, for example, during admission to an institution, or surviving a natural disaster, eliminates the material and social source of identity for individuals.

Status

One avenue for displaying one's things is through portraiture. The fifteenth century represented the beginning of free standing portraits of named individuals, as sitters were placed in detailed settings alongside personal props aimed at indicating status. A variety of subjects appeared; tradesman to court dwarfs, sat alongside the usual monarchs, courtiers and ecclesiasts (West 2004). Historically, this was the period (the Renaissance) when the notion of the individual was privileged over that of the collective. In Western Europe, the Renaissance was a period of increased self consciousness, in which concepts of unique individuality began to be verbalized (Woodall 1997). Over the following centuries, new

developments in the science of psychology led to deeper explorations of personality and self awareness.

In a portrait, gestures and objects substitute for words, and as the nature of portraiture typically represents something specific regarding the face and body, however, characteristics, aims, or virtues of the sitter are also scrutinized. Generic qualities attributed to a sitter can be conveyed through gesture, expression or role-play. Objects still come into play, a sitter still has to gesture or point at a particular object deemed important. For example, an individual known for scientific research would be shown with his paraphernalia. (Fig 1.) A more light hearted approach, but no less relevant, is the proud owner of his button collection as photographed by Sally Ryan (Fig. 2). On sallyryanphoto.com, the caption reads: "Jerry Ruda has been collecting buttons for most of his life. In order to maintain peace with his wife, Ruda displays them in a small building behind their home in suburban Chicago".

Collecting, according to Belk (Tilley 2006), may be seen to be "both the epitome and the antithesis of vulgar materialism" (p.534). Rather, collecting focuses on accumulating items as a special type of consumerism, and it is suggested that objects lose their commodity status to become sacralised. Objects that found their way into collections were originally produced for economic capitalist reasons, but now are used to enhance feelings of mastery and competence. Other reasons for collecting include pride, socialisation, economic investment, and reflecting nostalgia from a remembered childhood; as relationships with objects evolve from the reinforcement of various influences as particular times, as characteristics emerge from certain traits and styles. For example a collector buys second hand cups and saucers to transform their purpose (flower receptacles for a wedding), but as an entire (non-matching) set, it becomes a collection of specifics. Purchasing a tea cup as a commodity *per se* is not the first priority, but instead utilising specific attributes e.g. its age

and design. Gregson and Crewe (2003) state that the teacups' value is "ambiguous and is more open to cultural interpretation through shifts in desire, and through transformations in form through possession rituals" (p.143).

The idea of collecting also was investigated within psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud originally used the term 'object' to refer to anything that a person used in order to satisfy drives. Libidinal theory states people choose certain objects to establish relationships for specific types of emotional substance; psychological development or need. Transitional tangible items are not the only defined objects in this – other people or parts of other people are utilised to form attachments. Woodward stated: "Within psychoanalytical theory, this tendency to invest objects with power and energy is call *cathexis*" (Woodward 2007 p.139). Examples can range from children forming relationships with their toys, to adults creating strong attachments to food or alcohol, which are objects used to serve or overcome their grief. Indeed, the nature of subject matter to which can be used to collect and form attachment to is expansive, however, the basic tenets behind these attachments are fundamentally similar. Through Ruda's expression, and the context mentioned in the caption, along with the buttons themselves, the viewer can 'read' the directness of Ruda's assertiveness as to the ownership of his collection. By placing him in the centre of the photograph, Ryan gives Ruda a look of totemic control over his objects.

Props and poses served as signs of the sitter's actual or desired social position, however, some evolved to become conventional mainstays in portraiture. Theories abound argue that the self is constituted by various relationships (through objects or other people), but how can that be artistically rendered? Brilliant's (1991) notion of identity itself is a fundamentally social phenomenon constituted by people's interactions with one another. Such impersonations are thus 'other' directed, and only to some extent artificial. The task of

portraiture complicates this, due to the rendering an artist has to interpret not only the person's actual appearance, but also the person's impersonation of a self. Portraits partake of the artificial nature of masks because they always impersonate the subject with some degree of conviction, however, what if, anything lies behind the mask can only be inferred by the viewer. Clues provided by the mask may mislead as well as inform (Freeland 2010). Because of our curiosity about others we constantly seek the reality of a person in a portrait, and wonder about their identity. Freeland (2010) agrees, saying that people represent their self to the outside world as part of who they are, in and of, themselves, and that self is inevitably social. The public self, *is* the self, something each person develops as a part of configuring who he or she really is. Velleman (Freeland 2010) argues: "Self presentation serves a similar function in the social realm, since others cannot engage you in social interaction unless they find your behaviour predictable and intelligible" (Freeland 2010 p.53).

Other conventions in portraiture had social or artistic origins. Hand gestures such as those shown in *Francis 1*, the subject is presenting to the viewer his tools of his trade, and pointing to indicate particular importance. Our culture places great emphasis on verbal communication. Nonverbal communication is not taught, but instead learned informally as a matter of survival, and has been the yardstick against which words and intentions are measured. In portraiture of course, nonverbal communication is the only mode of presenting an image to a viewer. More subtle mannerisms such as placing a hand in the waistcoat pocket was as West states: "a social mannerism among the elite in France, but in England it was became associated with portraiture rather than actual behaviour (West 2004 p. 25). The meaning of a nonverbal signal may vary according to the other nonverbal signals that are simultaneously present, or according to the context in which the sitter is positioned. In Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* in the first century A.D., wrote about the use of gestures of professional speakers, orators and actors. Besides giving practical advice, this text also

argued that the language of hands seemed to be universal, an idea that was very popular in the 17th and 18th centuries (Feyereisen & de Lannoy 1991). Women had more restrictions in acceptable gestures in portraits. Producing a portrait meant reconciling the conflict between what society expected of the female sitter, and how an artist may wish to depict her. Striking a pose of that of a male sitter was not always an option, as women could not ignore the rules of female gesture and dress. Borzello stated: "Throughout the centuries, artistic rules have dictated that women could not show their teeth, unbound hair or crossed legs" (Borzello 1998 p.32).

To the ruling elite, portraiture has always had an important function. Although portraiture has become closely identified with the rise of bourgeois individualism, during the second half of the sixteenth century a connection can be discerned between portraiture and concepts of nobility. Around 1550, humanist and painter. Francisco de Holanda specified that very few people merited the honour of portrayal. Woodall states: "these were illustrious princes, kings and emperors, princesses and queens of virtue and wisdom, men famous in arms, art and letters, and 'nobody else at all'" (Woodall 1997 p.23). The basis of de Holanda's classification was the sitter's possession of a special absolute quality: illustriousness, wisdom, fame, liberality, masculine or feminine virtue. To achieve this by visual means, objects were inserted and displayed to attain this perception of virtuous morality and power. Portraits had to distinguish between the frailty of the human body and the symbolic powerful nature of the position held by monarchs and other power roles. West states: "The primary purpose is not the portrayal of an individual as such, but the evocation through his image of those abstract principles for which he stands" (West 2004 p72). The poses chosen by an artist in portraying power have remained consistent including full standing positions, or sitting on a horse. Items worn or carried by sitters became symbolic and were depicted as, and when relevant to the sitters' position in society. A cane indicated

the judicial authority, and the full-length, life-sized format with legs astride, hand on hip, curtains, a pedestal and a covered table were widely associated with images of sovereigns. Gold chains were signs of honour, conventionally distributed by a monarch. The helmet signified the military prowess upon which the noble order was founded, and wearing a sword as a prerogative of the titled aristocracy. Hands were either gesturing to, or holding, something decidedly of great magnitude , while the gaze was direct and uncompromising. This established 'language' of prestige could shift in signifying different propensities due to spatial and temporal historic events. A covered table becomes just a piece of household furniture as well as a courtly prop, while a helmet could be seen as an anachronistic ornament rather than a serious military accoutrement.

As mentioned earlier, the bourgeois embraced portraiture to present their distinct identity to the world. Woodall (1997) argues that 'noble' conceptions and conventions were realised by the bourgeois to define and elaborate elite identities which did not depend on noble blood. Rather they acknowledged 'interior' virtues such as intelligence, genius and constancy which then became the hallmark of middle class individuality. A significant difference between portraits of rulers and those of the middle classes was the genre of depicting scenes from ordinary life. Such portraits placed emphasis on being communicative and expressive, with a focus on the trivial and familiar elements of the scene. Less symbolism was evident, rather more of a light hearted approach was rendered. Relationships with objects evolve from the reinforcement of various influences at particular times, and characteristics emerge from certain traits and styles. The objects in the home and worn on the body then go on to help create narratives that are seen as everyday practices. Cultural biographies of things are important in the construction of individual identities, and are embedded in frameworks of time and memory. Objects ranging from the mass-produced to

the unique have been chosen to create this 'meaningful' décor. Hurley states: "From this, people can move from being supposedly alienated or passive consumers to active producers of meaning" (Hurley 2006. p.719) This aestheticisation of everyday life is a positive aspect of culture, and allows the consideration of taste as part of the *habitus*; the material culture of day-to-day life. Objects also need to look good as well as being functional, as they become aestheticised, and Woodward (2007) states that old hierarchies of cultural taste have become fragmented in postmodern times. Within many bourgeois commissioned portraits, domestic possessions were evident. Degas's portrait of *The Bellelli Family* (Fig. 4) contains household items that are positioned in such a way to expose the dynamics of the family members. The uncomfortable and unstable resonance of this composition was due to marital breakdown, and Degas attempted to tackle this tension visually rather than subsuming it beneath the artistic conventions of formality and hierarchy (West 2004). In commissioned portraits of middle classes, the artist was permitted to have a looser interpretation than those portraits of rulers and other powerful leaders.

Portraits of the 'under classes' were rarer. They do exist however, representations of the poor, servants, criminals, non Europeans and the disabled were more likely commissioned, not by the sitter themselves, but more likely by other interested third parties, or painted by artists as commercial speculation. The genre of Victorian academic painting was rife with scenes of the above subjects, however these narrative depictions cannot be regarded as portraits, so will not be included in this essay.

Satire

The history of portraiture is also very much related to the history of imperialism and colonisation, and from its inception, portraiture has always engaged ideas surrounding race,

gender, class and nation. Within this context, portraiture expands on subjective ideals of how selfhood is constructed by sitters and the artists who portray them.

Samuel Fosso's figures interweave ambition and fantasy with the political issue of stereotyping. In the didactic *The chief, the one who sold Africa to the colonists*, (Fig. 5) the title, the traditional African print and the trappings of Western abundance all combine to suggest a baroque, but more knowledgeable narrative (O'Reilly 2009 p.103). Artists such as Samuel Fosso has used forms of photographic representation to generate images that challenge the viewer to reconsider and review how the self – that of the artists and of their own – is fluidly and continually reconstituted. The props in this image are both obvious and ambiguous. The lavish, almost ostentatious 'traditional' dress and accessories are more readable than say, the bouquet of sunflowers, the pumpkin orange loafers and the wild pair of white sunglasses, all which have the power to interrupt the flow of the scene.

An earlier use of photograph manipulation came from Cubism's use cut and paste paper. Film and radio were in their early stages; rather it was photojournalism that evolved into montage which coincided with significant upheavals in 20th century history. With the rise of state communism and fascism in Europe and Russia, along with the economic crisis of hyper inflation and low employment, this new and accessible form of media was increasingly used in the political spectrum. Walter Benjamin stated: "The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed work entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular" (Taylor 2004 p.87). What began as cut and paste paper in the Cubist years, had now proliferated into a medium that was borne from the political upheavals of Europe and Russia. These collage and montage graphics were utilised for propaganda and ideology tracts, however, former Dada artist John Heartfield moved into satire using these very techniques in his involvement with the Paris group *Association of*

Revolutionary Writers and Artists. This allowed him to exhibit and promote such works as *Der Friedfertige Raubfisch* (The Peaceable Fish of Prey). This media collage technique provided a verisimilitude borrowed from the figuration of real objects, based on Dada principles, but instead exploited them for specific politicised messages. In Fig. 6 , Heartfield excoriates Nazi expansion into Central Europe by making Herman Goring into a fish who says: "I abhor collective security! I invite the little fishes to conclude individual bilateral pacts with me". Other everyday items that Heartfield inserted in his collages were chickens, oesophagus made from gold coins, all symbolic elements as to how Heartfield wished to depict the political aspirations of Hitler. One concern according to critic Alfred Kemeny, was that while bourgeois photomontage used photographed parts of reality to falsify social reality, "artists of Marxist orientation brings photographic details (part of reality) into a dialectical relationship, formally and thematically: in this way it contains the actual relationships and contradictions of social reality" (Taylor 2004 p91).

By 1970s wave upon wave of social crises, from housing to education, from price inflation to industrial strife, called out for images that carried clear messages. Other than photographic renditions of objects, mass produced paintings also played a part in denouncing communist tenets, as seen in Aleksandr Zossimov's *Gulliver* (Fig. 7). A painting of Moscow's Bolshoi Square is dominated by a suited figure carrying a briefcase – an atypical icon of capitalism in the West. One formal element of composition that satire photo collage can take huge advantage of is that of scale. This exaggerates the element of status, power, dominance, and superiority – the vertical dimension of human relation, signalled by our spatial metaphor of 'higher-ups', 'underlings', and 'looking up to others'. Henley describes the horizontal dimension as opposite to the vertical, defining it as "a friendship relation and the corresponding spatial metaphor refers to 'closeness' and 'being near' (Henley 1977 p. 2). Within my body of work, each painting also contains the image of a man in a suit. One of the

symbols of Western capitalism, variations of the suit has only been in existence for a couple of hundred years. The ruling figures – gone from fop through to dandy, to mid Victorian paterfamilias evolved into the wearers of the plainer, simplified suit of today. There have been many explanations for this change; many factors have contributed, however, as McDowall argues: "The extravagant peacock was killed by middle class attitudes to education and sexuality…. Nineteenth century power dressing (stove pipe hat, high stiff collar) was not exactly practical but it was sober" (McDowall 1992 p.37). Men who dressed too fanciful during these times were deemed more feminine. During this time, the idealisation and sentimentalising of women was underway, as the whole of fashion progressively divided in respectable tailoring for men, and frivolous 'Fashion' for women. As the nineteenth century progressed and moved into the twentieth, men increasingly gained individual strength from uniformity of dress. The concept of power dressing developed; it was an entirely male concept and it reduced virtually all men's clothing to a uniform, tightly controlled by upper-middle class usage. (McDowall 1992)

Self

In self portraiture, artists project particular ideas about themselves. This deliberate 'self fashioning' has been rarely absent, as artists have used self portraiture as a means to perpetuate a view of themselves as wealthy, poor, sad, insane, genius or iconoclast. The idea that different public roles could be contrived and presented emerged from the Renaissance. Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1528) suggested that a particular kind of character, physical appearance and behaviour could and should be cultivated by the higher classes of society West (2004). This perpetuated an assumption that public performances and character traits could be learned and fostered. Rather than being a spontaneous happening, an individual implicitly requests that the observer takes seriously the impression that is being presented

(Goffman 1959). To help portray this assumption, the artist uses signs which dramatically highlight and confirm facts that otherwise remain unapparent or obscure.

The publication of Russell Belk's (1988) *Possessions and the Extended Self* solidified and accelerated consumer research into how consumption helps define people's sense of who they are. Belk created a large body of work to support the thesis that consumers use key possessions to extend and strengthen their sense of self. Whether an individual has a general accumulation of treasured possessions, or has created an unambiguous collection of specifics, both factors according to Belk (1988) mean that: 'attachment' is the extent to which an individual uses an object to develop and maintain a cognitive sense of self, and is a central factor for understanding property ownership. It is the concept of control over one's things that Belk believed contributed to identity. Belk explored James' ideas in more depth and wrote that objects (as well as other people) need to be investigated when discussing the conception of theories about self. The term 'extended self' was referred to as being the body, internal processes, ideas and experiences, alongside places, things and other people to which an individual feels attached. Kleine, *et al.* (1995) state that: "material possession attachment; a property of the relationship between a specific person and a specific object of possession reflects the extent of 'me-ness' associated with that possession" (p. 337). This occurs in a particular context in both time and space. To define affiliation, possessions reflect connections with others, with one's heritage and tradition, and other such occasions involving important people. Both people and possessions reflect autonomy seeking behaviour when they portray individual achievement, distinction, uniqueness, independence and self control. However, the objects *per se* need not be scarce in the usual meaning of the word. Simply the fact that they are owned by a particular individual is enough to give that individual a sense of uniqueness both as an individual and through social context.

The body comes under the definition of object for the purposes of this essay. It has always been an important aspect of portraiture - primarily it was the depiction of the face that was seen as the marker of identity, whereas bodies were shown to be more conventional rather than individual. Self portraiture is perceived as autobiographical; however, as an extension of this idea, some artists manipulate their identity through disguise and assumed personae. While it is true, the artist's own face is always available, deeper forces determine how and why the artist depicts their personal imagery. This self identity is influenced by the status and gender of the artist at different periods in history. However, underlying all self portraiture is the mystery of how an individual see themselves as other. A self portrait involves an artist objectifying their own body and creating a 'double' of themselves. Using poses, objects, or a descriptive context, an artist can portray self identity in a myriad of ways. Alfredo Dino Pedriali (Fig. 8) frames his sexual identity within his artistic identity, whilst showing the viewer his preferred medium. His camera obliterates his face – a primary indicator of identity, thus moving the viewer's attention to the naked man in the mirror, and to the backdrop (a bathroom).

Recent decades have seen artists create self imagery that show themselves as mere surfaces or signs, thus, a portrait places them as simply the location for diverse sorts of identity emphasising the artificial constructions of gender, race or politics. The assigning of a specific identity to a represented face and body is predominately a Western tradition, and the face is seen as the ultimate signifier in portraiture, allowing individuality to be socially and historically constructed. Artists have referenced popular culture icons or art history to insert themselves in position of the 'main' character(s). In *Portrait (Futago)* (Fig. 9), Yasumasa Morimura plays both the servant and the prostitute in Manet's *Olympia*, blacking up or using digital enhancement to achieve the requisite skin tones of the original figures. The only reference to his Japanese heritage is the Hello Kitty figurine in place of the black cat of the

original image. This form of imagery blurs the boundaries of what could be defined as self portraiture. By employing diverse media, styles, and conceptual considerations, artists now explore the depths of the self to many ends, from the literal self portrait to the assumption of multiple identities both real and imaginary. Performance based self portraits using props such as Samuel Fosso's *The chief, the one who sold Africa to the colonists,* and Yasumasa Morimura's *Portrait (Futago)* are not about being 'oneself': rather they are about enhancing the imaged self. They question the boundaries of the 'self' by documenting the simultaneous permanence and malleability of physical appearance (Kent 2006).Their work is deeply personal, while also clearly engaging the cultural and socio-political dynamics and histories of the wider world, critically examining how these issues come to bear on the individual, and how one identifies and is identified.

Along with objects, personal identity is an ambiguous constant in a human life. Just as the body, the mind, and the reputation of a person changes over the years, identity is not fixed either, except perhaps in the memories of others after death. Historically, portrait artists have often sought to discover some central core of personhood as the proper object of their representation. That invisible core of self was and is hard to portray, so various solutions were invented that would extend the metaphorical nature of the portrait in a manner consistent with the subject's own behaviour or patterns of self representation. Tangible objects are one such part of what makes a person a whole. Objects are defined as any physical item that is included within the person's life, ranging from their own body to that of personal possessions, and to other humans. All of these constitute and contribute to self identity and therefore will always play an essential part of portraiture.

Illustrations

Fig. 1 *Francis 1* Johann Zoffany c1770s Oil on canvas. 232 x 149 cm

Fig. 2 Jerry Ruda

Fig. 3 *Napoleon 1 on his imperial throne*. Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres 1806. Oil on canvas. 259 x 162 cm

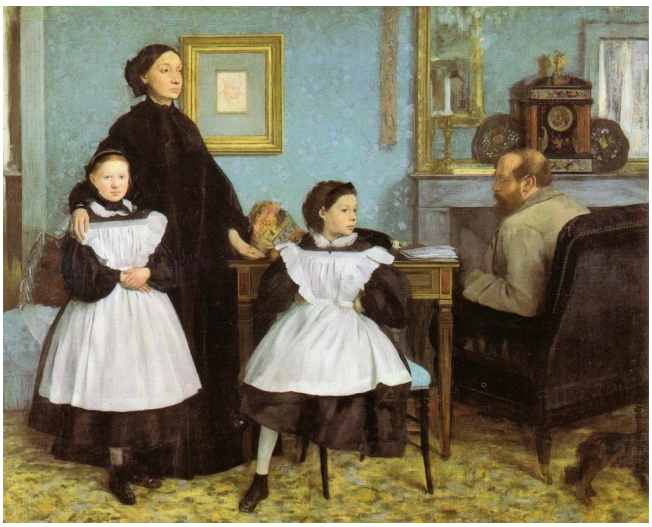

Fig. 4 *The Bellelli Family* Edgar Degas 1858-60. Oil on canvas 200 x 250 cm

Fig. 5 *The chief, the one who sold Africa to the colonists*. Samuel Fosso 1997 type C hotograph 105 x 105 cm

Fig. 6 *De Fried Fertige Raubfisch*. John Heartfield. Collage 1937 38 x 27 cm

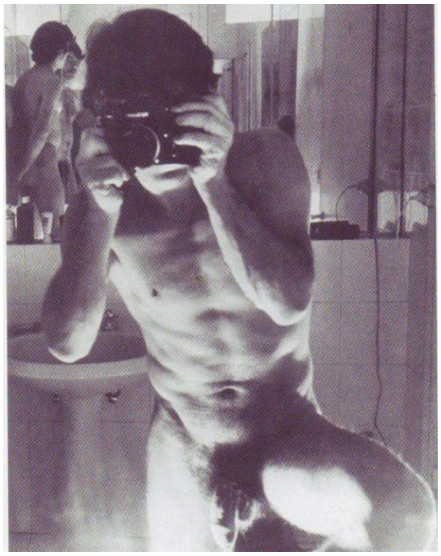

Fig. 7 *Self portrait with camera* Alfredo Dino Pedriali 1979

Fig. 8 *Gulliver* Aleksandr Zossimov 1987 Paper collage 23 x 30 cm

Fig. 9 *Portrait (Futago)* 1988-90 Yasumasa Morimura. Colour photograph 209 x 299 cm

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