

PERFORMING THE SELF

This exhibition demonstrates the unique properties of self-portraits which transcend mere stylistic development, revealing an extraordinary recurrence of certain artistic strategies across five hundred years of Western art history. The works all share the physical circumstances of material dependence on the mirror in the studio. In spite of the changing social and philosophical contexts the artists also share certain subjective needs that inform the way the paintings are structured.

Artists express a strong desire to communicate with posterity, often going to great lengths to convey their layered personal and social circumstances to establish their identity and their status as creative artists. However, the best self-portraits are far more than personal memorials. Many artists draw each successive spectator into an intimate exchange, and through this exchange they ensure their immortality in the hearts and minds of others. It is the continuity of common themes and encounters that has informed the selection of the exhibition and the themes explored in this catalogue.

The sense of urgency that often produces the compelling nature of the self-portrait image has its roots in the Renaissance. From the late fifteenth century artists had acquired both the status and the technical means to create this new genre that permits an intimate exchange between artist and viewer. For these artists it was not only the immortality of their superficial appearance that concerned them, but the very particular way they wanted to be remembered. They wished to establish their social context and to present themselves as embodying a powerful presence that would be encountered by generations of future beholders.

Since its origins in the Renaissance the genre of self-portraiture entailed many often contradictory aims: to project the artist as a significant member of the intellectual elite, rather than as an artisan, and yet also somehow capture the moment of creation as proof positive that I, the artist, made this transformation of base matter into the likeness of a gentleman. There is a commonly held view that any portrait should attempt to reveal the true character and the complex identity that lies behind the appearance of the sitter. This is always a problematic assumption, and even more so when the sitter is the artist, but it is a challenge that has become an obsession for many artists. Being human, artists may wish to present the image they want us to have of them, or indeed to create the ideal to which they aspire. These issues are dealt with in other parts of this book, but my chief interest will be to consider self-portraits as representations of artistic creativity. The immediacy of the creative act is captured in the mirror and translated onto the canvas, to be empathetically encountered by future beholders who stand in the place of the artist before the painting.

There are three distinct ways in which the idea of creativity can be represented in a self-portrait. The most direct of these is to paint oneself in front of the easel with brush in hand (and we include a number of examples here). Then there is the trace of the artist's hand, the signature brushwork that proclaims originality and individuality, acting as evidence of the artist's touch. In known self-portraits we do not need to be experts in identification to read this signature: it is sufficient that we appreciate the handling of the paint as evidence of the artist's prior presence in front of the canvas. This literal trace provides us with an indirect contact with the artist that is more

immanent than any image alone. Finally, there are allegories of creativity, for example Dionysian inspiration, most notably evident in Caravaggio's *Self-Portrait as the Sick Bacchus* (c.1593–4)



Caravaggio *Self-Portrait as the Sick Bacchus* (c.1593–4)

and the modern equivalent of the bohemian artist with glass or cigarette in hand. Female procreativity or male fertility may also be associated with the act of artistic creation.

When artists show themselves in the studio they provide us with a privileged insight into the structure of all self-portraits. In these compositions we can see the set-up that applies to the genre as a whole. In order to paint his own likeness the artist must be able to look into a mirror. While it is possible that they could memorise their image and reproduce it later, this is not how most artists undertake the process. The mirror is usually placed to one side of the artist with the canvas on the easel at right angles to it and in easy reach of the artist's brush. So the artist stands or sits in a tightly configured triangular space compressed between mirror and canvas. As a result the painted image often appears to extend beyond the frame of the painting just as its reflection will have done beyond the mirror.

When we look at a self-portrait we occupy the same space before the canvas as the artist did to paint the image. While this is also true of all paintings, in the case of the self-portrait it is particularly poignant: we find ourselves looking back into the eyes of the artist, just as they gazed into their own reflection in the mirror. In this way the canvas replaces the mirror spatially and the viewer is caught up in a close exchange with the artist. The intimate nature of many self-portraits ensures that the viewer stands at approximately arm's length from the canvas in order to view them. This spatial relationship supports the tendency for the viewer to identify with the artist as the trace of the artist's hand is brought into sharp focus.



The self-portrait of Johannes Gump (1646) makes this prismatic configuration explicit. The artist is seen from the back, standing in the same plane as the spectator. The mirror is shown to his left and the painting he is working on hangs on the right. The Gump is also notable for the way it engages the viewer in a paradoxical hierarchy of representations of the real. Almost half the painting is occupied by the back view of the artist working in the studio; his black cloak forms a large triangular area in the lower centre of the composition, as it were a void at the bottom margin of the painting. It also acts as an arrow to point up the composition to where the action takes place. By making his own body our point of entry to the composition Johannes Gump underlines the role of the spectator as second beholder, standing in the place of the artist, the first beholder.

There is a subtle progression in the three images of Gump presented here. The cloaked figure is the largest, yet it is virtually an unrelieved black space with the exception of the white collar separating black hair from black cloak. To the left is Gump's reflection in the mirror, facing the black figure. However, the figure does not seem to be facing the mirror: he turns to look at the painting which hangs on the right, a little lower than the mirror. The mirror image thus represents his memory of what he saw before he turned to the canvas. The painted portrait is just a little brighter and more present than the mirrored image, and, although it is the same face captured at the same moment, instead of looking back at the artist it completes the cycle by looking over his creator's shoulder at the spectator.

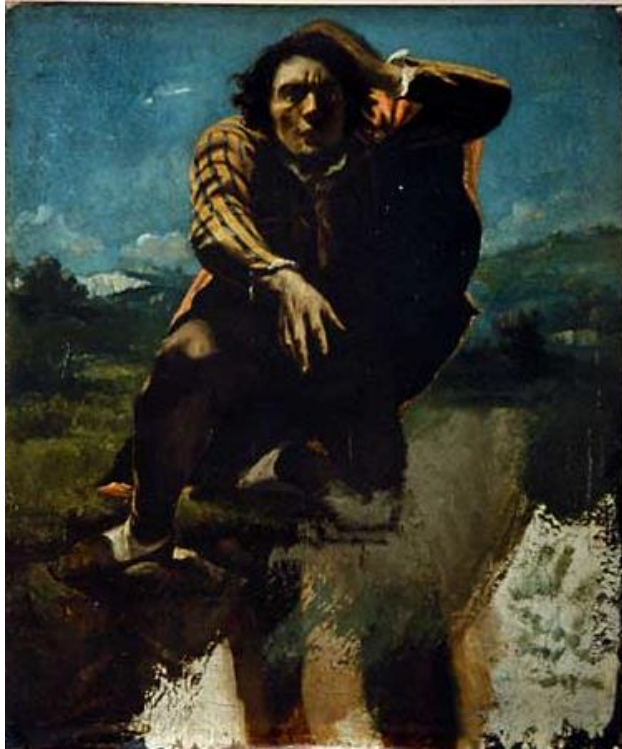
The figure of the artist that is the closest to the viewer (the one in the cloak, brush in hand) must have been painted from imagination unless he had a very complicated set of mirrors in the studio, which may partly explain why it is the least defined of the three. The mirror, presumably a memory in the representation, is slightly shaded; the painted portrait that is the focus of the artist's gaze is the brightest of the three. Thus we have a clever representation of various states of consciousness: imagination, memory and immanent perception. It could equally be a demonstration of the artist's skill appearing to create an image brighter than life itself. The picture is an extraordinary study of the experiential consequence of the set-up necessary for any self-portrait.

The intensity of this implied circling of the gaze, including that of the spectator, in self-portraits supports Michael Fried's speculations on the 'quasi corporeal merger' that he finds at work in the self-portraits of Courbet.¹ Fried finds that in bringing the figure very close to the surface and providing various compositional strategies the painter attempts to break down the boundary that separates the world in the image and the world on our side of the canvas.



Gustave Courbet *The wounded man* 1844-45

Courbet's *Wounded Man* (1844–5) seems to be slipping out of the picture at the bottom of the frame as if the lower part of his body were continuing into our space before the canvas. This apparent movement out of the picture plane brings us so close to the image of the painter that we come to empathise with him to the point of a close identification. I would suggest that, contrary to Fried's view, this is not specific to Courbet but applies in some degree to self-portraiture in general. I suspect that this is an important factor in many self-portraits: they do not simply communicate an experience of the artist; rather, their true purpose may be the projection of the idea of selfhood from the artist to the viewer.



Gustave Courbet *The Man Made Mad with Fear* (c.1843–4)

Courbet's most dramatically claustrophobic self-portraits underscore the climax of a process in which the perceived boundaries between representation and reality are put under pressure. In *The Man Made Mad with Fear* (c.1843–4) the artist seems to be leaping out of the canvas in which his virtual presence is entrapped. Remarkably, the painted surface breaks down into an unresolved scumble just where the cliff edge or void should be. This is, of course, just an unfinished canvas that reveals a partly erased underpainting – or is it? In many self-portraits Courbet deliberately plays with this possibility of an imaginary passage between the painted space and the world on our side of the frame. In *The Burial at Ornans* (1849–50; Musée d'Orsay, Paris), for example, the open grave just appears at the lower edge of the canvas, providing a point of passage between our world of consciousness and the imaginary world beyond. The dark figure of Gumpff performs a similar function in his self-portrait, and in many of the paintings of Cézanne there is a loosening of the painted structure at the lower edge that seems to facilitate a kind of entry to the composition. Consciously or unconsciously, therefore, the fragmented edge of the void in *Man Mad with Fear* may well represent such a passage. Courbet was after all a master of the rapidly rendered rock face and it would have required little effort on his behalf to complete the image. He may, on the other hand, have frightened himself by imagining his own extreme existential terror and simply abandoned the project. In either case we can share the sense of panic it embodies.

The Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz illustrated this experience for me when he gave me his interpretation of the composition of *Las Meninas* by Velázquez (1656–7), one of the great self-portraits of all time and one of the most complex in terms of its engagement of the viewer in a reciprocal and self-conscious exchange of the gaze.² Muñoz talked of the cycle of glances and of the king and queen who must have stood just where we stand in order to be reflected in the rear mirror and painted by the artist who glances out at them (and us). He also raised the question of the notional and

problematic giant mirror that would have needed to be positioned where we stood, in place of the subject, so that the artist could see himself making the painting, as well as the scene behind his back where we see the reflection of the missing king, queen and courtier in the doorway. It was then that Juan so pointedly evoked the existential terror to be found in the Courbet when he said: ‘Now we go to have a real Spanish lunch, but they stay; and that is the terror of Spanish painting!’



Alessandro Allori *Self-portrait* (c.1555)

In some of the most direct self-portraits where artists represent themselves as engrossed in the process of capturing their image in a mirror positioned at right angles to the pictorial plane, strange things may also be happening. In the case of Alessandro Allori's charming and gentle self-portrait (c.1555) he shows himself gazing down and to the left, presumably at a mirror that must be on our side of the picture plane. Allori paints himself in the act of applying paint to an invisible surface abutting the edge of the actual canvas and at right angles to it. The mirror and the pictorial surface seem hinged at this point, and in this way the artist makes explicit the notional hinge between the real and the represented. In this kind of image the artist captures the moment of creation, showing himself with the tools of his trade in hand. Even in the most apparently conventional self-portraits, where the head and shoulders are framed and the head is inclined to one side as if glancing into the mirror, we experience a kind of complicity not common to other genres of painting.

This is the case with Vincent Van Gogh (1888), Sassoferrato (c.1650), Sabine Lepsius (1885) and many others in this exhibition. (Shown below)



Because we know that this is a self-portrait our reading of the image is conditioned to the presence of the mirror, and this may be reinforced by other clues. The eyes of the artist purport to be meeting their own gaze in the mirror, the surface of the canvas becoming one with the surface of the mirror. The viewer then seems to look into a mirrored surface and, instead of his own reflection, sees the face and intense gaze of the artist returned. This most authentic moment of connection between artist and beholder, bound in an empathetic exchange, is also the strangest of deceptions.



Charley Toorop, *Three Generations* (1941–50).

A most compelling example of this is a self-portrait by Charley Toorop, *Three Generations* (1941–50). This painting is an example of the dynastic self-portrait in which the artist is depicted surrounded by family: here Toorop is overlooked by her son and the gigantic bronze head of her father, both also artists. Here the artist also deliberately introduces the conceit of the mirror. She paints herself gazing directly into the mirror, with paintbrush poised to dab a spot of colour onto the canvas that replicates the plane of the glass. The mirror and canvas are directly substituted, so that

the paint, dab by dab, could potentially obliterate both the reflected image and the viewer.



Richard Hamilton *Four Self-Portraits* (1990).

This idea is taken to its conceptual conclusion by Richard Hamilton in his *Four Self-Portraits* (1990). Each of the four panels shows a different viewpoint, making an oblique reference to Cubism. Here many layers of deception are at play. Hamilton has painted apparently expressive gestures on to a pane of glass through which his reflection is seen as if partly erased by paint. This image irresistibly brings to mind Henri-George Clouzot's film *Mystère* (1956), in which Picasso is photographed painting on to a sheet of transparent material, or Hans Namuth's film of Jackson Pollock painting on to a sheet of glass between him and the camera. The glass sheet can be seen as a substitute for Toorop's mirror. But Hamilton has worked with photography rather than a mirror, enabling him to rephotograph the overpainted portrait and then paint again. In the four panels the same apparently spontaneous gestures have been meticulously recreated, so that at first it is not clear which is a photograph and which is a painted copy.

Here, as in the painting by Johannes Gump, we are invited to explore many layers of representation or a hierarchy of authenticity. Hamilton takes the illusory nature of painting to an extreme, thereby exposing the mechanisms that condition our reading of the images and making us very aware of the structure of our looking. Although he is playing with painting and photography in a way that suggests a postmodern context, such deliberate strategies have long been employed by artists to produce, from the outset, a self-consciousness on the part of the viewer, particularly in looking at a self-portrait.



Sofonisba Anguissola *Self-portrait* (1550)

Take Sofonisba Anguissola's witty self-portrait (1550), for example. Here she shows herself being painted by her master, Bernardino Campi, who stands in front of a large canvas where Sofonsiba's completed image has taken shape. His hand with the maulstick (a rod used to steady the brush hand of the painter) rests gently on her breast where in all modesty it should never have been in life. The image of Sofonisba is slightly more prominent than that of Campi. She paints herself half a head higher than Campi in the composition and, although both figures turn to face us, her features are more brightly lit and framed by the open white collar of her blouse. She looks back at us with a trace of a smile. In acknowledging her master as having created her she clearly and playfully surpasses him. Her smile, directed at us, makes us feel complicit with the artist in an intimate and revealing personal moment.

Oil paint as a medium has an intimate connection with the self-portrait. The framed oil painting with its glossy surface has an affinity with the framed mirror that no other medium can quite replicate. There is also the advantage of oil paint's material bulk that so readily holds the trace of the hand and the structure of the image. Far from having a distancing effect, this evidence of manufacture makes us all the more susceptible to the sensuous quality of the medium and its material property of organic oiliness that is so compatible with the representation of flesh. At another level, oil painting exemplifies the metaphorical transformation that occurs when an artist takes earth (pigment) and creates the image of a subject with a spiritual dimension.

In the sixteenth century the Catholic Church was struggling with religious practices that the Protestants regarded as idolatrous. Established pilgrimage routes in Northern Italy, particularly in the vicinity of Florence and Pisa, connected sites where revered icons were housed. The attraction of these particular icons rested on their reputation of having been miraculously generated, by a saint or by the Virgin Mary.³ This attribution naturally necessitated the absence of detectable identity or personal touch. The trace of the artist's hand in many paintings after the Renaissance, and the acknowledgement of the artistic process testified by the brushmark, by contrast manifestly denied the possibility of the miraculous and affirmed human creativity. Paradoxically, it is this emphasis on materiality and authorship that has separated most painting since the sixteenth century from the ontological communion that applies to the medieval icon.⁴ The new emphasis is paradoxical because the trace of

the artist's hand is also indexical and tactile: we may not touch it with our hand or lip like the medieval pilgrim, but we seem to touch with the mind's eye.⁵



Georg Baselitz *Mannlicher Akt – Fingermalerei* 1971-73

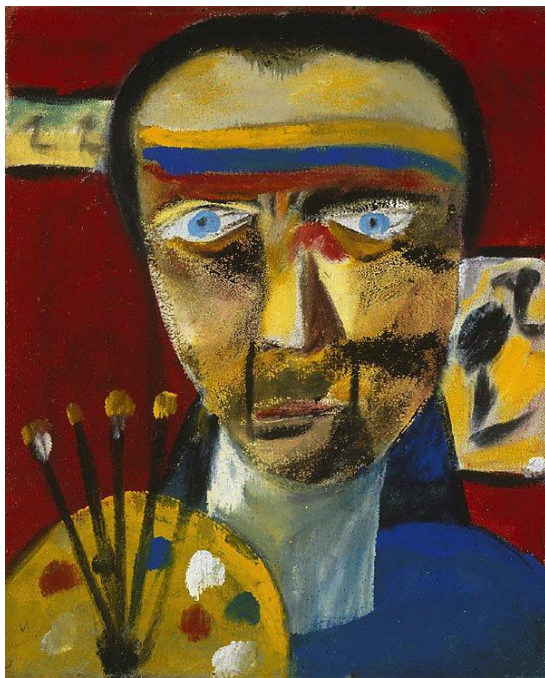
The way the paint is handled very often tells us more about the character of the artist or the art-historical context of the work in than iconography would. For example, in his 1971–3 self-portrait *Mannlicher Akt – Fingermalerei* Georg Baselitz created his own likeness by smearing oil paint onto the canvas with his fingers – perhaps the most extreme example possible of the hand of the artist as a trace of his literal presence.

In Pierre Bonnard's *Self-Portrait in Dressing-Room Mirror* (1940) the artist represents himself as self-absorbed. He is viewed as if from behind, reflected in the dressing-room mirror; yet he does not look into the mirror to meet our gaze, but rather down at his hands, concentrating on some small domestic task. He is wedged awkwardly between what is often taken to be the reverse of a canvas, but it could equally be the panelling of a door. Either way, the effect is to press his image up close to the surface. Bonnard uses strong colour here – ultramarine, yellow gold articulated by black and white – surprisingly harmonised into an atmospheric likeness. His strong, open brushwork and broken colour push the structure of representation to the point of collapse, yet we can still read this as a credible likeness. It could be argued that



Pierre Bonnard *Self-Portrait in Dressing-Room Mirror* (1940)

because he looks modestly away and avoids our gaze he is avoiding self-revelation, yet the manner of his working supports another interpretation: he may be reticent, shy and a very private person, but the vigorous brushwork suggests that the artist behind this reticence is very much in charge.



Sidney Nolan *Self-Portrait of 1943*

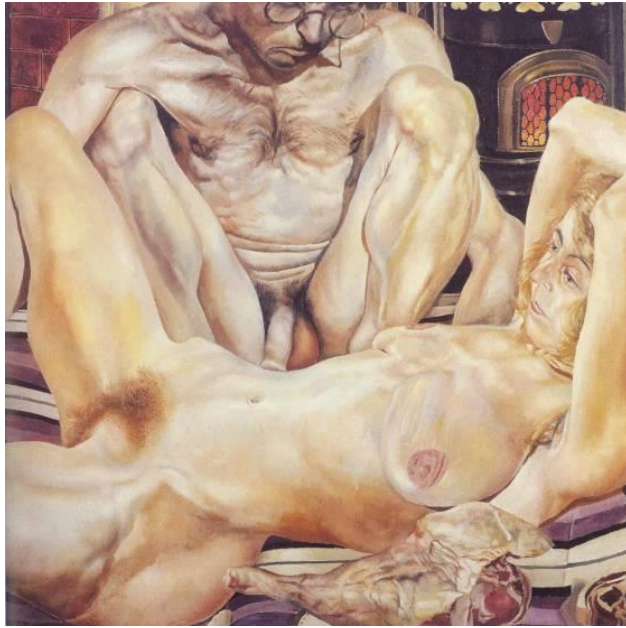
Sidney Nolan uses strong colour – red, yellow and blue with slashes of black – for his far from flattering *Self-Portrait of 1943*. This is even less an imitation of appearance than Bonnard's, yet the material quality of the work and the way the paint is applied speak volumes about the man behind the image. When he painted it Nolan was an army conscript stationed in the bleak Wimmera landscape; a year later he deserted and became a man on the run. Conflict is written all over this painting: Ripolin

(household enamel paint) is defiantly slashed across rough hessian sacking; the primary colours across his forehead look like war-paint and the palette and brushes are held up like a shield and a bunch of spears. The background is an intense, blood red broken by black and yellow forms representing his paintings in the studio. The background – like the stretcher bars/panelling in the Bonnard – force the subject up against the pictorial plane. This use of material and the manner of its application vividly express the artist's internal state at the time. The flattened space and blocked-out composition can be seen as a statement about modernism translated imperfectly into the Australian context, but fitting perfectly with the narrative about Nolan and his place in the world at that time. Australia was relatively isolated during the Second World War, and those experiments in modernism that did continue were typically skewed by what Ian Burn has referred to as 'creative misreadings'.⁶

The quality of the paint and the way it is applied can also stand in for qualities of the thing to be represented. Through his bodily experience the artist searches for a kind of equivalence between perceived qualities in nature and his own technique – not an imitation, but rather a way to evoke a particular response that is in some degree parallel to our experience of the thing itself. Lucian Freud, for example, makes much of his brushwork, to the point where it seems almost independent from the contours he is trying to describe. But it is because of this that we are compelled to resolve the image in the mind's eye, and are drawn into an uncomfortable complicity as our eye follows the tip of the brush as it 'feels' the flesh of the sitter.

This uneasy relationship between paint, gesture and subject is a particularly important factor when artists wish to draw our attention to the tension between mind and body. The starched white ruff separating head from body in so much sixteenth- and seventeenth-century portraiture is an accidental metaphor for the separation of the subject as a thinking being from the body. By contrast, in many of the paintings in this exhibition the fleshiness of the body is represented, either directly or through the metaphor of soft fabric against flesh, as if were augmenting it as a second skin. An open-necked shirt may reveal the throat and chest, hinting at movement across the boundary between the body's interior and exterior

Allegorical representation of creativity often supports the material evidence of creativity registered in the brushwork. The artist may wish to be seen as a member of a creative dynasty, like Charley Toorop, or claim status as father or mother to demonstrate creative powers, or even show themselves in the company of a creative muse, as Sir Stanley Spencer does in his self-portrait with Patricia Preece, his second wife (1937).



Stanley Spencer (self portrait with Patricia) *Leg of mutton nude* 1937

Here Spencer challenges social convention with a strikingly intimate depiction of his private world, a bohemian gesture echoing the tradition of Dionysian inspiration exemplified by Caravaggio or Lomazzo's self-portraits as Bacchus. Even when an artist's self-portrait seems to be the result of a genuine moment of self-regard or self-interrogation, it is invariably a kind of performance. In many cases, such as Caravaggio's *Self-Portrait as Sick Bacchus*, the role-playing is overt. With Johannes Gump, what appears to be a literal representation of the artist is in reality a complicated and conscious fabrication: it is virtually impossible not to self-consciously construct your own image.

In every self-portrait we discover individuals who wish to portray not just likenesses or even inner worlds, but concrete facts about who they were, what they could achieve and how they fitted in to the world around them. These things can in no way be conveyed by physical likeness alone. The existence of the painted image identifies the artist as the creator who can be judged as much by the quality of the painting and the trace of his hand as by the characterisation we suppose to be embedded in a portrait. In this exhibition we have included only oil paintings because of the centrality of the medium to the Renaissance tradition that gave shape to the genre. In the mid-twentieth century, however, the urgent need of the artist to communicate creativity to an audience found other means of expression. Performance art, and in particular the performing body, is founded on enacting similar definitions of the creative force to those we have already examined, such as the relationship of mind and body of the artist and the spectator as collaborator. Performance artists Marina Abramovic and Mike Parr explored the limits of the body and the mind's capacity to control it in their works of the 1970s. Parr literally put his endurance to the test when he held his finger in a flame for as long as he could bear it. Abramovic and her partner Ulay performed many endurance works in which the end of the performance came when their bodies could no longer obey the commands of the mind. These extreme performances were also enacted before audiences whose own endurance was severely tested, and in this way the work of art became a mutual or empathetic experience of artist and viewer.



Yves Klein *Leap* 1961

A more poetic performance of artistic creativity occurred in 1961 when Yves Klein leapt from a second story window in Paris. He called this performance *Leap into the Void*: Harry Schunk's photographs of Klein's enactment reveal just how brilliantly he expressed his transcendent aspiration. The images show Klein's body launched into space, giving every indication that he is defying gravity; his face perfectly expresses the passionate desire of a man to be free from material constraints. He was a practicing Rosicrucian and his life's work closely followed the spiritual aspirations of his faith: he believed that through spiritual exercise, humanity could help bring on the age of the immaterial, hence his constant visualisation of the void. Setting the spiritual concerns aside, Klein here enacts all our dreams of flying, however we wish to interpret them.

Like every other self-portrait, Yves Klein's performance reflects not just the artist but also something of each individual viewer. Intense moments of shared humanity between artists and spectators are often separated by centuries, yet they are experienced as immanent. It is this living presence of the artist through such shared moments that provides the most significant form of immortality through art. Unlike monuments, these compressed and urgent communications come alive for every viewer because they are remade through our own image of selfhood and the wonder of being.

NOTES

¹ Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago and London, 1990), especially 'The structure of beholding', pp.29ff.

² There has been a great deal written about this work, and in particular about the relationship of the viewer to the missing subject of the artist's painting, most notably Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (English trans. London, Routledge Classics, 1970). See also Svetlana Alpers, 'Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of *Las Meninas*', *Representation* (February 1983).

³ In a presentation at University of Sydney 2003 Megan Holmes described these icons and their mystical attribution, the research was to be published as: Holmes, Megan, *The Elusive Origins of the Cult of the Annunziata in Florence*, in *The Miraculous Image in Late Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, eds. E. Thunø and G. Wolf (Rome: Analecta Romana Instituti Danici in collaboration with L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2004).

⁴ The icon illustrates the truest example of a religious picture as defined by Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Truth and Method* [New York, Continuum, 1975], p.126): ‘Only the religious picture shows the full ontological power of the picture.... Thus the meaning of the religious picture is an exemplary one. In it we can see without doubt that a picture is not a copy of a copied being, but is in ontological communion with what is copied.’

⁵ ‘Touching with the eye’ is a phrase Marcel Duchamp used, but it has currency in surrealist thinking more generally, e.g. Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* 1928 published in English by: Urizen, New York 1977.

⁶ Ian Burn, ‘The re-appropriation of influence’, in *From the Southern Cross* (exh. cat. for the Biennale of Sydney, ABC Sydney, 1988).