

Tra-visare. Self-Portrait as Intentional Representation

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Abstract

The proposed contribution investigates the topic of self-portrait, limiting the analysis to cases where the subject is represented within a reflective surface. The consecutive logical link, mirror-view-knowledge, is varied where the surveying subject coincides with the detected object and the mirror, at the same time an instrument of knowledge and communication, is represented by introducing specific characterizations to the surface in relation to the prefigured effect: distorted, distorted, misrepresented. Although the study is approached through interpretative keys proper to relief and representation, a horizontal approach is proposed at the same time, because opened to contaminations deriving from the fields of art and human sciences. In particular, starting from an introductory reflection aimed at framing also from a historical point of view the deep link between reflection and self-representation, the analysis focuses on some case studies selected from the history of representation. Finally, the contribution opens up to readings on the relationship between self-knowledge and the communication of one's own image in contemporary times, with specific reference to the spread of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: representation, interiority, knowledge, reflection, art.

Introduction

The news of the touching virtual encounter between a mother and the accurate holographic reconstruction of her missing daughter, broadcast by the South Korean television company MBC as part of the documentary *I met you*, has recently spread. Beyond the understandable ethical considerations, the story opens a reflection on the role of representation as a mnemonic support, where it, in its different technical declinations, through the introduction of a substitute image becomes the tool to deal with the loss (or fear of loss) of a loved one. In these terms, the contemporary story is similar to the well-known legendary story about the origins of the drawing narrated by Pliny the Elder during the Roman imperial age (fig. 1).

“Butades, a potter from Sicione, was the first to invent clay portraits, using nothing else but the earth itself, by his daughter, who, having taken love for a young man and having to leave him, in the light of a skylight outlined the shadow of his face on the wall and on these lines her father, having imprinted clay, made a model that he left to dry together with other terracotta objects and then baked them” [Ferri 2000, pp. 252-253]. The figure portrayed, of which Pliny the Elder speaks, obtained by circumscribing the projected shadow, is characterized by a fundamental aspect for the purposes of this contribution, namely the relationship of similarity with the subject represented. The model, in fact, in order to ensure the recognizability and to preserve the



Fig. 1. Left, *I met you*, 2019, frame. Right, Jean-Baptiste Regnault, *L'origine de la peinture ou Dibutate dessinant*, 1785, detail.

memory of the individual, must be as referable as possible to a given physiognomy [Magli 2016, pp. 129-130]. An aim more hardly achievable through the use of the word [Derrida 2015, pp. 67-70]. In this regard, in enunciating the item “Encyclopédie”, Denis Diderot introduces the anecdote of a man who, driven by the desire to own the portrait of his lover, made a description of the latter as detailed as possible, breaking it down into a plurality of fragments. He then recorded the proportions of the head, the size of the forehead, eyes, nose and mouth and sent the same description to a hundred painters, asking them to translate it into an image on canvas. Finally, the client received the hundred works in which the individual details, although perfectly faithful to the description, were recomposed within a hundred portraits, all different from each other and all dissimilar from the face of the beloved woman [Diderot 1778, pp. 377-378].

It is well known how Platonic philosophical thought, starting from the famous cave myth in particular, gives rise to an “oculentric” culture, where cognitive activity is considered to be closely linked to visual activity [Stoichita 2015, pp. 22-23]. In this context, the passage from the world of appearances (illusion) to the world of the real (knowledge), is marked by a profound ambiguity about the cognitive value associated with shadow and reflection, whose mutual relationship, also because of the common evanescence and transience, has been a topic long debated in philosophical discussion. It is only

in the passage dedicated to *mimesis* that Plato himself, uniting the image painted with the reflection on the mirror, introduces the latter in the context of “epiphenomenal representations”. The mirror, therefore, is identified as the mimetic instrument par excellence, capable of reproducing everything (though only in the form of a copy) and comparable for its way of working to the imitative arts, with specific reference to painting. According to the Romanian historian Victor Stoichita, it is precisely from Plato’s philosophical interpretation that “the work of art will bend to the demands of the mirror paradigm and the projection of the shadow will play only a marginal role. This does not mean, however, that the shadow will be completely eliminated from the arsenal of representation, but that it will be forever the poor relative of every reflection, the dark origin of every representation” [Stoichita 2015, p. 26].

The mirror, as a device of vision, or knowledge, is gradually associated with self observation. Diogenes Laertius tells how Socrates, in accordance with the motto “know thyself”, invited young people to an educational practice consisting of aiming at the mirror, interpreting it as a true instrument of knowledge [Gambetta 2012, pp. 88-100]. Similarly, about five hundred years later, Seneca expresses itself in the following terms. “Mirrors were invented so that man might know himself, drawing many advantages for the future, first of all knowledge of himself, then useful suggestions for dealing with different

situations: if beautiful to avoid dishonourable actions; if ugly, to know that one must redeem with virtue all the shortcomings of the body; if young, so that in the blossom of age he might be warned that it is time to learn and to dare daring deeds; if old, to abandon all that is unsuitable for dogs, to think a little also about death. In view of these things nature has given us the opportunity to look back on ourselves" [Vottero 1989, I, 17, 4]. When at the beginning of the twentieth century the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan introduced the mirror stage, he underlined how this has to do in a particular way with the identification of the "I", associating instead the shadow with the identification of the "other". [Bazzanella 1998]. It is no coincidence that in the Plinian tale, in which the craftsman (the surveyor subject) and the model (the surveyed subject) are two different persons, the act of circumscribing the shadow leads to a figurative outcome that guarantees the similarity between the real image and the represented image and that the same technique, if used in the self-representation, as imagined by Giorgio Vasari (fig. 2), leads to an image without a visibly significant relationship with the represented subject. [Stoichita 2015, pp. 37-40].

Before going into the specifics of the topic, it seems appropriate to underline that this contribution, although developed through the interpretative keys of survey and representation, includes important contaminations from the world of art and the humanities. If only for the origin of the term itself. The term "self-portrait", in fact, was coined in the 19th century, that is, at the same time as the spread of psychoanalysis, in which the relationship between the individual and interiority takes on a central value [Gigante 2011, p. 274]. With respect to the use of the self-portrait as an instrument of analysis of the psyche, it seems appropriate to recall Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's character heads. They are sixty-nine busts that reproduce as many grimaces interpreted as reflections of the artist's moods (fig. 3). It is known that this is a series of variations of self-portraits recorded by the artist posing in front of a mirror [Sdegno 2017, Husslein-Arco 2013]. A process, that of the voluntary alteration of one's own face, only apparently ironic and reminiscent of Italo Calvino's exercises narrated in the story *The Mirror, the Target*, in which the protagonist lightens the responsibility of being himself with a series of grimaces made in front of the mirror through which he pretends to be other people [Calvino 2018].

Fig. 2. Giorgio Vasari, *L'origine della pittura*, Firenze 1573, detail.





Fig. 3. Matthias Rudolph Toma, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt: physiognomic busts, 1839, detail.

From self-drawing to self-withdrawing

According to the English journalist Elisabeth Day, the first image published with the hashtag #selfie would have appeared on the Flickr website in 2004 [Day 2013; Brooke 2014]. Since then, every year the social channels are flooded with hundreds of millions of digital images that record the author's face inside the screen of a smartphone. An extremely widespread practice that allows you to capture, edit and share images in seconds, subjecting them to uncontrolled media overexposure. Because of the relationship of equivalence with the author's face, the selfie is of-

ten associated with the more traditional self-portrait. Significant in this sense is the experience known as *Museum of Selfies*, born in 2014 from an idea of the Danish art director Olivia Muus, in which the hand and camera of a smartphone are turned in front of a series of portraits simulating that the subject of the painting is the author of a selfie [Borzello 2018, p. 231-232] (fig. 4). However, history shows us that the self-portrait is not always exactly a faithful representation of the author's face. In fact, if the selfie, as it is centered on the concept of sharing, is mostly aimed at recording one's outward appearance because it is easily recognizable by an external observer, in the

Fig. 4. Olivia Muus, *Museum of Selfies*, 2014-2020.



Fig. 5. Cameron Jamie, *Untitled*, Venezia 2019.

case of the self-portrait, by virtue of the close link with one's own self-consciousness, particular attention is paid to the representation of identity characters, and therefore not necessarily physiognomic, by adopting a look turned inward. A concept conveyed in an evocative way by the installation presented by the American Cameron Jamie on the occasion of the 58th. International Art Exhibition in Venice in which the artist, addressing the public with the interiors of a series of ceramic masks fixed to the wall, offers the viewer alternative ways to represent his authenticity (fig. 5).

Wanting to offer a definition of self-portrait, one could argue that it consists of an intentional representation of a specific individual, based on the criterion of identification rather than similarity, and that for this reason it cannot disregard self-knowledge [Gigante 2011]. As stated above, the operation of the artist's retreat is an act of projection of his own interiority and therefore not necessarily linked to a realistic representation. In virtue of the above, three fundamental aspects are outlined in the interpretation of the self-portrait: representation, identity and knowledge. In this context, as anticipated in the introductory paragraph, the mirror assumes a central role. It is no coincidence that the mythical story of Narcissus, allusion to self-knowledge, arises precisely from the relationship with one's own image reflected from the surface of the water. And it is the figure of Narcissus himself that Leon Battista Alberti placed at the origins of painting, precisely by virtue of the act of mirroring. Painting, in fact, allows you to "embrace with art that surface of the source" [Alberti 1804, p. 39] thus fixing an ephemeral apparition. There are many artists who mention the mirror, recognizing its usefulness as a technical aid. Among them, Cesare Ripa, who in *Iconology* includes it among some of the more traditional measuring instruments, such as the compass, the ruler and the square. [Gambetta 2012, pp. 145-155]. But if on the one hand the artist considers the mirror as a technical aid, functional to the realistic representation and to the control of the exactness of the represented subject, on the other hand the need to synthesize the information obtained is highlighted. The mirror, in fact, produces virtual images (and not signs) by temporarily recording what affects it and exactly how it affects it [Eco 2018, pp.

27-31]. In this regard, in the field of ancient optics, the expedient of marking points on the surface of the mirror in correspondence to the reflected image was known so that it could be determined in graphic terms. As Decius Gioseffi pointed out. “Moreover, the cutting of the cone (or of the visual pyramid), which is the foundation of perspective, is widely used in ancient optical demonstrations (starting with Euclid) and regularly practiced in catoptrics, where the geometric construction of the mirror image (‘virtual’, ‘inverted’ and ‘behind the mirror’) requires the cutting of the virtual pyramid through the surface of the mirror. That this ‘intercision’ did not go unnoticed is, ad abundantiam, demonstrated by the expedient of marking points on the surface of the mirror in correspondence to the image, practiced by Ptolemy, Hero and –for Hero’s testimony– by Archimedes himself” [Gioseffi 1963, p. 279].

A real operation of discretization of reality, in which the complexity of the reflected image is reduced through the definition of significant points [Ippoliti 2000]. On the other hand, the *trahere* root of the Italian verb *ritrarre*, with the meaning of “to draw lines” [Alberti di Villanuova 1825], has had different semantic derivations identified by the prefixes *re-* (as in the case of the Italian *ritratto*) and *pro-* (as in the case of the English “portrait”) that highlight opposite cultural interpretations linked respectively to a repetitive sense (*retrāhēre*) and a substitutive sense (*prōtrāhēre*) of the action [Migliore 2014, p. 120].

This interpretation, therefore, introduces a double meaning to the action of portraiture. On the one hand the portrait is understood in an iconic sense (that is, a repetition of the observed image) on the other hand in a symbolic sense (that is, a drawing of something in place of something else).

From a methodological point of view, the artistic references mentioned in this contribution have been selected for the evident tendentious use of the reflective surface and therefore as significant in the interpretation of the self-portrait as a practice of “inventive survey” [Belardi 2001], where the information recorded by the mirror surface is interpreted by the author, at the same time a surveying subject and a surveyed object, making the self-portrait first of all a product of the memory and imagination of the author. In this sense, it seems significant to mention the

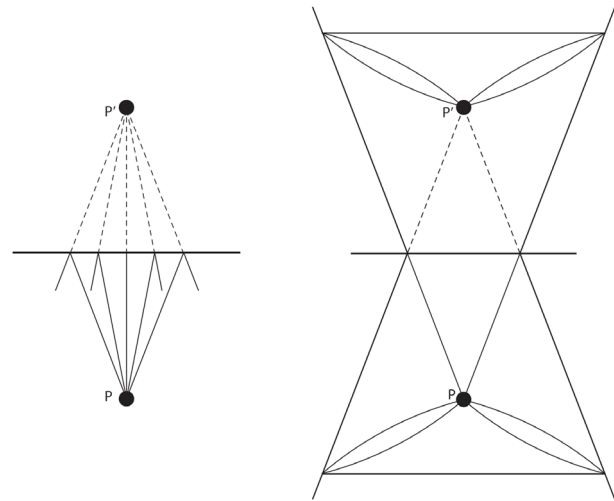


Fig. 6. Left, reflection scheme of a specular flat surface. Right, representation of the principle of the mirror according to Michelangelo Pistoletto (graphic elaboration by the author).

personal interpretation of the functioning of a flat mirror by Michelangelo Pistoletto that exemplifies the principle at the basis of his works. The observer, reflected from the surface of the mirror, defines a structure interpreted as the maximum extension of the human figure: the emotion reflected in reason and rationality reflected in emotionality (fig. 6). A continuous specularity within which the mirror assumes the role of “balance of the opposite parts”. On the other hand, as argued by the American architect and academic Georges Teyssot, the mirror is “a device that multiplies and internalizes. [...] In so far as the mirror is a replica or double of the painting, a reverse of it or an image seen from behind, the ‘abyss’ effect determined by reflection is not based on a mere principle of repetition. In the first place, nothing is ever repeated as it is, since the mirror, and in particular the convex one, tends to deform; in the second place [...] the repetition (and duplication) made by the mirror is a celebration of what occurs only once, in time and space, *hic et nunc*. In both cases, the act of representation is clearly recognized by the role of painting as an image, in reference to the mirror’s

ability to reflect, to the memory of a specific event – and at the same time acts as both a document and a memory” [Teyssot 2000, pp. 30-31].

In this context, without prejudice to the instrument used, the purpose of the operation is central. In fact, if the advance of technical developments over time has made it possible to obtain mirrors with perfectly polished and transparent surfaces that have considerably reduced the error of the reflected image [Melchior-Bonnet 2002], at the same time, the practice of the self-portrait gradually moved away from the faithful

repetition of the reflected image and the symbolic representation, a sign of the style, idea and theory of its author; took over from the physiognomic representation, imitative of somatic characters. To punctuate this ascending climax of self-denial connected to the tententious use of the reflective surface, the self-portrait of Parmigianino (fig. 7) in which the introduction of the convex mirror is aimed at highlighting one’s technical skill and the refinement of the representation, unlike what happens four hundred years later with the famous series of self-portraits with reflecting sphere by



Fig. 7. Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola (Parmigianino), Self-portrait within a convex mirror, 1524.

Fig. 8. Maurits Cornelis Escher, Hand with reflecting sphere. Self-portrait in a spherical mirror, 1935.

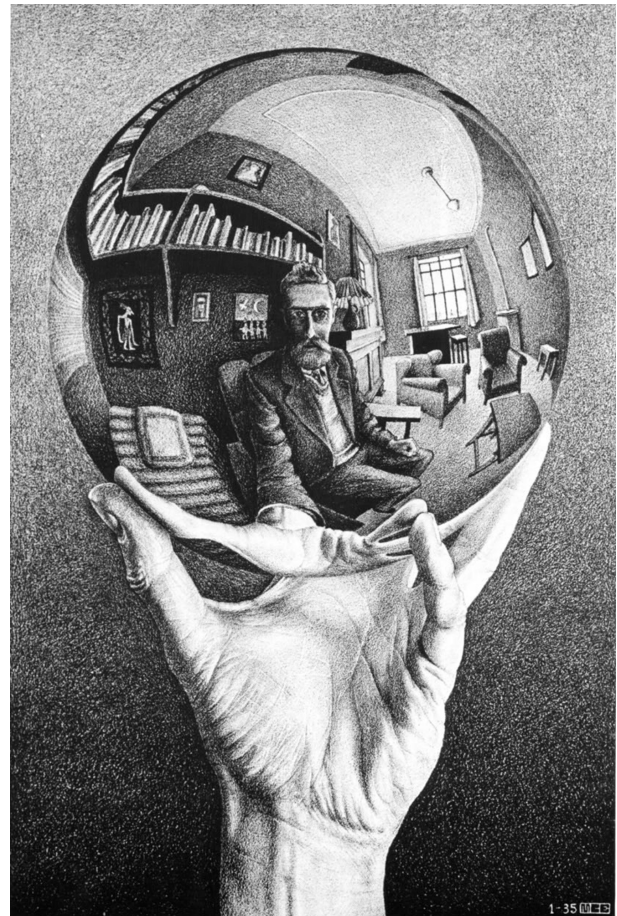




Fig. 9. Mario Cresci, *Self-portrait*, 2015.

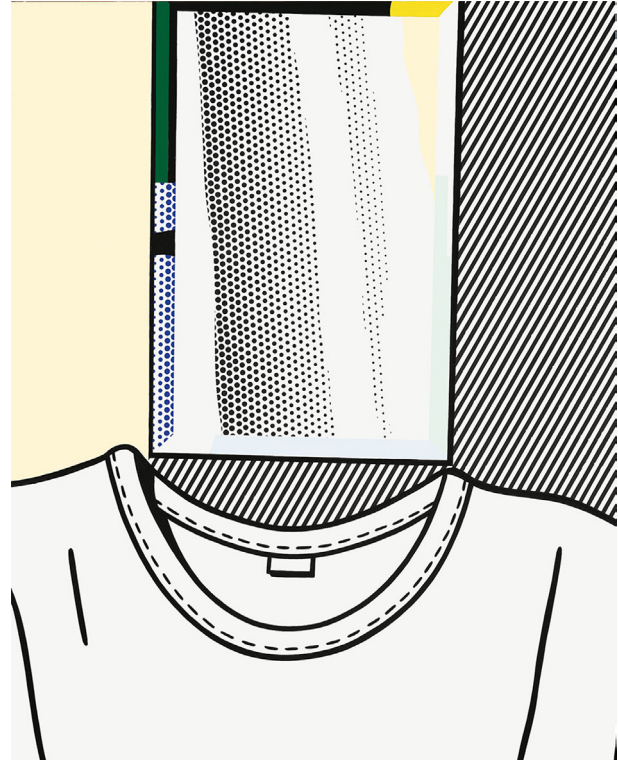


Fig. 10. Roy Lichtenstein, *Self-portrait*, 1978.

Maurits Cornelis Escher (fig. 8) where the choice of the convex surface is aimed at accentuating the sense of ambiguity and paradox that characterize the artist's works; in his photographic self-portraits Mario Cresci (fig. 9) replaces his own face with a convex mirror reflecting the camera, the protagonist of the private spaces in the centre of which it is placed from time to time (his own studio, a bedroom, etc.); finally, for the purpose of this contribution, the self-portrait conceived by Roy Lichtenstein in 1978 is enlightening [Waldman 1999] (fig. 10). Here again, the artist replaces his face with a flat mirror that is, however, devoid of reflected images. A total concealment that reaffirms the privilege of inner space. An absent, subtracted, "withdraw" face.

Conclusions

Walking along the Vasari Corridor at the Uffizi Gallery we come across the Collection of self-portraits that brings together famous faces, such as those of Raphael, Canova, or Guido Reni, but also the conceptual self-portrait of Emilio Isgrò or the grimace of Oliviero Toscani. Whether iconic, paradoxical or provocative, the self-portrait is undoubtedly a form of interpretation and critical representation of one's individual identity. A process during which the information accumulated and recorded over time is analyzed by bringing out significant elements that are recomposed, related and then formed [Augé 2011, pp. 8-9]. The mirror, as a reflection device "acts as an inter-mediary between two worlds, giving access to

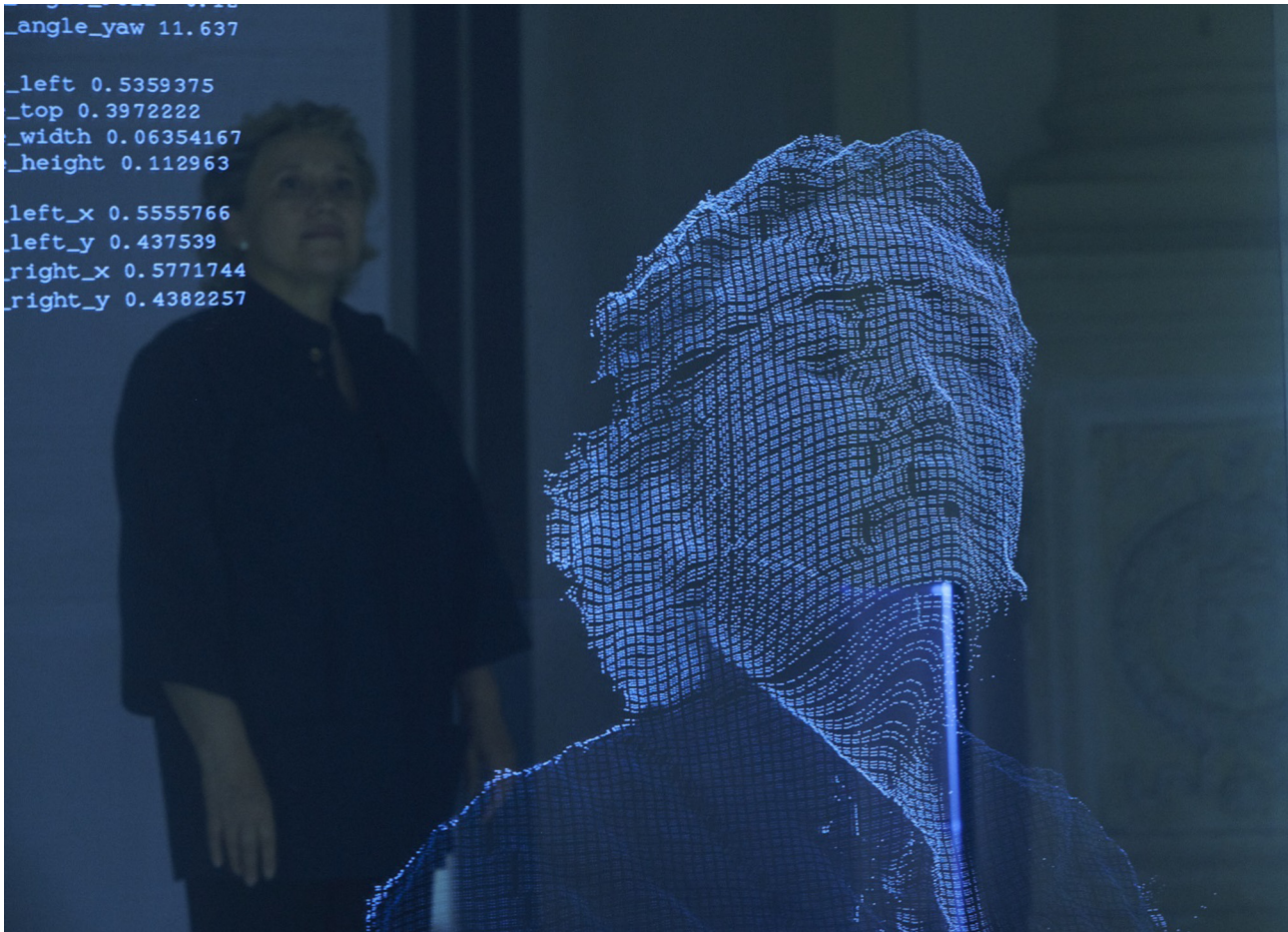


Fig. 11. Neural Mirror, Spoleto 2019.

the imaginary and the illusion [...]. As well as a medium between spirit and matter; between ideal and real, it is also traditionally a link between eternity and finiteness, the infinite and the finite, or between inner and outer” [Teysot 2000, p. 29].

Science, however, speaks to us of a rather different future. The American Kevin Kelly, writer and scholar of digital culture, talks about the beginning the mirror world, where every place and thing in reality will have a digital twin and life-size [Kelly 2019]. In this new platform we will interact with the virtual dimension by moving into the physical one. This is the concept behind *Neural Mirror*, the installation designed by Ultravioletto, the Roman

interaction design collective, which was presented during the 62. Festival dei Due Mondi di Spoleto (fig. 11). The human figure is scanned and translated into a cloud of points by means of a Face Recognition algorithm, becoming a flow of information (from one’s physical state to one’s emotional state) decoded by the artificial intelligence that re-elaborates the image in real time. What appears in the mirroring interface is the interpretation of the subject by the machine, a reinvented body and mind, from biological beings to digital alter egos. Will the *Neural Mirror* make room for the self-portrait? Whatever the answer is, we can only hope to provide our best “points” for the future.

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