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Fantasies of being somebody: Auto/biographic potential of posing conventions

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается соотношение индивидуального и коллективного в современной массовой фотографии, которая помещается в исторический контекст позирования для заказных портретов. Характеризующие эту традицию индивидуализация и (авто)биографический вымысел получили резкую оценку в теоретических статьях Александра Родченко и Осипа Брика конца 1920-х годов. Критикуя воспроизведение живописных клише в современной им фотографии, данные авторы видели в этих условных элементах ненужную красивость, заслоняющую и искажающую реальный мир. Реальность для Родченко и Брика определялась взаимодействием социальных сил, и достаточным основанием для осуждения фотографий было обыкновение изолировать портретируемого в обстановке студии. Центральное для рассуждений этих теоретиков понятие клише, или «штампа», в данной статье рассматривается, напротив, как имплицитное указание на коллективный аспект каждого отдельного портрета. В первой части статьи исторические прототипы современной массовой портретной фотографии анализируются с точки зрения формирования классовых и гендерных стереотипов. Идея имплицитной коллективности, присутствующей в стилистически близких изображениях, получает развитие во второй части статьи, где фотографическая серия Яны Романовой «W» рассматривается через призму концепций Лорен Берлант («задушевная публика», «женские жалобы») и Гейл Лезерби («авто/биография»).

Ключевые слова: позирование, портрет, авто/биография, клише, Яна Романова, задушевная публика, гламурный труд, женственность, красота, социальные сети, Александр Родченко, Осип Брик

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Fantasies of being somebody: Auto/biographic potential of posing conventions

Abstract. The article examines the tension between the individual and the collective in current mainstream photographic practice, which is considered within the long-term historical context of commercial portraiture. The individualizing tendencies of this representational tradition as well as its status as (auto)biographical fiction were astutely analyzed by the Russian avant-garde thinkers Alexander Rodchenko and Osip Brik. Criticizing the persistence of "painterly" clichés in studio photography of their time, they saw these conventional elements as something that obscures and distorts reality, substituting for it a beautiful picture. For these leftist theorists, reality was primarily defined by the interplay of social forces, and isolating the subject within the picture frame was sufficient grounds for their disapproval. Taking up their notion of cliché applied particularly to posing, this article proposes to view it, instead, as an entry point into the usually invisible collective dimension of each individual portrait. The first section of the article discusses historical precedents to current mainstream photographic portraiture in terms of class- and gender-specific pressures on the sitters which have contributed to the homogenization of the genre's visual canon. The suggestion to view stylistically similar images of individuals as expressing a latent collectivity is developed in the second part of the article, which analyzes Jana Romanova's photo-

graphic series *W* through the theoretical framework borrowed from Lauren Berlant ("intimate public", "female complaint") and Gayle Letherby ("auto/biography").

Keywords: posing, portrait, auto/biography, cliché, Jana Romanova, intimate public, glamour labour, femininity, beauty, social media, Alexander Rodchenko, Osip Brik

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In 1928, Alexander Rodchenko, a pioneering Russian visual artist, published an article which started with an account of his dispute with an unnamed opponent concerning painting's and photography's respective value as a medium of portraiture. The anonymous interlocutor argued that a painted portrait presented the "sum total" of characteristic moments distinguishing a particular individual, whereas a photograph gave only a fleeting and imprecise impression of the person at an arbitrarily chosen moment. Rodchenko, on the other hand, pointed out that painting was never objective as it presented an idealized version of its subject, in contrast to which he emphasized the documentary value of photography. However, the idea of a "sum total" apparently appealed to him as well, so he proposed a more modern and "truthful" alternative to the traditional (painted) portrait — a photographic archive which would include all the documented moments of an individual's life:

> It has to be argued firmly that with the emergence of photodocuments the notion of a single irrefutable portrait is out of the question. What is more, a man is not just one sum, he is many sums at once, and these sums can drastically contradict one another[1].

The idea of a multiplicity of images necessary to create a "truthful representation" (*vraie représentation*) of a model had already been voiced many decades earlier by André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri [1862: 102], who, ironically, was largely responsible for photography's adoption of the conventions of a painted portrait. For Disdéri, potential diversity of images consisted, above all, in the variety of angles, as well as the model's poses and facial expressions, whereas the temporal dimension was barely present — in his photographic manual Disdéri recommended a device which allowed for taking several pictures directly one after the other, thus "com-

[1] "Нужно твердо сказать, что с возникновением фотодокументов не может быть речи о каком-либо едином непреложном портрете. Больше того, человек не является одной суммой, он — многие суммы, иногда совершенно противоположные" [Rodchenko 2007: 335]. All translations from the Russian and the French are mine, unless otherwise specified.

pressing" the time of the sitting. For Rodchenko, the passage of time was more important: to create a veracious "sum total", he urged photographers to take snapshots of a person "at different times and in different circumstances" [Rodchenko 2007: 337]. As an example of such a documentary "portrait" he pointed to all the existing photographs of Lenin, which, taken together with the revolutionary leader's books and notes, recordings of his voice and film footage, constituted a true representation of his personality, which no painted likeness could ever attempt to rival.

For Osip Brik, writing a month earlier for the same journal as Rodchenko, photography was opposed to painting in yet another significant respect. Painted portraits, he claimed, isolated the subjects from their social milieu, placing them in artificial, sometimes entirely fictional settings. This view decidedly does not do justice to the vast variety of portraiture throughout history, across diverse art schools, traditions and movements, but it is mostly true of commercial portraits in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, painted as well as photographic. Brik compared this visual convention to "literary biographies" in that both genres engaged in aggrandizing the protagonist and nurturing individualistic fantasies[2], highlighting the agency of a particular person while downplaying social connectivity and interdependence [Brik 2007: 330]. Instead of perpetuating this approach, Brik urged photographers and writers to engage with collective subjects and focus on their interactions.

The way Brik upends the value judgements habitually attached to the notions of the individual and the masses, though predictable in the early Soviet context, in the current neoliberal climate can well appear intellectually refreshing. What dates his perspective, however, is his insistence on seeing the individual and the collective as opposed rather than interrelated and mutually constitutive. Furthermore, Brik seems interested only in the masses taken literally, as a crowd — the new subject of visual representation whose advent he hails. In contrast, I would like to focus on the masses as emergent and dispersed collectivities coalescing in common affects and fantasies that mass culture traffics in. In doing so, I draw on Lauren Berlant's notion of intimate publics, which "operate when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires", and where "all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience" [Berlant 2008: 5, vii]. In this sense, a portrait of an isolated individual does not have to be opposed to a representation of the masses — on the contrary, it can function as a site of collective longing.

In order to show how this longing takes shape, while obfuscating its collective origin with the fantasy of a unique self, the article proposes a two-fold approach. The first part focuses on the visual clichés of commercial portraiture in modernity, notably posing, interrogating the interplay between repetition and distinction it reveals. I discuss pre-photographic functioning of conventional poses and their new meanings in "the age of mechanical reproduction", their denigration in theoretical writings on photography and their justification in posing guides. I emphasize the continuity of commercial portrait tradition from painting to photography in terms of the sitter's social aspirations and agency vis-à-vis those of the artist, and demonstrate the pertinence, with due reservations, of Brik's and Rodchenko's critique for

[2] It is noteworthy that when studies of life writing began to coalesce as a research field in the mid-twentieth century, it initially promoted the same view of the subject that Brik had criticized, focusing on autobiographies as creations of "great men" [Smith, Watson 1998: 7–8].

current mainstream portrait photography. In the second part of the article, I expand these avant-garde theorists' understanding of photography, portraiture and collectivity by turning to the work of the contemporary artist Jana Romanova, whose project *W* interrogates the role of posing in the formation of the photographic subject. I argue that Romanova's work not only deconstructs visual conventions and gender stereotypes of popular culture, but also registers the specific experience of trying to fit in with them, which turns *W* into a collective feminine autobiography.

Whose clichés? The perpetuity of posing conventions

One notion that defined the existing tradition of visual representation for Osip Brik in 1928 was that of a cliché. Partly a powerful rhetorical device, which allowed the author to distance himself from the "old" or "bourgeois" art and promote his own version of the myth about the "originality of the avant-garde" (to use Rosalind Krauss's famous formulation), at the same time cliché is indeed a useful term to discuss commercial portraiture. The original Russian word used by Brik (*shtamp*) refers to a rubber stamp or impressing block, suggesting a helpful metaphor for the portrait's subject being pressed into a desired (and highly conventional) shape — when posing for a picture, this can happen quite literally, as I will show below. On the other hand, the English word *cliché* has its origin in French, where it used to mean, among other things, a photograph. This serves as a useful reminder of the inherently serial, repetitive nature of photographic practice, where the notion of an image's "original" had been blurred long before the digital era. A photograph's reproducibility transcends the purely technical possibility of printing numerous images from the same negative and encompasses particular ways of seeing, framing and ordering the world [Sontag 2001], including human bodies and faces as well as their perceived relationship to identity. The body itself is both consciously and unintentionally trained to perform in front of the camera, which thus becomes a powerful tool for articulating and disseminating "universal" body standards.

I use the concept of a "universal" body following in the footsteps of Oksana Gavrishina, who posited it as one of the key features of Western urban modernity, when in medical, anthropological, criminological and other contexts "any body [could] be described by means of the same 'universal' categories" [Gavrishina 2011: 33]. In an important addition to scientific metrics and terminology, photography provided a visual language which could be used to set the parameters of corporeal universality and register variations within them. At the same time, as Gavrishina has argued, the universal body of commercial photographic portraiture was at least partly modeled after earlier, painterly paragons, largely shaped by the norms of aristocratic self-presentation [Ibid.: 35–36]. This contributed to the aspirational function of studio portraits through which an increasing number of subjects from virtually all walks of life could acquire visible tokens of their "gentility" and urban sophistication.

To some extent, such democratization of portraiture had already been happening long before the invention of photography, though obviously on a considerably smaller scale: painters catering to a widening clientele of small gentry and middle-class sitters often used almost invariable compositions, poses and effects of drapery. In the eighteenth century, it was not uncommon for a portraitist to add only the sitter's face to a separately painted, "standard" body. Noting that sometimes the

piece of canvas showing the face was "sewn or stuck into position on a larger canvas bearing the body", Robin Simon concludes: "not the least remarkable aspect of this whole business is how very seldom we are actually made to feel aware of the production-line process that may lie behind the elegant, and apparently undisturbed, surface of the portrait" [Simon 1987: 98]. Apart from the painter's technical dexterity and the material properties of oil paint, which facilitate the creation of a smooth, uninterrupted texture, this effect highlights the assimilating power of vision, able to synthetize the subject from pre-fabricated, randomly associated parts.

This tension between the notion of the self and the conventional, standardized elements which are mobilized to represent it, animates my analysis. At the same time, I am interested in the "seams" which hold together such disparate elements in the case of photography, where all the parts may actually come from one and the same body, but have to be adjusted so as to fit the representational canon. Not infrequently the constructedness of the posed body becomes discernible in the image itself, its awkwardness a keen indicator of societal and attitudinal changes, as Oksana Gavrishina and Olga Annanurova have shown with regard to Soviet photography [Gavrishina 2011; Annanurova 2018], while Galina Orlova [2019] has explored a similar set of issues in the context of post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s. My project differs in that I focus on "perfect" embodiments where the subject appears to merge with the aesthetic and social standard seamlessly and completely, leaving no traces of adaptation to it. Looking at images in order to see what is not visible may seem a pointless, if not outright delusional task, but I am inspired by feminist theorists' call "to look for gaps and silences in texts, to read away from coherence" [Smith, Watson 1998: 20]. Though what one chooses to show is perfectly valid as an autobiographical statement, no discussion of it can be complete without paying attention to that which remains withheld and suppressed.

Identifying an element of a portrait as clichéd can be a starting point in disassembling a seemingly perfect and coherent image. A cliché does not exist within a picture, but requires it to be juxtaposed with other visual sources for the recurring features to become visible. Such viewing opens up a virtual space across images where their interrelatedness can be articulated as a form of collectivity, overcoming the individualist fiction of portraiture condemned by Osip Brik. That Brik himself had not done so may be accounted for, among other things, by the way Russian avant-garde theorists conceptualized (or rather, failed to conceptualize) the photographic subject. Though a portrait arguably presents the outcome of interactions and negotiations between the artist and the model, both Brik and Rodchenko focused on the role of the photographer, whom they found guilty of taking up painterly clichés instead of developing a new visual language. In contrast, the subjects of portraiture are imagined as strangely passive, having little to no say in how they are represented — their job is simply to be there, so that the photographer might capture aspects of their being[3].

[3] This could be interpreted as yet another instance of "the tendency of modernist discourses of photography to collapse the meaning of any photograph into the photographer's supposed inner thoughts or intentions", discussed by Amelia Jones, who draws on Allan Sekula's pioneering essay [Jones 2002: 951]. It is ironic that Rodchenko and Brik, intent as they were on demythologizing photography and photographic subjects, should still contribute considerably to the mythologizing of the photographer.

While Disdéri similarly believed in the photographer's ownership of and control over the image, he reluctantly recognized the sitters' agency, which for him was a source of annoyance and creative disappointment:

> Almost all the people who have themselves photographed also have their favourite attitudes, which they studied beforehand in front of the mirror; in this way they have developed for themselves a comportment contrary to their nature. ‹…› This pretentiousness results in stiff, affected, mechanical portraits, whose least deficiency is to distort the true character of the model completely, and consequently, to lack in resemblance and in beauty [Disdéri 1862: 279–280].

Disdéri holds the sitters fully accountable for clichéd representations, whereas the photographer, in his opinion, can contribute a unique, innovative vision, creating an image which would be both beautiful and true to the subject's character. In this description of their interaction, it is clearly the photographer who has privileged access to the knowledge about the sitter's self, whereas the latter is deluded by mere surface effects. Discussing the relationship between self-portraiture and autobiography, Laura Marcus points to the deeply entrenched cultural expectation that "the visual artist, like the literary autobiographer, turns inwards to find his or her self-image, rather than merely representing the mirrored self". She goes on to show how this understanding is disrupted by photography, since "the self in the photograph is seen as another, as if from the outside" [Marcus 2018: 90, 98]. In this context, Disdéri's rhetoric not only elevates the photographer to the same artistic status as the painter, but endows him with an ability to help those fixated on the mirror image to rediscover their inner self, as if he created their self-portraits for them.

Nowadays, as the situation of being photographed has moved beyond the studio and become virtually ubiquitous, the figure of the professional photographer as the bearer of artistic (and epistemic) authority is often irrelevant, and the models are left to themselves — a shift clearly registered in the emergence and proliferation of online posing guides targeted at the sitters rather than the photographers. The preparations censured by Disdéri for yielding "mechanical" (*automatiques*) and "affected" (*guindés*) portraits are no longer criticized, but actively recommended:

> …this might feel really weird at first, but that whole 'practice makes perfect' thing also applies to looking photogenic. Hop in front of a mirror and try out different poses, angles and facial expressions to see what works for you. You'll be much more comfortable striking a pose you've pre-planned than positioning your body randomly and hoping for the best [Stiefvater 2017].

The sitter's agency is affirmed not so much in the face of the photographer's alternative vision (though this is still sometimes the case) as with regard to the camera's non-human view — for, in David Campany's words, "even if we do not pose, the camera will pose us, perhaps in an unexpected way" [Campany 2006: 107]. It is noteworthy that while Disdéri spoke of distorting one's "true character" by striking unnatural, pretentious poses, posing guides nowadays focus on the distortions produced by the camera, to counteract which posing conventions seem to

aim for in the first place. One of the most frequently voiced concerns is that "the camera adds 10 pounds", i. e. makes the subject look wider — an effect that can be corrected by turning the body slightly away from the camera: "This angle can help you appear more slimmer [sic!] and vibrant" [Wasim 2022]. The repetitive nature of photographic subjects' preferred attitudes could therefore be called "mechanical" not in the sense that may be inferred from Disdéri's writing — that of people becoming like automata themselves, — but rather in recognition of the technological conditions of image-making: similar poses emerge as a response to the same kind of distortions.

Such a technocentric view of posing conventions, however, obscures their continuity with those of a much earlier tradition of painted portraits. Considering that some poses have remained virtually unchanged, such as the "Renaissance elbow" discussed by Joaneath Spicer [1991], which by now has become a fixture of glamorous photography, it is essential to look at these precedents in order to properly contextualize the more recent photographic clichés. We need to interrogate the "differentiated" bodily canon [Gavrishina 2011: 34] before we can see how some of its elements become "universalized" in photographic portraits.

Numerous researchers have pointed to the connections between the conventions of early modern portraiture and everyday norms of elite comportment and self-presentation. Robin Simon effectively compared the poses in eighteenth-century British and American portraits to those described and pictured in dance master François Nivelon's 1737 manual, *The Rudiments of Genteel Behavior* [Simon 1987: 73]. Similarly, Harry Berger has looked at early modern books of manners in order to problematize the notion of the sitter's "true character", which had long dominated discourses about portraiture (above we have seen Disdéri use it to claim authority over his subjects). According to Berger, the proliferation of courtesy books in the Renaissance shows that while physiognomic readings of appearance remained highly influential, there arose a conviction that they could (and ought to) be tricked by "voluntary performance of 'involuntary' soul signs" while presenting oneself to others:

> The representation of an inner self can no longer be left or delegated to nature; it gets promoted as a skill to be cultivated, a technique of performance essential to successful participation in public life; something princes, courtiers, statesmen, lawyers, merchants, prelates, doctors, and even artists and poets have to learn — not to mention their daughters, wives, and mothers [Berger 1994: 97].

In portraiture, it becomes the sitter's task to anticipate the viewer's gaze and "the fantasies of the 'internal core' we inscribe on the surface of the representation we interpret" [Berger 2000: 20], and to enact (or, occasionally, subvert) those fantasies. In this, the portrait's subject can be assisted or hindered by the painter or, later, the photographer, who may have, as Disdéri's criticism of rehearsed poses testifies, a competing vision of the "truth". At any rate, "the advent of myself as other" [Barthes 1981: 12], which Roland Barthes associated with the photograph, for Berger had happened many centuries earlier, in Renaissance portraiture, which sought "to inscribe the inside on the outside", creating "images of correct psyche, soul, or personality" [Berger 1994: 94]. By physically embodying this ideal in the

portrait, "It is as an icon, an other (not a self), that [the sitter] gives himself [sic!] to be observed, admired, commemorated, and venerated" [Ibid.: 106].

While the quoted fragment explicitly focuses on male sitters, portraiture offers a similar "armor of an alienating identity"[4] [Berger 1994: 113] to women. If anything, feminine "armor" can be called even more solid, as portraits "of women tend to be less mimetic and more idealizing than those of men" [Ibid.: 107]. This is as true of the Renaissance likenesses to which Berger refers as it is of current mass photography: the predominance of posing guides explicitly targeting women as well as the rare examples of male and female posing guides compiled by one and the same author clearly show that women are expected to work harder to perform the aesthetic ideal and there are many more restrictions imposed on them. Apart from carefully studying their "angles" and choosing poses that will allow them, improbably, to appear both slim and curvy at the same time, women have to compose their image, in line with the classical canon, from perfect fragments. The following piece of advice allows us to understand how this principle can be applied to "realist" portrait photography:

> Here's the truth — the human body is both beautiful and awkward. Making each part of the body look good in a portrait is a challenge. The hair can look great but the eyebrows are off. The legs can look great but the chin is sticking too far out. Body shots can be complicated in this way but there are small changes or adjustments you can make to help capture a more natural look [Kelly 2019].

As numerous manuals reveal, posing is seen as the key tool for "editing" the image before it has even been taken. This representation of the self is not dissimilar to that produced by an autobiographical text — "a truth restructured and revised in its telling" [Gilmore 1994: 84]. In both cases "lived experience is shaped, revised, constrained, and transformed by representation" [Ibid.: 85]. In contrast to an autobiography, a diary presupposes an open-ended approach to subjectivity as being constantly (re)written [Lejeune 2009; Smith, Watson 1998: 31]. It is noteworthy that the logic of social media appears to favour precisely such a mode of self-presentation, unfolding in time as new posts are being added without an overarching narrative framework or direction of development.

Tellingly, some influential blogging platforms of the 2000s, most notably LiveJournal, but also local services such as the Russian Diary.ru, had names explicitly referring to the practice of diary writing. Projects dedicated to posting entries from Samuel Pepys' *Diary* online "in real time"[5] also seem to testify to the affinity of social media like Twitter to historical precedents of journal keeping. As technological developments increasingly facilitated sharing visual content in addition to (or even instead of) textual material, there apparently arose an

[4] Berger borrows this phrase, repeatedly used in his article, from Jacques Lacan's famous work on the "mirror stage" of individual development [Lacan 2005: 3]. While I have my reservations with regard to Berger's psychoanalytic interpretation of early modern subjects, his arguments sound much more convincing if applied to current photographic practice, with the representational anxiety he ascribes to dukes and duchesses clearly articulated in posing guides apparently targeting less socially elevated personages.

[5] I owe this information to Anna Stogova's research published in this issue, see pp. 177–207.

opportunity of creating online archives of diverse images of the self, presenting it, to use Rodchenko's words, as "not just one sum, [but] many sums at once", which may "drastically contradict one another". When Instagram first appeared, it seemed to answer this purpose perfectly: "the initial way users interacted with it lent the images posted to Instagram a quality of spontaneity and a somewhat tangible connection to a user's offline life, as their posts mediated their experiences in real time" [De Perthuis, Findlay 2019: 224]. However, by the end of the 2010s this perceived authenticity has been largely compromised by commercial uses and heavy editing, which made most blogs look like extensions of fashion magazines.

It was in this climate of intense (self-)scrutiny generating a push towards increasingly standardized and airbrushed self-presentation that photographic portraits abandoned their diary-like spontaneity and redeployed century-old posing conventions to project a consolidated "autobiographic" self. While images have become a major vehicle of storytelling on social media and a key tool of making sense of the self in relation to the world, the level of control and stylization they tend to exhibit largely precludes viewing this self as a dynamic process. Instead, photographic portraits serve as visual equivalents of (auto)biographical fiction in that it is carefully curated and complete in itself. Time both flows through the feed and is suspended in the perfect moment captured by every photograph.

Likewise, though the Internet and social media in particular seem to underscore the "hypertextual", networked nature of all cultural phenomena, including those of the pre-digital era [Rocamora 2013: 156], photographic portraits posted online tend to downplay and conceal other people's (and non-human agents') involvement in shaping each individual blogger's looks and life. In this way, they match Brik's description of portraits-cum-biographies which edit out all the "unnecessary" details in order to create the fiction of the individual. Expanding the avant-garde writer's understanding of collectivity, which presupposed, quite literally, showing numerous people within a single photographic frame in explicit interaction with each another, the following section of the article proposes to explore the virtual space between images that had been hinted at but never fully recognized in Brik's use of the notion of cliché.

Auto/biographic chronicle of longing: Jana Romanova's *W*

In their insightful analysis of self-presentation on Instagram, Karen de Perthuis and Rosie Findlay point to the telling silences and omissions in the kind of imagery an influencer typically shows: "we see the cavalcade of places she poses in, but none of the journey taken to travel there" [De Perthuis, Findlay 2019: 221]. While "journey" in this quote refers primarily to moving through space, the same is true of the temporal and social dimensions of a celebrity blogger's self-fashioning: she presents herself as always already "there" — at the highest peak of her career, beauty and popularity — and not in the process of getting thither (or, for that matter, being or going anywhere else). What would it look like to foreground what is typically hidden, to tell a story of becoming — or, even more strikingly, not becoming — the glamorous self that everyone apparently wants to embody? In search in an answer, I turn to the work of Jana Romanova, a multimedia artist whose work in the 2010s

engaged with the notions of identity and belonging, addressing, among other themes, cultural constructs of femininity and their impact on women's lived experiences.

In several projects, Romanova explores cultural obsessions with slimness and weight control, feminine "grace" and attractiveness — obsessions which the artist shares to some degree, hence her projects' confessional element, carefully offset with ironic distancing. Romanova's work is participatory: the artist creates a space where she can discuss a common concern with her subjects or let them express themselves while minimizing her own intervention. Whether or not she can directly relate to the subjects' emotions and experiences, she aims to investigate the collective aspects of seemingly private feelings, strivings, and desires. As she put it in an interview, "the main task is not to describe my experience, but to show how this experience is shared by others, and to what extent I am part of the society that brought me up, with all its problems, dramas, and all the madness which is happening around" [Gusarova 2019: 313]. Such an approach recognizes the inextricable entanglement of the biographical with the autobiographical, to reflect which the sociologist Gayle Letherby suggests the spelling *auto/biography*, where the slash stands for more than simply "and / or", instead serving to join the self and the other as mutually co-producing [Letherby 2014: 46]. It is as auto / biography — talking about her own experience through others and vice versa — that I will consider Jana Romanova's work, particularly her project *W*[6], whose very title (read as "double you") seems to favour such interpretation.

According to the artist[7], her primary inspiration for *W* came from fashion magazines and the way (female) readers interacted with them: how "ordinary" women projected themselves into fashion narratives and how fashion imagery shaped women's view of themselves and their strategies of self-presentation. But even in 2011, when the project was started, the type of images addressed by Romanova in *W* was not restricted exclusively to the fashion press, but had a much wider currency within "euphoric" (to borrow Roland Barthes' term) systems such as advertising [Barthes 1990: 261; 2002: 68]. Nowadays, with the prevalence of such glamorous aesthetics on social media, Romanova's project can be seen as interrogating the notion of (self-)portrait in popular visual culture, and particularly the role of posing clichés in mediating the expression of subjectivity.

For this photographic series, the artist asked each of the participants to adopt a mode of self-presentation which makes them feel beautiful, in order to create successful portraits. Some have chosen to appear together with their loved ones, but the majority are photographed on their own, striking dramatic poses which resemble fashion shoots or pinups. The resulting pictures would have looked like typical images from a young woman's personal photographic archive or social media profile — but for the presence of the artist, who appears in each photo studiously copying the subject's attitude. The immediate impression is amusing: the rather heavily built artist seems to parody the dominant standards of beauty by emphasizing their incongruity in the context of most women's appearance and lifestyle. However, this is not a body-positive project encouraging everyone to accept themselves as they are and to stop pursuing the impossible aesthetic ideal. Even as she deconstructs and defamiliarizes the visual canon of femininity, Romanova testifies to its power,

[6] See the artist's website: https://janaromanova.com/wproject.
[7] Jana Romanova interviewed by the author, 26 May 2019.

which registers in the confident expression of her subjects as well as in her own discordant awkwardness. Importantly, both dispositions share the same level of "reality" within each photograph, unlike the popular comedic template "Instagram vs Reality", where glamorous pictures are contrasted with their "real-life" equivalents, obscuring the fact that the latter are equally staged and therefore cannot provide access to any unmediated reality.

W is one among several projects which show the artist in the process of attempting to change herself in order to meet some external criteria of personal and social worth — in this case, by learning to look beautiful in pictures. Two of her other projects explore similar themes: in *The Goddess Guide* (2016–2017) Romanova visits life coaches and spiritual teachers who promise to help her develop her femininity, while in *Losing August 31* (2015–2016) she tries various faddish diets and other extreme ways to lose weight. When I asked her how serious she was in these attempts and whether critical reflection got in the way of her ability to engage with these putative goals, the artist replied: "there is simultaneously a desire to get involved and a critical distance, and they are in permanent conflict with each other. And it is ultimately this conflict that I'm interested in exploring" [Gusarova 2019: 327]. Whereas for the viewers the humorous elements of the above-mentioned projects may be more obvious, for the artist herself the performative aspect of her work involves suspension of disbelief and embracing of irrational, contradictory drives.

Such desperate, if at times ironic, longing for the impossible lies at the heart of what Lauren Berlant, in her eponymous book, has termed "the female complaint". Women are conditioned to see love as the meaningful core of their lives, which makes them simultaneously profoundly dissatisfied with how romantic fantasy plays out in reality and hungry for melodramatic stories which reaffirm the "truth" of impossible scenarios and the worth of even frustrated longings. Berlant concentrates on narrative structures in literature and film, but also pays attention to visual imagery and embodied experiences (though those, too, are accessed predominantly through verbal texts). Thus, discussing Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Berlant argues that the intent, yearning gaze one of the novel's main female characters focuses on the other reveals a desire "to wear her way of wearing her body, like a prosthesis or a fetish" [Berlant 2008: 109]. Though this instance pertains particularly to the phenomenon of racial passing, Berlant's conclusion can be generalized to other situations as well: in cultures which value women primarily for their bodies, and value some bodies more than others, this way of "wanting someone's body" seems an inescapable element of femininity as a genre. "To call an identity like a sexual identity a genre is to think about it as something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations," Berlant explains [Ibid.: 4]. Jana Romanova's *W* creates a visual inventory of some of these variations, and the enigmatic one-letter title of the work can also stand for "woman" or "womanliness", while it underscores the repetitiveness or doubling inherent to this gender-as-genre.

Indeed, the doubling of the female subject's figure in every image from *W*, together with the project's serial nature, underscores the clichéd character of the feminine self which is represented in the pictures and the central role photography plays in the creation and perpetuation of these generic clichés. The images we see

are copies of the episodes of posing, and by copying the subject's poses the artist engages in an embodied "photographic" practice — she performs a "photograph" of her subjects. What is more, it can be argued that the subjects themselves are doing exactly the same: "When we pose we make ourselves into a frozen image. We make ourselves into a photograph, in anticipation of being photographed" [Campany 2006: 107]. This image is inherently imitative: it is self-referential (both in the sense of referring to a certain idea of the self and by reenacting rehearsals in front of the mirror), but at the same time it is a copy of countless other pictures. Posing guides typically present such model images the reader should imitate, and some of their authors explicitly tout the value of imitation:

> Choose a famous "style icon", preferably from the last century, and start to imitate her ‹…› For instance, Grace Kelly [or] Audrey Hepburn ‹…› Gradually, your own style will start to develop, you will begin to understand which poses suit you better, and then your photos in turn will become paragons of style[8].

By drawing attention to this repetitive, imitative nature of all instances of self-presentation, *W* ("double you") seems to be telling the viewer: you are, in fact, a double; your "self" is just one element in an infinite series of copies.

Interestingly, the viewers of at least one exhibition of Romanova's work ("(Beside) Oneself" at Metenkov's House, Ekaterinburg, March 7 — June 16, 2019) responded enthusiastically by joining in this parade of imitation: they posed in front of one photograph printed to match the size of gallery wall and had pictures of themselves taken[9]. Once visualized, the process of imitation set off a wave of mimetic contagion: the visitors imitated the artist imitating her model, although, being in the foreground, the viewers inevitably look as if they were sources of the attitude rather than imitators, which points to the indistinguishability of "original" and "copy" in this circuit of images.

In this way an intimate public was mobilized within the gallery space and even captured in some amateur photographs later posted on the visitors' social media — a public united in an ironic defiance of the compulsion to imitate they could not help feeling. At the same time, *W* points to the existence of another public, usually invisible as a collective: the audience of posing guides and women's magazines, the consumers of images and advice, all the women currently at work perfecting their bodies and their posing skills, desperately wanting to be beautiful, to be loved, to be valued.

Romanova's own character in *W* illustrates all these frustrated efforts. In contrast to her subjects, who have fully incorporated the conventions of femininity as a genre by mastering the art of posing and recognizing themselves in representational clichés, the artist's figure projects an uncertain, barely readable message. Turning into a "photograph", a copy, she can neither claim any meaning separate from those

[8] "Выбери знаменитую 'икону стиля', лучше из прошлого столетия, и начни ей подражать ‹…› Например, Грейс Келли [или] Одри Хепберн ‹…› Постепенно у тебя начнет вырабатываться собственный стиль, придет понимание, в каких позах ты получаешься лучше, и тогда уже твои фотографии станут образцом стиля" [Vern'e 2013].

[9] Jana Romanova interviewed by the author, 26 May 2019.

her subjects convey, nor assert her ownership of those meanings. Superficially, the images from *W* can be said to resemble "before" and "after" pictures featured in many posing guides in order to illustrate typical posing "mistakes" and ways to avoid them. However, unlike this type of imagery, which shows the effects of improved posing on one and the same model, in *W* the "phases" of transformation are embodied by two different people, which raises questions about the very possibility of change. Though posing guides typically claim that "everyone can shine like a star" with the help of "a couple of basic poses" [14 Tips 2017], at the same time special recommendations are often addressed to stouter women, whose bodies allegedly require special efforts in order to look acceptable (an absolute minimum being to turn further away from the camera while posing together with a slimmer friend or relative). *W* belies the ostensible inclusivity of beauty culture, demonstrating that, just like clothes, a pose may not "fit" all bodies equally well.

Clothes, in turn, play an important part in *W* — as well as in posing guides, according to which dress is expected to complement the pose in its interplay of concealing and revealing, emphasizing the figure's "advantages" and dissimulating its "drawbacks". Loose-fitting garments are routinely discommended in posing guides as producing a "shapeless" silhouette. On the other hand, demonstrating too much skin is considered vulgar and larger-sized women in particular are advised to strategically cover "certain areas" with clothes which would give their bodies a smoother, seemingly firmer surface. Defying such recommendations, Romanova in *W* poses in all the images with bare legs, wearing the same loose top of nondescript colour. According to the artist, this garment creates unity throughout the series, turning her into a "character" who is instantly recognizable through her costume. Later the same character was featured in *Losing August 31*, where imitation of other people's example or prescriptive model was also a key issue and Romanova's character similarly failed to achieve the "after" state by losing weight, remaining caught in the permanent "before". Her costume in these two series highlights the interconnectedness of body size, clothes and pose, as it draws attention to the "problem" which is the character's legs. As Romanova explains in an interview, since childhood she was often told in the family that while legs were the only beautiful part of a woman's body, hers left much to be desired [Gusarova 2019: 326]. By exhibiting this "deficiency" in her photographs, the artist draws on the experience of body-shaming common to most women. Its auto/biographical traces are equally visible on the surface of all bodies in *W*, in what Romanova's character shows as well as in what other subjects conceal with smooth athleisure wear or ruffles of long full skirts. Similar experiences also shape the viewers' responses to these images, which the artist invites us to reflect upon.

Demonstrating what the prevailing aesthetic taste urges us to hide extends in *W* from "unattractive" body parts to the very process of learning to pose, which is normally relegated to the backstage of our social life, involving exercises in front of the mirror when no one can see and countless instantly deleted "bad" pictures. By embodying this preparatory stage, Romanova's character not only emphasizes her own incapacity to look conventionally beautiful, but also hints at the difficulty in seeking to coincide with one's own "perfect" picture at all times. Her figure, the "double you", emerges in *W* like a shadow of failure haunting every "successful" image.

In this way, the artist questions the notion of a single, unified self which the conventions of mainstream photography purport to portray. *W* reveals the precariousness of the modern self's visual presentation, oscillating between the not-yet-being-oneself of the unwillingness or inability to fit into the dominant aesthetic canon and, on the other hand, transcending the self in a subject who has internalized this canon so completely that she no longer represents herself so much as channels the utterly impersonal imperative to (work hard in order to) be beautiful. This work has been theorized as glamour labour, and Elizabeth Wissinger, who studied this phenomenon with regard to fashion models, has at the same time noted "a confusing extension of glamour labor to the general public" in the era of social media [Wissinger 2015: 148]. Wissinger's remark on the status of glamour labour as "a form of right living" [Ibid.: 160] brings to the fore the auto / biographic significance of conventional photographic portraits — they do indeed "sum up" the whole life spent working on one's look as they present its ultimate achievement.

Romanova's *W*, however, complicates this story by making visible the moments and images which are typically purged out of the perfect picture we want to project. This alternative kind of visual "life writing", among other things, raises the question about the ownership of clichés, which I have explored in the previous section of this article. When one's photographed self completely coincides and merges with a conventional mode of representation, is it the subject who owns the cliché, or perhaps the other way round? Is such a merger even possible, or is there always some other self which remains beyond the picture frame? By letting this other ("double you") enter the picture, *W* suggests that a person involved in glamour labour is as alienated from his or her "product" as any other worker, though this split is camouflaged by the embodied nature of both the work and its outcome, which therefore seems to be about one's "self".

Lauren Berlant comes to a similar conclusion discussing female stardom through the example of the protagonist (played by Lana Turner) of Douglas Sirk's 1959 *Imitation of Life*: "Lora Meredith becomes her own prosthesis, projecting herself into simulacral public spaces where the commodity, representation, and the body meet" [Berlant 2008: 133]. If Jana Romanova's character in *W* depicts the desire "to wear [another person's] way of wearing her body", other subjects' relationship to their own bodies proves equally "prosthetic". This fundamental equivalence sublates the ostensible binaries of "successful" and "failed" self-presentation, of glamorous and non-glamorous subjects, as well as of visual mainstream and artistic intervention. By inserting herself into others' self-portraits Romanova unpicks the invisible seams in the smooth surface of conventional representation and activates the clichés' collective dimension within, across and beyond the images.

Conclusion

According to Lauren Berlant, "In the public mode of sentimentality ordinary lives articulate with fantasies of being 'somebody'" [Berlant 2008: 24]. Though mainstream photographic portraiture is not exactly a "sentimental" genre, it evidently speaks to the same desire, as it borrows the posing conventions from the tradition of aristocratic likenesses to help everyone (or so posing guides tell us) "shine like a star". This representational democratization, however, comes at a

price, for it defines the sine qua non of a11 photographic portraits nowadays. In a similar vein, Elizabeth Wissinger describes "the movement from the notion that anyone could do glamour labor (of bodily improvement, for instance) to the idea that everyone should do it" [Wissinger 2015: 160], which draws ever wider segments of population into the pursuit of highly standardized, unrealistic and unsustainable looks and lifestyles.

Considering this context, the insights of Russian avant-garde theorists of a century ago into the commercial visual culture of their time now prove more relevant than ever. Not only do they offer helpful ways of thinking about what Rodchenko called a "summative portrait" and its, according to Brik, quasi-biographical fiction, but they also suggest alternative modes of representation which could break the mold of cliché. Rodchenko emphasized the role of photographic, documentary and multimedia archives in recording the "many sums at once" that each person is, whereas Brik pointed to the importance of "bad" photography for developing a new visual language [Brik 2007: 327].

Interestingly, in Jana Romanova's work we can see both of these ideas put to practice. Her art combines aspects of performance, participatory interactions, photos, videos and occasionally texts, the primary medium of expression being a photographic archive, album or series. Though the archives created by the artist mostly assemble clichéd forms of (self-)representation, the way their conventionality is brought to the fore through repetition within each series itself works as a form of critique. What is more, in *W* Romanova directly experiments with "bad" photography — here meaning "unsuccessful" posing — in order to investigate the visual construction of the (feminine) self.

Though very different stylistically, Romanova's *W* can be compared to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, about which Paul Jay has written: "her self-portraits take the shape of something like an autobiographical metanarrative about the course of one artist's investigation of subjectivity, scrutinizing the very concepts of identity and subjectivity in a way that turns that act into a memoir of itself" [Jay 1994: 199]. However, to an even greater extent than Sherman, whose work examines popular culture's visual clichés and viewers' gendered and genre-driven expectations, Romanova emphasizes the collective experience of looking at pictures and being (in) the picture. She appeals to and makes visible the intimate public of femininity, consolidated around the enchantments and disappointments of being female — an embodied condition firmly tied to the world of images through figures of imitation and repetition. By posing in *W* as an autobiographical character, who is simultaneously a "double you", Romanova generously shares her "investigation of subjectivity" with those who at first glance might seem to have already found everything they needed.

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