

ARTICLE

Self-portrait as mask. The case study of Gillian Wearing

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Abstract

This article examines Gillian Wearing's *Family Album* photographic series (2003 – 2006), relating her self-portraits to the postmodern identity theories of Fredric Jameson (1984) and Kenneth Gergen (1991) for the 1st time, as well as linking them to Hans Belting's interpretation of the symbolism of the mask (2013). In the photographs, Wearing assumes the features of her family members through hyper-realistic masks and wigs, recreating and "wearing" the faces from the family albums. Through this process, the artist temporarily assumes the identity of another person while creating a new subject that combines and adds further characteristics to the personalities from which it is composed. The photographs from the series are compared with other works by the artist, particularly her self-portraits painted during the 2020 lockdown and those created in 2023, in which she portrays herself without a mask, marking a significant shift in her artistic practice.

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1. Introduction

A mask covers the artist's face, making it impossible to guess her physiognomy. Although, at first glance, a photograph does not show any unusual features, the unnaturally shiny surface of the face soon reveals its artificial character. Multiplied into numerous versions, the image of the artist takes the form of one body and then another, shifted by masks that change its connotations: this is how many of Gillian Wearing's photographic self-portraits are presented, with a focus on the exploration of personal identity. This article seeks to relate Wearing's self-portraits, for the 1st time, to the postmodern theories of identity developed by Fredric Jameson and Kenneth Gergen, as well as to Hans Belting's interpretation of the meaning of the mask in art.¹⁻³

The relationship between the self-portrait and the mask in Wearing's videos, photographs, and installations has been the subject of texts, interviews, and exhibitions over the years, which have emphasized the connections with the work of contemporary and modern artists, such as Diane Arbus, Claude Cahun, James Ensor, and Cindy Sherman.⁴⁻⁸ From 2021 to 2022, the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York devoted a major retrospective to the theme. The exhibition, entitled *Gillian Wearing: Wearing Masks*, featured most of Wearing's self-portraits, including a new series of paintings and sculptures titled *Lockdown* (2020). The exhibition, curated by Jennifer Blessing and Nat Trotman, explored the performative nature of identity in a media society, with critical

references to the work of sociologist Erving Goffman. It also presents the works in chronological order to highlight the different modes of self-representation adopted by the artist over time.⁹ Despite the aforementioned initiatives, there is still no theoretical production that thoroughly addresses the significance of the mask in Wearing's work, placing it in the postmodern context. In general, there is a paucity of scholarly publications on the work of this artist although she has received significant recognition, including winning the 1997 Turner Prize, and exhibited works in major museums and institutions. Therefore, this article aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by identifying theoretical frameworks that can provide new insights into the study of the self-portrait in Wearing's work as well as that of other contemporary artists.

2. The face as a mask, the mask as a face

The mask plays a central role in Wearing's practice, particularly in her works from the early 2000s, such as the *Family Album* photographic series (2003 – 2006). Wearing presents herself with the features of her relatives by reproducing images from her family album. The artist, thus, explores the ambiguity of self-perception and the perception of others by taking on the faces, bodies, and identities of her family members.

While *Family Album* is a significant milestone in the evolution of Wearing's language, mask-related elements can also be found in her earlier works, although they were not associated with the theme of self-representation. For her well-known work *Signs That Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say* (1992 – 1993), Wearing photographed passersby holding blank paper signs, upon which they wrote their thoughts and messages. The work highlights the contrast between the physical appearance of the subject and the thoughts expressed on the paper.¹⁰

In this first series of photographs, although the mask is not materially present yet, its symbolic function permeates the work.¹¹ Examining the image *I'm Desperate*, for example, the theme of the series (i.e., the conflicting relationship between interiority/exteriority, the individual, and the social environment) clearly emerges (Figure 1).¹² The businessman's face and posture convey confidence and control, in keeping with his attire, but the sign he holds reveals the state of impenetrable desperation in which he lives.

The subject's face appears to confirm one of the theses presented by art historian and theorist Hans Belting in his essay on the history of the face. The contrast between the subject's mood and physical appearance is striking. Belting argues that the face has the capacity to become a mask. He states the following: "We do not have access to an artificial



Figure 1. Gillian Wearing, *I'm desperate*, 1992 – 1993. Photograph, color, chromogenic print, on paper. © Gillian Wearing, courtesy Maureen Pauley, London

second face, but rather produce masks with our own face by making it expressionless or by grimacing."¹³ Belting treats the face as the figurative medium necessary to make the body an image: in this sense, it represents a temporary image of the person, not the true self. Subject to mimicry, gaze, and language, the face is the seat of multiple images of the self, cast as masks according to circumstance. Confirming Belting's statement, the face of the protagonist in *I'm Desperate* is configured as a mask worn to reflect the expectations demanded by his role in society, creating an image capable of mimetically concealing the unhappiness being experienced.

Wearing's exploration of people's inner states and the image projected in the social context is further developed in the video *Confess All on Video. Don't worry, You'll be in Disguise. Intrigued? Call Gillian* (1994), where the element of the mask appears for the 1st time in a tangible way. The operation begins with an advertisement in the magazine *Time Out* that contains the text quoted in the title, inviting volunteers to confide in front of a camera. The artist selects 10 people from among those who had responded to the advertisement, gives them a choice of disguises, and films them as they reveal their secrets, which usually concern betrayal, revenge, violence, or sexual acts. In this case, camouflage is introduced to protect the privacy of the 10 volunteers, who are invited to

reveal their secrets on camera in a process inspired by reality television.¹⁴ The video creates an atmosphere of secular confession, which loses its sacredness because of the type of masks used: caricatured reproductions of the faces of public figures, flashy wigs, false noses, fake beards, and sunglasses. The disguises in *Confess All on Video* sometimes completely cover the face of the interviewee, whereas in other cases they leave the face partially or fully visible – a characteristic that is shared with later works that also focus on the genre of the masked media confession.

The function of the mask is enriched with new meanings in Wearing's artworks of the early 2000s, in which a greater focus on the self can be observed, concretized in the development of different types of disguised self-representation. Prominent among these are the photographs in the *Family Album* series, a collection of black-and-white as well as color images, in which Wearing reinterprets her family tree and reproduces family photographs in the form of self-portraits with elaborate masks and hyper-realistic silicone wigs.

3. Portraying oneself as the other

In one self-portrait in Wearing's series *Self-Portrait as My Mother Jean Gregory* (2003), the artist uses a mask to



Figure 2. Gillian Wearing, *Self Portrait as My Mother Jean Gregory*, 2003, framed bromide print. Frame: 150 × 131 cm, 59 × 51 5/8 inches. Print: 135 × 116 cm, 53 1/8 × 45 5/8 inches. © Gillian Wearing, courtesy Maureen Paley, London, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

recreate a black-and-white photograph of her mother as a young woman (Figure 2). The photograph depicts a smiling young woman in a floral blouse in a half-length, three-quarter turn. Wearing explains that she found it difficult to recognize her mother in the original photograph, which was taken before she was born.¹⁵ The peculiarity of the portrait/self-portrait is that it captures both the woman's past features and those of her daughter: with this self-portrait, Wearing aims to show, through her gaze, her mother's light-hearted youth.

The same mechanism is used to reproduce photographs of her brother, sister, father, uncle, and grandparents – the vehicle of an investigation that, through the medium of photography, intersects with topics such as identity, memory, and the impermanence of existence. The chosen images show almost all family members at the same age, between late adolescence and their 20s, which places them on the same level, regardless of their role in the family tree.

In the series, the artist's actions do not aim to remove the identity of her family members but rather to show the interpenetration between the subjectivities contained in a single body, represented in its various manifestations. The artist temporarily assumes the identity of another individual, with whom she shares genetics and certain physical characteristics, to create the image of a new subject who combines and adds other attributes to the different personalities of which she is composed. The subjectivity she describes and represents is indeed neither her own nor that of the other relatives: it takes the form of a third simulated identity, elaborated to confront the ideas of original and copy, the concepts of past and present, and the family dynamics that contribute to the definition of the individual.

The performative act of masquerade adopted by the artist is linked to a tradition of masked portraiture that, in the contemporary context, has roots in the works of Marcel Duchamp and Claude Cahun, themselves protagonists of a series of self-portraits linked to *Family Album*. Duchamp's female alter ego, Rose Sélavy, first assumed a physical presence in 1921 through photographic portraits created by Man Ray. These images depict Duchamp in female attire and posture, a motif that would be replicated in other Man Ray photographs throughout the 1920s. The pun that forms Rose Sélavy's name recalls the French phrase "Eros, c'est la vie" (which can be translated as "Eros, such is life"), an allusion to the erotic sphere.¹⁶ By presenting herself as a woman, Duchamp disrupts social norms and ironically plays with gender roles, creating an alternative identity that is both the protagonist of some works (e.g., *Why not sneeze Rose Sélavy?* [1921] and *Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette* [1921]) and the author herself (e.g., *Fresh Widow* [1920] and *Anemic Cinema* [1926]).^{17,18}

In the same period, Cahun engaged in a multidisciplinary artistic practice encompassing writing, sculpture, photomontage, photography, and performance. By changing her given name to the gender-neutral pseudonym Claude and adopting her grandmother's surname, Cahun forged a new artistic identity diverging from both traditionally perceived femininity and masculinity.¹⁹ She wrote the following: "Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me."²⁰ Through employing various props such as masks, costumes, and elements from nature, she disrupted conventional perceptions of reality, creating self-portraits that focus on the exploration of the fluidity of the self. Simultaneously, her photographic portraits underscore the challenges of positioning herself as an artist generally perceived by her peers as a female within a cultural and intellectual sphere dominated by male presence.²¹

Wearing draws upon the artistic practices of both Duchamp/Rose Sélavy and Cahun, choosing photography as the preferred medium and the self-portrait as the predominant form. Although, as outlined below, her photographs differ from those of her predecessors, Wearing pays tribute to them through a series entitled *Spiritual Family* (2008 – present), in which she disguises herself as the artists who have most influenced her during her career by wearing silicone masks and adopting their gestures. In doing so, she acknowledges not only Duchamp and Cahun but also Meret Oppenheim, Robert Mapplethorpe, Georgia O'Keeffe, Diane Arbus, and several other artists as her chosen spiritual family.

In this context, as well as in other photographs, the masks have an alienating effect on the viewer because, despite their verisimilitude, it is obvious that they are prostheses. The large format of the photographic prints reveals some unmistakable details of their fabrication. In particular, the distance between the mask and Wearing's eye contour makes it clear that this is fiction, not a portrait of a real person.²² In the photographic self-portraits of Duchamp/Rose Sélavy and Cahun, the subjects' identities remain identifiable and cohesive, despite changes in makeup, clothing, and prosthetics. By contrast, in Wearing's self-portraits, the prostheses and makeup suggest that the represented identity is fictitious. These details lead the viewer to question who the real subject of the portrait is while underlining the theme of the whole operation, namely the ambiguity in the perception of the self and the other.

In this respect, Peggy Phelan's analysis of performance and the representation of the body in contemporary times is fascinating, especially when she focuses on Cindy Sherman's self-portraits. Addressing the politics of visibility through a

feminist examination of contemporary culture, she outlines – in reference to Sherman – that "just as her body remains unseen as "in itself it really is," so too does the sign fail to reproduce the referent. Performance uses the performer's body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body per se."²³

If Sherman's concern is to make the female body visible, Wearing shifts the focus to the exploration of relational and social ties and how they influence the construction of subjective identity. The works of both artists reflect the difficulty of representing oneself as one really is. In Sherman's case, as for Wearing, what is represented is a self-image that is "always already an image of the other" because it reflects something that does not belong to the original self and that remains covered up under makeup, wigs, and prostheses.²⁴ The visible body thus ends up concealing rather than revealing the real self.²⁵

This component ties into what Wearing's voiceover expresses in the video installation *Wearing, Gillian* (2018): "We all wear masks. We're all actors. When you walk out your front door in the morning, you're putting on a performance for the world."²⁶

In this respect, Fredric Jameson's study of the cultural, political, and social implications of postmodernism offers an interesting key to interpretation. It describes the transition from the centered subjectivity of classical capitalism to the fragmented subjectivity of postmodernism through pictures using examples from art history.¹ Jameson identifies Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) as emblematic of the modern era's anxiety, highlighting its depiction of "the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation" as a sign of the expression of individual subjectivity.²⁷ Regarding the postmodern subject, Jameson asserts that it lacks the capacity to organize time into a coherent experience; the inability to create continuity between past and future results in a schizophrenic subject who exists in a perpetual present, experiencing fragmentation, plurality, and emotional flatness. Consequently, a painting such as *The Scream*, which conveys intense emotions like anxiety and alienation, can no longer be created in postmodernity, as the concept of expression presupposes a unified and unique self, a coherent temporal experience, and a clear demarcation between internal and external realities.

Jameson cites Andy Warhol's work as indicative of early postmodern artistic production reflecting the advent of a new form of flatness, the collapse of the distinction between high and low culture, and the waning of effect.²⁸ In Warhol's portraits, the subjects are replicated, commodified, and reduced to mere images, thereby erasing references to their

individual lives or emotions. The repetitive portrayal of subjects erodes the expression of complex emotional states, rendering personality to be subordinate to the seriality of its media representation.

As Jameson claims about the lack of depth of postmodern pictures, Wearing's self-portraits do not offer any element of the artist's personality or emotions. The expressiveness of the portraits is abandoned in favor of a simulated representation where the artist's face itself becomes a mask, behind which we are unable to discern anything.

Another pertinent key to interpreting this subject is provided by Kenneth Gergen, an exponent of social constructionism and contemporary social psychology. According to him, the fragmentation of the idea of the self coincides with the development of multiple, disconnected relationships that lead the individual to play different roles, corroding the concept of the "authentic self."²⁹ His position draws on one of the classic sociological studies with which Wearing is familiar, namely Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which Goffman argues that the concept of self is formed based on relationships with others and the social context in which we are embedded.^{30,31} Gergen notes that the postmodern self, which can move freely from one image to another, evolves in response to external stimuli conveyed by other identities. Instead of the personal identity core of modernity, it is inhabited by images of the outside world and the people around it, until it becomes a relational self.³²

In line with these assumptions, Wearing's works stage a constantly changing personality that allows her to present herself in different forms, a process confirmed by the following statement by the artist herself: "I believe that identity is fluid and it's what you absorb and internalize from the world around you. But what you reveal of yourself to the world is how other people define your identity."³³

4. The disembodiment of the face

In light of the observations made in previous sections, it is relevant to note that in *Family Album*, Wearing not only plays the roles of family members but also reproduces two photographs of herself at the ages of 3 and 17 years. In particular, in *Self-Portrait at 3 Years Old* (2004), the artist exercises her adult gaze through a child's mask. The work reflects on the passage of time, questions the truthfulness of the photographic medium, and raises multiple questions, such as the following: Which of the two images more authentically reflects the artist's identity? Is the Gillian Wearing of the new self-portrait the same as that in the original photograph?

These questions are raised by the numerous photographic self-portraits in which the artist wears her own mask, usually in an idealized version or at a different age from that at the time of the work's creation, as in *Self-Portrait* (2000), *Self-Portrait at 27 Years Old* (2012), and *Rock'n'roll 70* (2015). As the title of one of these self-portraits suggests, namely *Me as Mask* (2013), the artist seems not so much to be representing herself with (or in) a mask but rather *as* a mask. This concept of "presenting as" offers a possible key to deciphering the nature of the subject behind the silicone faces.³⁴

Belting argues that the mask is a symbolic representation of a face rather than a replica of a real one. He describes it as "an exarnation of the face, in the sense that it "disembodies" a face to "embody" someone else. By contrast, one may speak of an incarnation of changing masks, which our face constantly produces in expressive gestures."¹³ According to Belting, the face and the mask share the same iconic character, allowing for one image to transform into the other. Wearing's use of the mask aligns with Belting's interpretation as it enables the creation of new images by transitioning between identities and constantly "disembodying" one's own face.

This modus operandi seems to have taken a surprising turn in a series of self-portraits taken by Wearing in 2020 during the isolation imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Entitled *Lockdown*, the series provides an account of the time spent in confinement, exploring the artist's own image in a solitary configuration that – unexpectedly – does not involve the use of a mask. Interestingly, Wearing's decision to paint herself without a mask came at a time when the global pandemic had forced everyone to wear surgical masks as protection against the virus. At a time when people had become accustomed to not seeing each other's faces, Wearing made the opposite choice by painting her own features. In addition to the paintings, a sculptural installation is included in the series, but the paintings are the most prominent works. The series marks Wearing's return to the medium of painting more than 30 years after her last paintings. The poses and facial expressions seem to mimic the possible states of mind experienced in a context of separation and seclusion as if it were a theatrical performance in which the artist plays different characters and roles. Although she paints herself without disguises or references to other ages, the reference to the mask is also subtle in these works. In one of the portraits, the outline of the face appears to be marked by the edges of what is effectively a mask, beneath which the artist's eyes stand out (Figure 3). Thus, even when the artist appears to be portraying her true self, her identity seems to shift from one painting to the next: in the proliferation of



Figure 3. Gillian Wearing, *Untitled (lockdown portrait)*, 2020, oil on canvas. © Gillian Wearing, courtesy Maureen Pauley, London

self-portraits, the target of identity is again lost, confused in the plurality of its versions. Wearing, then, lets the mask slip, only to remind us that we always wear one, even when we are outside the social context. In this sense, *Lockdown's* self-portraits are related to early works such as *I'm Desperate*, where the artist's mask and face eventually coincide.

In 2023, Wearing held a solo exhibition titled "Reflections" at the Regen Projects Gallery in Los Angeles. The exhibition showcased new paintings inspired by the esthetics and styles of past artists whom Wearing admired. The paintings depict details of objects, still-life scenes, and empty rooms, combined with self-portraits. In *No Reflection* (2023), for example, Wearing portrays herself sitting on a chair, from behind, looking into a mirror. The mirror does not reflect the artist's face, which creates a sense of estrangement and loneliness reminiscent of the works of Edward Hopper.

In *Rembrandt's Eyes* (2023), Wearing employs the penetrating gaze of the Dutch painter to depict herself through a dense painting characterized by masterful uses of lighting and contrasts. The artist's eyes are prominent in the painting, gazing at the viewer with an intense and melancholic expression. In contrast to the *Spiritual Family* series, in which Wearing impersonates the artists she

admires, she incorporates elements of Rembrandt's style to produce a contemporary self-portrait. This painting, along with others in the exhibition, showcases how Wearing's work draws from a wide range of images and artworks from the past. The theme of personal and collective identity is explored through a contemporary lens. The painting *Looking Forward, Looking Backward* (2023) is the culmination of this process, as it features a double self-portrait and a play on mirrors and reflections. On the left, a young Wearing gazes at the more mature self-image placed on the right, in a pattern that repeats Piero della Francesca's *Double Portrait of the Dukes of Urbino* (1465 – 1472). The viewer is once again faced with the challenging task of determining which is the "true" portrait of the artist from among the various self-images depicted.

5. Conclusion

A large part of Wearing's artistic production consists of a form of self-representation that does not collide with the traditional concept of self-portraiture, as the identity of the subject constantly evades definition, thus "disembodying" itself through different faces. In *Family Album*, the chameleon-like interpretation of countless personalities and roles, tangentially different from each other, helps to conceal Wearing's already imperceptible identity, which loses its unity through a process of multiplication of the personal image. The same happens in the countless portraits of the artist taken over the years, in which the mask worn prevents penetration into her personal sphere.

Wearing uses her body without realizing an autobiographical narrative, producing numerous selves that do not add up or tell anything about her personality, interests, or personal life, in line with the characterization of the postmodern subject postulated by Jameson and Gergen. Her works simultaneously activate different temporalities, showing artificial versions of the artist at the age of 3, 50, or 70 years, in a timeless configuration that allows her to create a continuous self-portrait through which she mirrors herself in multiple bodies and identities. Wearing's face gradually loses its resemblance to herself and ends up as a foreign body, a mask, or – rather – an essence suspended between the self and the other.

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Further disclosure

The author is an independent researcher who is an expert in Theory and Critic of Contemporary Art.

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