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5 The Self at a Distance: Simone Fattal's *Autoportrait* (1972/2012)[1]

ABSTRACT: Back in the early 1970s, Beirut-based Syrian artist Simone Fattal intended to make a self-portrait. The story goes that Fattal visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York and looked at a range of painted self-portraits, wondering why there were none in video as the new medium seemed to her better suited to the form. She returned via Paris, invited a photographer friend back to Beirut and started to make one. Together they shot hours of footage, mostly of Simone monologuing about herself in her apartment, but also interviewing friends and family. She then proceeded to put the footage away. For forty years. Several wars and displacements later, having shifted from painting to ceramics, and from Beirut to California, then Paris, Fattal came back to that material of her former self and *Autoportrait* was made forty years after it was shot. The portrait of the artist as a young woman refrains from commenting directly on the distance from which it was wrought, despite the lifetime that stands between the divided self.

In 2014, while interviewing a young Egyptian filmmaker named Alia Ayman for my *Filming Revolution* project, I asked her how she came to make the intimate personal reflection that I had just seen. Ayman said that she would never have been bold enough to make such a piece, had she not stumbled upon the video *Autoportrait* (1972/2012), as part of the 2012 *Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema* show (co-curated by Rasha Salti and Jytte Jensen) at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Ayman recounts that, by coincidence, she met the filmmaker, Syrian-Lebanese artist Simone Fattal, who was

1 I would like to thank the editors of this volume for their attentive reading and suggestions. If not for them I might never have turned my attention to the question of self-portraiture as a distinct area of first-person practice. I would also like to thank Alia Ayman for introducing me to Fattal's video, and Eugénie Paultre, Tony Chakar, Gordon Hon, Rania Stephan, Octavian Esanu, Peter Schwartz, Shahidha Bari and Tania Krzywinska for their helpful replies to my queries. My deepest gratitude goes to the artist herself, Simone Fattal, who graciously provided me with a copy of the film and with a wonderfully in-depth interview.

there for the opening of the MoMA show.[2] The two had dinner together and discussed Fattal's *Autoportrait*. It was only after the encouragement Ayman received from Fattal that Ayman went on to make her own self-portrait film, *Catharsis* (2012).[3] According to Ayman, a well-educated, middle-class Egyptian, before encountering Fattal's video self-portrait, she had no idea that such a personal expression on film existed in the Arab world, let alone by a woman, filmed all of those decades earlier. The video opened up an entirely new imaginary for the budding filmmaker. Such is the power of this unusual work.

The story behind the video

In 1972, when Simone Fattal was nearer to Ayman's age, she too visited MoMA in New York and saw a show of painted and photographed self-portraits. While she thought the work was powerful, she wondered to herself why there were no self-portraits in the show using video. She had a sense that video would be an excellent medium for self-portraiture, despite never having seen a video self-portrait herself. Video, as a new medium, had been taken up with tremendous enthusiasm by many artists, and although Fattal had no exposure to or awareness of the video art movement of the time, she

2 To hear the interview clip of Ayman discussing her encounter with Fattal and *Autoportrait*, please see: <https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/165/a_trend_of_personal_films_in_egypt>. The extract is part of the *Filming Revolution project* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018): <https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/>

3 Ayman's *Catharsis* is an entirely different type of work than Fattal's. A much more conscious interrogation of identity it foregrounds the tensions between Western cultural values and Arab, in Ayman's case, Egyptian, cultural values. Ayman, for instance, speaks both Arabic and English in her voice-over and noting the cultural schizophrenia inherent in the shifts, whereas Fattal's chosen idiom is exclusively French, performed with no apparent irony or alienation, given that French is the second language of Lebanon and is spoken by the Lebanese bourgeoisie and especially the Christian community, as a sign of social status (thank you, Tony Chakar, for clarification on this matter). *Catharsis* is available on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/60322336>.

determined to make a video self-portrait, recruiting two French friends to serve as her crew.[4] Let us not forget that at the time, in the early 1970s, video was a medium that promised a kind of accessibility and immediacy well beyond what film and photography could offer and indeed any other available medium of the day. Many artists had taken to it precisely as a medium of the body and of personal expression, so much so that by 1976, less than a decade since its introduction, art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss declared video art the primary medium of narcissism.[5] Fattal seems to have shared many other artists' intuition that video had inbuilt reflective and intimate properties and endeavoured to exploit them in the form of a video self-portrait.

It seems a prescient and highly innovative idea looking back from four decade's remove, especially given that no one in Lebanon had yet made a video self-portrait, and to my knowledge would not do so for quite a few more years. Self-portraiture in painting was by no means a novelty in Lebanon at the time. Modernist painters often trained in Europe had mastered the self-portrait, and at times intriguingly adapting it or knowingly deconstructing it, for the better part of a century.[6] But to say it was not a novelty, is not to say that it was entirely commonplace, and to introduce the medium of video, which was really only being taken up by a small minority of artists, based in the centres of the art world, especially in the USA was, without a doubt, well ahead of its time. That the camera masters sat in a draw unedited for all those years, not seeing the light of day until 2012, implies that, for this artist at least, the idea was even ahead of itself, taking all that time to, in effect, properly catch up.

4 Skype interview with the filmmaker, 6 April 2016.

5 Rosalind Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October* 1 (Spring 1976), 50–64.

6 Portraiture and self-portraiture were certainly known and practised in Lebanon and the region for centuries. The wealthy Maronite population sent its young artists to study in Rome for centuries, bringing back classical Renaissance techniques. I am grateful to the curator of the American University in Beirut Art Gallery, Octavian Esanu, for helping to clarify this point. Possibly the first modern painted self-portrait was Khalil Saleeby's *Self-Portrait* (1895), the artist is known as the founder of modern art in Lebanon. An instance of an ironic and knowing self-representation would be Omar Onsi's *Self-Portrait with a Turban* (undated, likely 1930s when he was living in Paris and painting portraiture), playing up to expectations of the 'Arabian' self-presentation, despite the fact that the artist was thoroughly Western in his appearance. Saloua Raouda Choucair's *Self-Portrait* (1943) is an important example of a modernist self-portrait painted by a Lebanese woman artist.

It was in June of 1972, that Fattal and her small crew consisting of two Frenchmen, shot ten hours of footage over a relatively short period of time, including an all-night session with Fattal where she monologues about different phases of her life. She reminisces about the convent school she went to as a young girl; impressions people had of her growing up; boyfriends that did not work out for one reason or another; and perhaps most poignantly, the importance of discovering herself as an artist, in her twenties. There seems to be no necessary order to her recollections, though a rough outline becomes apparent of the life of an upper-class Christian child raised in Lebanon in the 1950s and her journey from dutiful if spirited young girl to restless and thoughtful young woman, leading up to the day the monologue was filmed.

The video begins, after a few shaky establishing shots of the Beirut skyline from her apartment balcony, with footage from the end of the aforementioned all-night marathon shoot. We see an arrestingly beautiful and slightly mysterious figure sitting on a bench, looking at times coyly or even flirtatiously toward and away from the camera, or rather toward and away from the person standing behind the camera (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Simone Fattal, *Autoportrait*, 1972–2012.

The figure says nothing. She seems to have talked herself out, though the viewer is yet to hear a word from her. From this mute yet seductive state of exhaustion, accompanied by an introductory song by Simon and Garfunkel which I will discuss in due course, the video moves choppily to edited extracts from the all night monologue session which constitutes the majority of the forty-six-minute-long piece. Before we hear her voice or are introduced to the mise-en-scène of the monologue session, we see a shot of a photographic portrait in a frame: Fattal looking sharp and composed in a trench coat, a portrait taken by another, with all of the rough edges of a person in the process of formation erased. The video presents her first as eminently presentable, framed and sanitized, and then proceeds to deconstruct the polished image in myriad ways.

The mise-en-scène of the main monologue is crude and basic. A table cluttered with scattered items (which are not constant over time): cigarettes, a coffee cup and *rakweh*, a microphone on a small table stand, a lighter. When we first hear the spoken voice, which we cannot yet know is Fattal's, we witness the setting without the protagonist, a bohemian living room with little artifice. It comes in stark contrast to later scenes intercut into the monologue, that are shot in the mother's home, with its ornate furniture and a *décor* that bespeaks propriety. One can sense a clear separation in manner and milieu in these juxtapositions.

There are a few interruptions to the monologue, the mother lamenting the disagreeable changes made to her own father's house or telling stories about harrowing moments of their life in Beirut, being one, a few key friends being interviewed about Fattal's character being another. The interviews with friends are used sparingly and mainly point to her gregarious character and her love of spontaneous dance, something we cannot even guess from her strained and at times pained narrative, but is illustrated for us toward the end of the video, first with the playful use of distorted footage (a consequence of a defective lens, not post-production manipulation) of Fattal repeatedly walking in and out of her apartment and then with footage of Fattal dancing with abandon, framed as if shot off of a TV screen from that era, which indeed it was. The emphasis on her love of dance in the video seems to be raised as yet another way to distinguish her behaviour

from that of her proper family. In the video, a journalist friend describes the family's response to her wild dancing as 'totally uncomprehending'.

Other than the brief shots from the balcony at the beginning, and a series of landscape shots, again from the balcony at the end of the video, the entire project is filmed indoors, as if the 'Paris of the East' as Beirut was known before the Civil War, had no cinematic allure. A shipping vessel makes slow progress in the haze and one can make out a slice of the Beirut skyline at points, with construction scaffolding indicating a city on the rise. That is the extent of the outside world that can be seen in this idiosyncratic and very personal envoy from a distant and irretrievable past. The video is predominantly about internal states, about the private view of an individual character, yet even as such, the limits of what is revealed are apparent. In contrast with the extreme 'reveal' of much of the body art and video art happening in a parallel universe in the USA, *Autoportrait* is positively buttoned down, as if made by a prudish ingénue. If not for the flirtatious eye games at the start of the film and the wild dancing toward the end, we would have only words to indicate the boldness of this artist, no physical manifestation in the confrontational manner of a Joan Jonas or a Carolee Schneemann. And yet, the very fact of her embarking on the making of this video self-portrait at all, in the context of conservative Beirut social conventions of the time, should indicate to us a powerfully original and independent spirit.

In the video, Fattal's stories range from random reminiscences of her childhood, such as her love of baths at boarding school though she was only allowed to bathe once a week, or the consequences she suffered after telling the nuns that she did not believe in God, to stories of young adulthood, including travel adventures and painful break-ups. True to the self-portrait's form, the stories remain disjunctive and are told in rambling succession making it less a telling of a life (autobiography), than the episodic snapshot that yields a series of narrated portraits that are eventually (well after the telling) complimented by a sequence of still photographs from roughly the periods recounted. The episodes do not cohere into a whole, even if what emerges gives us glimpses of an adventurous young woman with a rebellious streak who is nonetheless keenly aware of the expectations of society and the ways in which they inhibit her. Fattal's self-conscious

coquetry with the camera and with the man behind it, suggests that she is not only habituated to certain rituals of seduction, but that she may be using them to conceal as much as to reveal who she really is. Considerably altering Michel Beaujour's summation of the (literary) self-portrait that he says declares: 'I will not tell you what I have done but I will tell you who I am',[7] her self-portrait seems to say, 'I will tell you a little of what I've done but it won't tell you who I am'.

In fact, it is not in the telling that the artist's self-portrait comes alive, but in the interstices, the fragmentation, and the disjunctures. The video provides only the most fitful narrative, breaking up into snippets, pieced together only to be torn apart by black leader and video noise. Even as she tells us something of what she has done, the video somehow undoes the telling with its disruptions and digressions that punctuate them, and in this process we learn something of how Fattal sees herself, which is not as a whole, re-presentable being, not as a tidied up and contained portrait, but as a series of disjointed, if animated, fragments.

To continue with the history of the production, apparently after the short period of production which occurred over the course of just a few days, the hired French video team edited an hour and a half version of the material that Fattal rejected. It is unclear what she objected to, but she acknowledges that it was 'a very big problem to look at yourself, I mean, I put myself out there'.[8] After what appears to have been a falling out, the crew then promptly left Beirut, absconding not only with the original masters but also with the video editing equipment that Fattal had bought specifically for the project. It took several years for her to get the tapes back and they then sat somewhere, packed up and all but forgotten for the next thirty plus years. Eventually, after a filmmaker friend helped her digitize the video masters, a young editor whom she knew offered to edit a new cut.[9] The

7 Michel Beaujour, *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait*, trans. Yara Milos (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 3.

8 Skype interview with the filmmaker, 6 April 2016.

9 It was Lebanese filmmaker Jocelyn Saab who helped with this, encouraging Fattal to do something with this precious material and helping to facilitate the digitization process. Saab herself made several brilliant first-person films during the height of

video was edited without consultation yet in the end Fattal was happy with the result.[10]

Autoportrait had its debut at the highly acclaimed experimental documentary festival, FID Marseilles, the same year it was finished, and went on to screen at MoMA, the Sharjah Art Foundation and the Venice Biennale, an impressive launch for this modest work. In one sense the video is of slight heft, made somewhat artlessly with amateur camera work and a young, self-possessed, and not a little self-obsessed, wealthy beauty with pretentions to art at the centre. Possibly had it been finished at the time it was started, it would have been forgotten long before now. Yet for reasons that have to do with the intervening years – the unspeakable destruction and upheaval that the twenty-year civil war(s) wrought upon the city in which it was filmed, and the intriguing aspect of the vast and unaccounted for temporal lapse in the act of self-portraiture itself – the video gains historical resonance precisely from what, in effect, it survived, virtually undamaged. It peeks its head up through the rubble like a tentative yet hardy weed, a dust covered remnant that managed to miraculously survive the wreckage. It speaks as if from a lost time, a time that we thought could never speak to us again. In that sense, it is as fresh as if it had been born yesterday, a new and previously unheard voice from what seemed an obliterated past. It speaks as if it has somehow remained untouched by the intervening years.

Thinking specifically of the era in which it was shot, *Autoportrait* is in part a document of a time before, when one had the leisure to indulge one's whims and the luxury to inflate minor tragedies, such as loves lost, into heart-stopping catastrophes. The carefree attitude, or rather that which she chose to care about, suggests a freedom of spirit that comes with innocence and remains unburdened by the type of pain that one does not choose for oneself. In some sense it represents a time before the

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the Civil War, notably the trilogy: *Beyrouth, jamais plus* (1976); *Lettre de Beyrouth* (1978); and *Beyrouth, ma ville* (1982). While none of these should be considered self-portraits per se, they are unique in their own right due to their insistence to forego the journalistic impulse and to express a very personal and poetic vision in the midst of so much devastation. The name of the editor in question is Eugénie Paultre.

10 Skype interview with the filmmaker, 6 April 2016.

fall. In 1972, Beirut was full of possibility and life, three years prior to the outbreak of the civil war that was to divide the country and destroy the city, eventually sending Fattal and her partner Etel Adnan, along with thousands of others, into exile for years to come.[11]

The viewer's own retrospective gaze through the ruins of history that this work demands reminds me of the series by contemporary Lebanese artists Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, called *Wonder Beirut* (from their *Postcards from War series*, 1997/2012), where the fictional pyromaniac photographer, Abdallah Farah, is said to have gone back to his images of glamorous, carefree Beirut and singed holes into them where the war had left its scars. Yet, here in Fattal's video, there are no visible holes, no clear references to the twisted wrought iron and the collapsed concrete: they are invisible, like some kind of internal lesion eating away at the insides of a seemingly vital, healthy, body. And yet, perhaps the war should not be the only point of reference for the unaccounted forty years.

To give a brief snapshot of the artist's richly lived life in those intervening years, one month after the video was shot, Fattal was to meet her life partner, poet/painter Etel Adnan, eventually becoming possibly the best known Lebanese lesbian couple of all time. Three years later, the fifteen-year civil war broke out, and after braving the bullets and the destruction of civic life for five years, Fattal and Adnan eventually left everything behind and moved to northern California where Fattal ceased to paint (though she continued to make art, mostly sculpture) and established Post-Apollo Press – a feminist publishing house set up initially and essentially as a platform for Adnan's writing, but serving a vital role in the publication of poetry and experimental writing, often though not exclusively by feminist authors and writers from the Middle East.[12] Years later they moved to Paris, maintaining a residence in Beirut as well. Fattal has had many solo shows of her ceramics, collages and paintings, most recently a 2016 retrospective of her work at the Sharjah Art Foundation. *Autoportrait* stands out in Fattal's oeuvre as the only moving image work, and her only sustained attempt at self-portraiture.

11 The Lebanese Civil War lasted approximately fifteen years, from 1975 to 1990.

12 <http://www.postapollopress.com> accessed 15 August 2017.

James Hall, author of *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, tells us that '[o]ne of the most crucial aspects of the history of self-portraiture is understanding why and when self-portraits are made – and not made',[13] or in this case, why it was made and not made and then made again. Crucial though it may be, it does not seem possible to determine, but only to surmise. Why does an artist make her self-portrait, then not make it, then pick it up again after a span of forty years? Presumably to meet her former self: a portrait of the artist as a younger woman.

We might then expect some indication from the older Simone, yet none will be forthcoming. In this video, there will be no reflections added from the contemporary moment, other than the musical choices (two songs) on the soundtrack that function as an ancillary commentary. The voice and sync sound recordings from the 1972 taping self-reflexively consider what type of self-portrait Fattal would like to make, and what in fact might fall short in the process. She seems at points frustrated by the attempt to make an account of a self, questioning how it is being done, wondering aloud if it is going to work. At approximately fourteen minutes into this forty-six-minute video, after extended scenes of the monologue and the first interview with the mother, Fattal announces on screen, with her two crew members sitting cramped and restless by her side, that 'I wanted to do my self-portrait'. She goes on to describe the process of filming – that it veered from self-portrait to impossible autobiography (for which they would have 'needed an infinite number of nights' – indicating at once the making and unmaking of the project (more on this later). This self-portrait rests on the question of its own making, and resides in the temporality of the questioning. It holds within it, its own deconstruction, the very reason it both was and was not made at that time. And yet, the viewer is watching the finished product, with a time delay that this long lost and now found footage cannot itself account for. It is only in the two songs on the soundtrack, in particular with the first song, where the temporal disjuncture is signalled explicitly.

13 James Hall, *The Self Portrait: A Cultural History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014), 9–10.

The Simon and Garfunkel song that opens the video, 'Blues Run the Game', begins with a tell-tale 1960s folk guitar strain, setting the tone of the era. It is not one of their better known songs, yet it contains the lyric: 'Maybe when I'm older baby, someplace down the line, I'll wake up older, so much older, mama, I'll wake up older and I'll just stop all my tryin". This song must have been chosen not only for the clear sonic signalling of a bygone era, but also for this passage, suggesting a Rip Van Winkle aspect to this piece. Even more tellingly, though requiring extra-textual information to discern, this particular song was recorded in 1965 for their album *Sounds of Silence*, yet never appeared on it. Like Fattal's video, the recording was shelved for twenty-two years, and was only released in 1997 on their 'best of' album called *Old Friends*.

Whether one does the detective work to expose such a hidden clue, the video can almost not be watched and certainly not fully appreciated without considering the intervening period. The viewer of this self-portrait is thrown into the same uncanny overlaid moment as the maker, as if one could collapse two temporal registers while nonetheless being haunted by the gap in between. At the very least we are caught trying to imagine what the older Fattal makes of her younger self.

A self-portrait is a snapshot in time, capturing a moment, however extended, in an artist's life. It is rare that it is constructed in retrospect, though not unheard of (think of Frida Kahlo's *My Grandparents, My Parents and I (Family Tree)*, 1936, or even more uncannily, the Japanese British artist Chino Otsuka's series *Imagine Finding Me*, 2006).[14] In the latter example, Otsuka photoshops contemporary images of herself into old photographs of her as a child, mimicking or doubling her poses and gestures. There are also the examples in film, most recently and intriguingly, British artist Guy Sherwin's experiments interacting with the filmed image of his younger self in both *Man with Mirror* (2011) and *Paper Landscape* (2015).[15] Yet the few examples we can name always acknowledge the distinct temporalities, imposing the view of the older artist upon that of the younger, even to the extent of reaching through the veil of time to pose

14 I am indebted to Peter Schwartz for this reference.

15 Thank you to the editors for bringing this to my attention.

together anachronistically.[16] In the case of these all-too-rare retrospective self-portraits, including Fattal's, there is one party that is knowing (the older self) and one party that is unknowing. The only real difference with Fattal's is that the knowing self refrains from commentary, whereas in all other cases, the older self-portraitist is the one explicitly and implicitly commenting on, and in direct dialogue with, the younger self.

When asked whether she recognized her former self today, Fattal said she would do and say exactly the same things as she said then. In my interview with Fattal, she said she felt there was no difference between the person in the video and who she feels herself to be now. Internally, she felt she was the same person. Despite the ravages of time and history and the necessary cellular transformations of the body, Fattal does not necessarily see any progression or alterations of time upon her own sense of self. It is as if the artist who emerged to claim herself through the act of self-portraiture, was the realization of the woman who then went on to become an acclaimed publisher and ceramicist, with no major further transformation of self-perception.

Self-portraiture (indeed all first-person film) always entails a type of doubling. By definition it splits the self into subject/object, and at the same time collapses the dichotomy, effecting a kind of typological (if not psychological) breakdown. The act of self-objectification turns the subject and object into subject as object, thus eradicating any meaningful distinction. And indeed, when facing a self-portrait, the temporal divide is something the viewer may always encounter, as (with the exception of live portraiture) we are not generally looking at the portrait at the time of its making. But the typical *mise en abyme* of the self-portrait – as the artist gazes at herself gazing – is exacerbated here by the extended 'now time' – and forces not just the artist's subjectivity to collapse upon itself, but time to do so as well. By waiting forty years to make this 1972 self-portrait, Fattal has literally stretched back in time, as if in the process of framing her younger self, she has grabbed her out of her era and thrust her into the present, to co-exist

16 Another interesting example is Palestinian artist Azi Asad, with his paintings of himself as a child dressed as a girl, see *Three Brothers* (2007). Thank you to Gordon Hon for bringing this case to my attention.

as an uncanny double, one who knows but does not know, is but is not the same as, the Simone of the present.

As mentioned, Fattal has claimed full identification with the character on screen. However, in that same interview, she vacillated between that position and alienation from the character on screen. Thus, at one point she claimed to feel no distinction between the person in the video and her current self. Yet at another point she acknowledged that in fact it was difficult to watch as she would have liked to tell her younger self to speak differently, to know what she knows now – suggesting more of a dissonance with the person she saw on the screen, having been changed by the passing of time and a life fully lived. It seems the choice she made in the video was to allow the full identification of this former self to emerge, without burdening it with the knowledge she gained in the intervening years.

The specificity of the self-portrait

In this article I am making the clear distinction between the self-portrait and other forms of first-person address. When thinking of the video self-portrait, two things must be kept in mind: firstly, the self-portrait is intimately and implicitly tied to the history of art and must be understood within that context, and as such; secondly, the self-portrait, in any medium, is not identical to any other form of first-person expression, and in particular, it should not be conflated with autobiography.

The first point, that a self-portrait in film or video is essentially to be read within the trajectory of art history, is to say that the self-portrait is first and foremost indebted to and imbricated within that history. Further, I would add, that it is also a gesture from within the art world and toward the art world. The self-portrait has a long and venerable history in Western art, as a subgenre of the portrait. Its history in the Middle East is roughly commensurate, closely paralleling the developments in Europe. While self-portraiture may not have been taken up with the same avidity and regularity it enjoyed in the West, as mentioned earlier, it was nonetheless practised in

the Middle East, often by those who had been educated in the art schools in Rome, Paris or New York (depending on the era), and in that sense, it can be understood as participating in a 'conversation' between those artists and the world of art that they consider themselves a part of. At least for an artist who is not yet established, it is an application, an entreaty, a proposal, as if to say, I am part of this world, my work belongs here, in dialogue with others.

In other words, unlike the diary, for instance, as a rule, an artist does not make a self-portrait simply to understand themselves better, though that may indeed be an important part of the impetus. An artist makes a self-portrait primarily in dialogue with art history, as a way of asserting themselves as an artist among artists, not simply as a representation of a self among selves.[17] As Jean-Luc Godard once commented, 'a self-portrait, in the sense that the painters have practiced this exercise' should be seen 'as an interrogation on painting itself'.[18] It is a way to see what the medium can do with oneself, not what one can do with the medium and as such, it asserts a necessary relationship with the history of that medium and the context in which it is represented.

This does not mean that it is not also an exploration and investigation into the contours of the self. As National Portrait Gallery Curator, Liz Rideal, notes, the self-portrait is the artist's most personal form of expression. It is the ultimate means of self-analysis, presenting an opportunity for self-reflection, self-expression, and self-promotion; a bid for eternity. One of art's most fascinating subjects, the self-portrait often repeats familiar conventions in portraiture but it also brings scope for complex interpretation.[19]

There are as many ways to make a self-portrait as there are self-portraitists, and yet they are made within a context and in relation to a set of conventions that are in a sense imprinted upon that work like an invisible seal.

17 I can think of no better project to instantiate this point than Hermine Freed's video *Art Herstory* (1974) where the artist stages the mise-en-scène of several famous paintings and re-places herself as the model.

18 Quoted in Kaja Silverman, 'The Author as Receiver', *October* 102/96 (Spring 2001), 24–5.

19 Liz Rideal, *Self-portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2005), 7.

These conventions, such as the depiction of the painter's palate, paintbrush in hand, or looking into mirror, are by no means requisite elements and have long been surpassed or foregone, and yet the dialogue with art historical tropes continues. There are also subgenres, such as the 'bystander self-portrait' wherein the artist is just a face in the crowd, such as Sandro Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* (circa 1475), or the 'group self-portrait' where the artist situates him or herself among people with whom they would like to be associated, such as the artist's family as in the case of Egon Schiele's *The Family (Self-Portrait)* (1918), or the royal family as in the case of Diego Velázquez' *Las Meninas* (1656); the most common of all, obviously being the solo self-portrait.[20] To return to Fattal's unusual work, we can see elements of the solo self-portrait, while there are surely aspects of the group self-portrait in it as well.

I review the particularities of the self-portrait in part to distinguish the video self-portrait from other forms of first-person filmmaking that partake of the personal address which are not implicated as directly in this tradition, and in part to situate this particular video that I have been discussing within a certain historical and aesthetic trajectory. This *Autoportrait*, at least in its initial phase, was an attempt to assert something new in the art world and in the process insert itself within an ongoing historical dialogue around representations of the self in art. Fattal's perspicacious observation that the self-portrait show at MoMA back in 1972 did not have any video self-portraits, and her determination to immediately arrange to tape one, was clearly in dialogue with a perceived omission in art history, and an attempt to address it. And while Fattal may have been unaware of the overtures in video self-portraiture by American artists of the time, she was certainly the first to attempt a video self-portrait in Lebanon. That it was only completed forty years later, somewhat compromising this vanguard statement, seems to be another matter.

A second and related point is that the video self-portrait is not to be considered synonymous with autobiography, precisely because its roots are firmly planted in the history of art. As a form of expression, the self-portrait, like its literary counterpart as defined by Beaujour, makes no

20 Hall, *The Self Portrait: A Cultural History*, 9. Of course all of these conventions have been upended in countless ways too various to list here.

attempt to narrate a life but rather to capture a moment. The self-portrait in a time-based medium such as video could be seen to complicate that moment, extending and animating it, and yet the basic principle remains. As Raymond Bellour tells us, 'the self-portrait is distinguished from autobiography by the absence of a story one is obliged to follow'.[21]

Fattal was thirty years old and had been painting only a few years when she set out to videotape herself for posterity. Why she found painting to be an inadequate medium for her own self-portrait, when she claims in the video itself that painting was a kind of salvation for her, is just one of the paradoxes of this tape. One of the first things she declares, in fact, is that she could never have painted her self-portrait, despite the fact that she acknowledges that painting was the very act that constituted her self, as a self. As she says, 'I started to look after myself the day I started painting...Before that day I didn't dare say "me, I". I looked after others. I kept hidden' (see Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2: Simone Fattal, *Autoportrait*, 1972–2012.

21 Raymond Bellour, *Eye for I: Video Self-Portraits*, trans. Lynne Kirby (New York: Independent Curators Inc., 1989), 8.

So, the self-aware and self-caring 'I' emerges in the process of painting; the moment of expression is synonymous with the ability to assert self-expression. Yet painting is not the mode she chooses to express this explicit assertion of identity as an artist. She tells us later in the video that although she is a painter, she preferred video as the medium for this project, saying that 'the language of cinema is much richer and allowed a longer-lasting vision which was more likely to portray one's character than a mere painting'. Later, however, in my discussion with her, Fattal said that for her the term 'painting' simply stood in for 'art', and that the medium, whether painting or video, was not the point.[22] However, the medium may indeed be the point, and the point is related to the question of subjectivity, given that with painting, the artist is necessarily an active subject, yet appears unable to represent herself in that medium as an object. For that, she chooses video.

The differences are important. When painting, with its bodily gesture, it is the expression of the mind through the hand that is revealed. And while this can also be true, in some senses, in video, in this particular case, Fattal was being imaged and imagined by another, by several others (camera person, sound person, and belatedly, editor), in a medium about which she professes to have known very little. The video was edited twice, first by her cameraperson in the 1970s, in the cut that she found very disappointing and did not approve of (though I never learned precisely why), and much later by the young editor, also an artist and a writer, Eugénie Paultre, who had worked with her and with Adnan on other projects. In both cases, Fattal left the editing entirely to the editors, without intervening and without comment. In our Skype interview, Fattal told me that in the latter case, Paultre simply took the footage and edited it on her own, showing Fattal the cut only once it was done. While, of course, I do not subscribe to the belief that an artist must necessarily craft their work with their own hands, in the case of self-portraiture the status is considerably complicated when in fact it is made by another.[23] The otherwise usually clear line between portrait

22 Skype interview with the filmmaker, 6 April 2016.

23 There is a fascinating historical precedent that I would like to mention here. Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes about a nineteenth-century countess of legendary beauty who had herself photographed professionally by the same photographer literally

and self-portrait is blurred and what in another era we might have called a commissioned portrait, can in this one, be understood as a self-portrait by consensus. The French may accommodate this tension better, where a self-portrait is ascribed thus *un autoportrait de Simone Fattal*, which can mean both a self-portrait of Simone Fattal and by Simone Fattal. In this particular case, both possible interpretations seem apt.

The issue of the hand, of who is responsible for the making, may seem a parochial concern, one raised by a purist who believes in the unique signature of the artist and who is blithely unaware of a history of assisted self-portraiture, whether it was self-portraits painted by an apprentice in a famous artist's studio, or a photographic self-portrait taken by an assistant.[24] After all, there have been productive and provocative instances of self-portraits created or assisted by the hand of another, call them surrogate self-portraits, as long as responsibility for primary 'staging' of the image, as Amelia Jones has phrased it, is the artist's own.[25] But I believe the concern is of a slightly

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hundreds of times, clearly staging the myriad scenarios herself, complete with costume, props, and often quite risqué poses. Solomon-Godeau argues that these unusual photographs should be understood at least in part as self-portraits, despite the technical expertise provided by another. She considers them to be 'the personal expression of an individual woman's investment in her image – in herself as an image'. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Legs of the Countess', *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 70.

24 An example of the former would be the belief that many of Rembrandt's self-portraits were painted in his workshop, under his supervision, but not by his own hand (see Ernst van de Wetering, 'Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: Problems of Authenticity and Function', in Ernst van de Wetering, ed., *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings IV: Self-Portraits* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 144); and an example of the latter would be Robert Mapplethorpe's final self-portrait (1988) which was not only staged but also photographed by another, in this case, his younger brother, Edward.

25 Amelia Jones, 'The "Eternal Return": Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment', Signs, 27/4 (Summer 2002), 948–9. The idea of the surrogate self-portrait appeared most recently, with Los Angeles photographer Whitney Hubbs' show *Body Doubles* with Hubbs photographing other women's bodies as if they were her own. See Alyssa Buffenstein's 2016 review in Artnet News 'The Surrogate Self-Portraits of Whitney Hubbs: The artist explores what it means to photograph the female body'. More commonly, we have seen the artist posing as another, in disguise or externalizing affinities not immediately apparent to the eye. The obvious examples would be Michelangelo's 'hidden' self-portrait as St Bartholomew in *The Last*

different order. The presence and participation of others in the construction of this piece creates a challenge less at the point of creation than at the point of reception – a matter of address more than one of signature.

For instance, consider the presence of the cameraman – another person on the scene, who enacts the framing of this self-portrait. I have already noted that Fattal's eyeline in the opening shots of her, looks above the lens to someone unseen behind the camera. He appears to be the primary addressee in this piece. We cannot imagine ourselves to be addressed directly, a realization augmented by the fact of several conversations between Fattal and her crew seen later in the video. The supplement of the crew is admittedly unusual in any form of self-portraiture, video no less than writing or painting. In the painting the supplement might be the mirror or the photograph gesturing towards the need for a prosthesis or at the very least an apparatus, but the cliché of the paintbrush wielding artist, often standing in front of her proverbial canvas is a defining (if not always present) aspect of the self-portrait – it is the always inferred sign of auto-representation, the quintessential symbol of the autonomous, self-referential, act.

Frequently in self-portraiture, the artist is depicted looking straight out at the viewer, in the case of lens-based self-portraits, that requires that they look straight into the lens. This creates that impression of intimacy mentioned earlier, wherein the spectator is interpellated into a very private act. The artist can also be interpellated as the primary viewer, especially when scopic *apparati* are referenced (looking at her/himself in the mirror or monitor).[26] In thinking about early video art as self-portraiture, part of

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Judgement (1537–1541) or Caravaggio as Goliath in *David with the Head of Goliath* (1609–1610). There were two simultaneous exhibitions on these two themes, at the 2014 annual Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival in Toronto: 'In Character: Self-Portraits of the Artist as Another' and 'Material Self: Performing the Other Within' both curated by Bonnie Rubenstein, Artistic Director of CONTACT, the first in collaboration with Jonathan Shaughnessy and the second with David Liss.

26 There is the humorous painting by *Saturday Evening Post* illustrator Norman Rockwell called *Triple Self-Portrait* (1960) where a bespectacled Rockwell gazes studiously at himself in the mirror as he paints a version of himself without glasses. The portrait and the mirrored reflection of the artist both stare directly out of the canvas and towards the viewer. Thank you to Tania Krzywinska for directing me to this example.

the allure was the sense of a solo endeavour, the artist face to face (or body part to lens) with the camera, where the addressee (the spectator) is also at once the addresser breaking down the subject/object divide not only in terms of representation but also in terms of reception. Once another is introduced on the set (and in this case, also an editor as the next order of addressee) the one to one vectoral relation between self-portraitist and spectator is prismatically furcated in ways that disrupt any direct relationship, whether real or imagined, that is a defining feature of the self-portrait. This self-portrait is only partially addressed to the spectator, unexpectedly highlighting its split address among many potential interlocutors (the art world, the spectator, the camera crew, the editor, the artist herself, the spectator) and in doing so, it seems to render the subject herself multiple.

The specificity of video

In 1989, for a catalogue published for a major show on video self-portraits, Raymond Bellour spelled out four reasons why video was uniquely suited to self-portraiture. He singles out continual presence and the instantaneity of the image, its accessibility and ease of use, its manipulability making it more expressive than, say, film, and its contrasting relationship to television – benefiting from the familiarity of the image and distinguishing itself from it via an emphasis on subjectivity.[27] Interestingly, while all of these elements may ring true for the works in the exhibition he writes about, and indeed for much of the very personal video art that emerged from New York and California predominantly in the 1970s and 1980s, in general the description fails to communicate what is interesting and particular about Fattal's video. Fattal hires a video crew precisely because she does not consider the medium particularly easy or accessible, and it does not appear that she finds video to be particularly expressive, or at least not intuitively

27 Bellour, *Eye for I: Video Self-Portraits*, 9–10.

so. As for the element of instantaneity, we can read the intervening forty years between production and post-production, to have effectively mitigated any benefits of that much-vaunted feature. Fattal's *Autoportrait*, is about as far away as could be imagined from a video like Joan Jonas's *Left Side Right Side* (1972) which plays on the immediacy of the videotaped image and the fragmenting effects of the closed-circuit loop on the presentation of a unified self. In *Autoportrait*, Fattal disaggregates herself, in part with her address, and in part with the radical delay she effects, not due to the principles or particularities of the medium but in fact despite the medium entirely. By the time she actually disinters the miraculously intact video masters they will be in need of extreme measures to transfer the long obsolete analogue material into digitally rendered pixels. Video might as well have been film, in this instance, and indeed, it would have likely preserved better.

Beyond immediacy, there is also the question of mediation. As mentioned earlier, the video apparatus was quickly adopted by artists in order to create a more instantaneous effect, making it the most transparent and seemingly direct medium for self-portraiture to date, as if it could almost efface itself completely in the encounter.[28] While the lack of mediation was never more than an illusion, it is the effect here that is at stake. Leaving the temporal disjunction of the almost biblical forty years aside, the perception of intimacy with the spectator that video promises is compromised with the invitation of an intermediary whose entry into the equation, triangulates and thus diffuses it. And yet, not only may this diffusion be welcome (certainly a relief as compared to the invasive address of a Vito Acconci, for instance) it is, in some sense, inevitable. Acconci is not in the room with the viewer, is not addressing us one-on-one, and is in fact mediated not only through the apparatus of the camera and monitor, but by now at least, through the force field of fame and notoriety his work has received. It is not just Acconci who used video in intimate and intrusive ways. Joan Jonas played up to the camera

28 Visual artist Vito Acconci exploited this aspect most effectively, for instance in *Undertone* (1972) and *Turn-On* (1974), with his insistent address to the spectator, attempting at times to seduce, to irritate, to implicate in one way or another, always as if engaging one-on-one.

semi-clothed, flirting with the conventions of the striptease in *Vertical Roll* (1972); Nina Sobell's dystopic domesticity displayed in *Chicken on Foot* (1974) and *Hey Chicky Chicky* (1978) where the filmmaker appears nude, wearing a dead chicken over her face. Fattal seems sedate and measured in contrast, using the medium in a colloquial way, without breaking any barriers of privacy or intimacy that might cause discomfort or dismay. While others were rolling around nude in performance spaces or galleries and documenting their performances for posterity, Fattal foregoes the shock factor, perhaps a tacit acknowledgement of how far she had gone already to defy the norms of her gender role in the relatively conservative cultural context of early 1970s Beirut. Fattal commented to me that she was one of the few women she knew at the time who had their own apartment. And her autonomy was not easily won, though her class privilege, coming from a wealthy Syrian Christian family, may have protected her from some of the more restrictive social norms and mores of the time.

The contrast with these other more confrontational approaches, however, does not do justice to what she does indeed reveal in her discursive as well as her physical exposure. Her stories are unvarnished and incomplete, allowing for a less than polished persona to emerge from underneath the veneer of a 'well-bred' beauty. Her reflexive questioning of the form as part of the process is disarming, as if, as suggested earlier, the project threatens to unravel before our eyes – she wonders aloud in conversation with the crew, about the purpose of interviewing others for the project about herself, and notes that if she were to try to make an autobiography she would have to film everything, which is clearly impossible. We may not agree with Fattal's assessment of autobiography (if we did, surely no autobiography in film would or could ever be made) but the passage is telling. We learn about the form and its limits, according to Fattal, at the same time as we learn about her tendency to question convention, a neat trick that is deceptively simple.

Returning to Bellour once again, we must note that he does not dwell on the most obvious distinction that video provides in contrast to painting or photography, and that is time and movement (perhaps because he is also trying to distinguish video, as a medium, from film). Like a still photograph, a painted portrait must convey the complex dimensionality of the subject in a single frame, whereas the moving image, be it film

or video, can capture an illusion of motion in time, with multiple frames and aspects available to be seen. Scenarios can play themselves out, an impression of the person can unfold in time. Aspects of their personality can be understood not necessarily through the image alone, but through the image in time. In the interview Fattal told me that when she thinks of herself, she does not see an image, she sees movement, imagining herself in action as it were, making video a highly appropriate medium for her to have chosen, and going some way, in fact, to explain why she felt painting to be insufficient to the task.

In one of the most enigmatic scenes in the video, coming towards the end, Fattal is seen dancing with abandon framed by a monitor from that era. We had already heard a close friend refer to her dancing as something enviable that she did at any opportunity, much to the dismay and embarrassment of her high-society family. The footage was filmed, played and then shot off of a monitor, which places Fattal in a classical, if televisual, frame, further indicating a self-consciousness about the parameters that delimit the self-portrait (see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3: Simone Fattal, *Autoportrait*, 1972–2012.

For me, this footage communicates more about Fattal than all of her rambling monologues. Here we have, distilled into its purest form, the framed portrait in movement and time that does what a video self-portrait does best, reveal the character of the person well beyond what they might tell of themselves, and far more effectively. As Fattal twists and shakes, sensually yet for the first time apparently unselfconsciously, we see an indomitable spirit we can finally imagine could not be extinguished even through the bitter years of war and displacement. When Fattal said she could see herself in that person, that she did not feel so far from her, this is the footage I imagined she was referring to. In all that time with all that life lived, the words one would use to describe oneself may change, but the visceral love of life's expression through the body – and through art – remains, and is captured perfectly in the video self-portrait of *Autoportrait*.

Alia Ayman's *Catharsis*, with which I began this piece, is nothing like Fattal's *Autoportrait*. It is far more knowing, more overt in its exploration of identity and transformation, more confrontational regarding the influences of hegemonic cultures and more introspective about the complexity of identifications and desires.[29] Yet one can see the line through, the emboldening virtues of Fattal's double gesture – the making and the unmaking of a self-portrait, that signals both the strong, almost irrepressible, urge towards self-expression and its inherent, often terrifying, risks. In both its ambition to present in the face of history and the vulnerability and hesitancy it performs in the face of that task, Fattal's video gives clues to just what might be at stake in the act of self-portraiture writ large.

29 Ayman's film is bi-lingual, for instance, with the voice-over spoken at times in English, at times in Arabic, and it interrogates the experience of (mostly) American cultural hegemony without attempting to abrogate or renounce the identities that emerge through its effects.

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