

How do I know who I am? - ways of constructing the self

In this essay I want to tie together the themes that have emerged from my Unit 1 and Unit 2 essays and my studio practice:

- the importance of what is and isn't present: I concluded, from my research into how the passage of time was embodied in a selection of art works, that it wasn't the elapse of time as such that interested me so much as the movement from moment to moment and the changes that become visible - link with my long-exposure photographs;
- what is and isn't present in memory: understanding how memory works, especially the prevailing constructivist theory, highlights the importance, the necessity even, of forgetting and the opportunity failures and gaps provide for creativity - link with drawings from family photographs;
- what part memory plays in our construction of 'the self': memory is an important tool for constructing the self, but it isn't the only one, and indeed even people who can no longer make new memories have a sense of self. So what else is involved? How do I know who I am?

This question is so basic - how can you 'not know' who you are? - and yet so complex - philosophers through to neuroscientists have spent centuries investigating what the self and consciousness might be. Aspects that I want to explore are:

- the 'shape' of the self: two ways of explaining the continuity of the self, alongside continual change, are the idea of the dissipative structure (Griffiths, 1999) and of the self as a bundle (Baggini, 2011). Both may suggest ways of assembling imagery in a process of construction;
- the importance of the body in the sense of continuity of self (Neisser & Fivush, 1994) which links to Bergson's idea of the body as a 'threshold' between the past and the future, always moving through the present moment;
- what would it mean to treat myself as an archaeological site with strata and contexts but not a continuous (hi)story (Renfrew 2003) or as an archive with facets of the self as objects available for consideration, selection, re-arrangement;
- how the everyday may provide both an archive of experience and a thread of the narrative of the self which again may offer a way of organising visual imagery in response to experiences, even those which are quite banal. This is where the idea of 'family photographs' fits.

Artists whose work is relevant include:

- Louise Bourgeois - for ideas about repair, reparation and construction
- Robert Rauschenberg - for the use of selection, repetition and collage
- Jo Spence - for her use of photography and family history
- Fischli and Weiss - for the idea of giving things value by paying attention to them
- Thomas Saraceno - for the construction of networks

What I am searching for is a path through this morass of possibilities which will allow me to construct an authentic form of visualisation of my Self. I was going to write 'without getting bogged down by theory' but the 'getting-bogged-down' could also be an 'authentic' aspect of being Me, with its own place in my networked Self.

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