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**THE  
NARCISSUS  
EFFECT**

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Metanarcissism in Video  
(Installation) Art

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Maren Welsch, *Vom Narziss zum Narzissmus. Mythos und Betrachter. Von Caravaggio zu Olaf Nicolai*, doctoral dissertation, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, 2003, p. 6. [http://macau.uni-kiel.de/receive/dissertation\\_diss\\_00001012](http://macau.uni-kiel.de/receive/dissertation_diss_00001012) (accessed 17 February 2015).

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Umberto Eco, *Über Spiegel und andere Phänomene*, aus dem Italienischen von Burckhart Kroeber, Wien, 1988.

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Cf. Vilém Flusser, 'Introduction', in *Discover European Video*, New York, 1990, pp. 6, 7.

4  
Rosalind E. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, Massachusetts and London, 2011, p. 76.

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R.E. Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', in *Art and the Moving Image. A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton, London, 2008, pp. 208–219. Originally published in *October* 1 (Spring 1976), pp. 50–64.

6  
Leon Battista Alberti, *O malarstwie*, trans. Lidia Winniczuk, Wrocław, 1963.

**N**arcissus is a figure that, in various art media, thematizes and problematizes the status of representation, from particularly interesting perspectives. The manner in which he is represented says a great deal about the times in which the work was made: it is a kind of metaphoric mirror reflecting both art-theoretical and social aspects. Artists have usually resorted to depicting the protagonist of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in order to negate or challenge the artistic conventions that were dominant in their specific era.<sup>1</sup> Given Umberto Eco's assertion that video was born out of the mirror and continues its function in a technologically-enhanced manner<sup>2</sup>, I would propose the thesis that the modern-day embodiments and appearances of Narcissus in video art and video installation open up a uniquely intense meta-theoretical perspective. Namely, the video screen, treated as an active mirror<sup>3</sup>, posits questions about both the status of the medium and its connections with the tradition of representation. As a kind of post-medium image, video art does not completely break off its relation with the specifically modernist character of the medium and its tendency towards self-criticism, but rather reopens it in an interplay of transmedial exchange. The modern-day phenomenon of Narcissus's *Nachleben* underscores the historical nature and the recursive<sup>4</sup> structure of the medium, (re)defining it as a bundle of conventions.

The purpose of the present paper is to delineate and describe the characteristics of a trend discernible in video (installation) art which I propose to call metanarcissism. I shall fill this theoretical framework with the works of representative artists of my choice, such as John Cochran, Monika Fleischmann and Wolfgang Strauss, Lynn Hershman-Leeson, John Sturgeon, Bill Viola, Oscar Muñoz, Sophia Pompéry, Nicolas Anatol Baginsky and Andrzej Bednarczyk. What the prefix *meta-* connotes in this context is self-reflexivity, and this autoanalytical nature of the medium interoperates, in modern-day renditions of the Narcissus myth, with the traditional representation strategies, at the same time subjecting them to deconstruction and profound reflection, by employing the potential of new technologies.

The association of narcissism with video art was initiated in 1976 by Rosalind E. Krauss, who published a by now paradigmatic text in *October* magazine, putting an equation mark between these two phenomena.<sup>5</sup> The essay had a negative impact on the perception of video art as a whole, groundlessly narrowing down its properties to an aesthetics of narcissism, defined as a kind of self-idolization. Engaging in a polemic with Krauss's theoretical proposition, I shall anachronously invoke the Renaissance treatise *De Pictura (On Painting)* by Leon Battista Alberti (1435)<sup>6</sup>, in which the author points to Narcissus as the inventor of painting. This aspect, in my opinion, makes it demonstrable that the aesthetics of narcissism in video (installation) art is not something depreciatory but — quite the contrary — something that makes it possible to keep resuming, at the meta-level, the debate on the status of representation in the sphere of what is called new media.

Krauss points out that, starting in the 1960s, video artists would often parody abstraction in their work, using the monitor as a mirror. And then the body would become the central instrument, involved in a process of simultaneous reception and projection of an image. The author invokes e.g. Vito Acconci's *Centres* (1971) and *Air Time* (1973), and Bruce Nauman's *Revolving Upside Down* (1968). In *Air Time*, the camera focuses on the artist himself for 35 minutes, as he sits between the camera and a mirror, spinning a monologue based on the words 'I' and 'you'. In *Revolving Upside Down*, Nauman walks away into his studio and then turns round on his heel and comes back towards the camera. The pattern is repeated over and over again, and the artist's figure, as the title of the work suggests, is showed upside down.

According to Krauss, in this type of projects — where the monitor can be compared to a mirror — artists use a strategy of reflexiveness to attain a radical asymmetry from within. And then the researcher describes the traditional reflection in a mirror as an external symmetry, in which the figure and its reflected image remain separate.<sup>7</sup> The internal asymmetry becomes associated with the notion of narcissism derived from psychoanalysis, which means that the mirroring on the monitor screen is equated with a reflection in the mirror.

Krauss was then uninterested in the connections between video art and the art tradition, which made her text give a very limiting message. According to Irene Schubiger, it was limiting to the extent that its description of video as narcissism, involving the artist getting caught in a loop of self-admiration, practically precluded video from the realm of art until the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> At that stage of her research, drawing upon psychoanalysis, Krauss reduced the medium of video to an intimate relationship between the artist and the camera, without attempting any reflection on the representation status and the condition of the medium.<sup>9</sup>

An entirely different perception of the figure of Narcissus is offered by Alberti's treatise on painting, which proposes to look at it through the prism of the tradition and historical formulas of representation. This is relevant as metanarcissistic works are situated between the potential of new media technologies and the traditional strategies of the old media. I would also stress the fact that, in terms of origin, they go back to Narcissus as the inventor of painting. In the words of Alberti: 'I used to tell my friends that the inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus, who was turned into a flower; for, as painting is the flower of all the arts, so the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. What is painting but the act of embracing, by means of art, the surface of the pool?'<sup>10</sup>

In the opening of Book Two of his treatise, Alberti writes about the superiority of painting over other arts, and unambiguously points to Narcissus as its inventor. The image–reflection becomes a metaphor for painting and a synonym for true art. As opposed to the image–shadow, it is completely filled with colour. In 1916, Willy Flemming<sup>11</sup> pointed to the origin of this Albertian idea e.g. in Florentine Neoplatonic circles, who studied Plotinus, the philosopher whose *Enneads* contain a warning against following Narcissus in losing oneself in the reflections of a beautiful body and in shadows because they are unreal. Erwin Panofsky refuted this thesis, but did not propose one of his own, and Narcissus as

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R.E. Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics...', p. 212.

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Irene Schubiger, *Selbstdarstellung in der Videokunst. Zwischen Performance und „Self-editing“*, Berlin, 2004, pp. 26–30.

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As we know, she did it with in-depth insight in later years, in such writings as: 'A Voyage on the North Sea.' *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London, 2000, pp. 44–53. See also idem, 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, 2, special issue: 'Angelus Novus: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin' (Winter, 1999), pp. 289–305; *Under Blue Cup*, Cambridge, MA and London, 2011. Cf. also Agnieszka Rejaniak-Majewska, '„Kondycja postmedialna” i wynajdywanie medium według Rosalind Krauss', in *Sztuka w przestrzeni transmedialnej*, red. Tomasz Załuski, Łódź, 2010, pp. 42–52.

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L.B. Alberti, op. cit., p. 25 (English quote from Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson, London and New York, 1991, p. 61).

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Willy Flemming, *Die Begründung der modernen Ästhetik und Kunstwissenschaft durch Leon Battista Alberti: eine kritische Darstellung als Beitrag zur Grundlegung der Kunstwissenschaft*, Leipzig und Berlin, 1916.

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Christiane Kruse, 'Selbsterkenntnis als Medienkenntnis. Narziß an der Quelle von Alberti bis Caravaggio', *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, 26, 1999, p. 99. Cf. also Oskar Bätschmann, 'Albertis Narziß: Entdecker des Bildes', in: *Leone Battista Alberti*, red. von Joachim Poeschke und Candida Syndikus, Münster, 2008, pp. 39–52; Hans H. Aurenhammer, 'Narziss als Erfinder der Malerei: Spiegelungen im Werk Leon Battista Albertis', in *Orbis artium*, red. von Jiří Kroupa, Michaela Šeferisová Loudová, Lubomír Konečný, Brno, 2009, pp. 17–31; Hubert Damisch, 'The Inventor of Painting', *The Oxford Art Journal*, 33, 2010, pp. 301–316.

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Victor I. Stoichita, *Krótko historia cienia*, trans. Piotr Nowakowski, Kraków, 2001, pp. 30–39.

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C. Kruse, op. cit., p. 100.

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Ibid., p. 101.

the inventor of painting fell into oblivion for a long time in the art historical discourse.<sup>12</sup> The myth was revisited only by Victor I. Stoichita, who placed the image–mirror in the Western tradition, alongside the image–shadow.<sup>13</sup> He interpreted the story of Narcissus as a transition from the shadow stage, involving the recognition of the external, to the mirror stage where — in Jacques Lacan's categories — the recognition of the self takes place.

Christiane Kruse proposes to look at Alberti's statement through the prism of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (completed in 8 CE), and suggest that such a trope can be discovered in the very work of literature: namely, Narcissus experiences a new metamorphosis, which changes his tragic fate for good, as he is ultimately immortalized, aesthetically, both in the work and in the painting medium.<sup>14</sup> When asked if Narcissus would live long, Tiresias replied that indeed he would, but only on the condition that he *saw* himself. The stream or pool over which Narcissus leans to take a drink of water while hunting has some unreal, unattainable quality, remains still and dark. This is where the curse of Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, catches up with him. According to Kruse, the scenery as described by Ovid appears to be staged. Narcissus's seeing his own face is not sudden, but rather a gradual process. Ovid describes him as a poor fool who desires himself, thus revealing — through the author's meta-commentary — the nature of the mirror of water as a medium. Narcissus's gaze is thus not only erotic, but also aesthetic. Ovid writes that Narcissus perceives himself as a beautiful marble statue. He admires fine materials and forms, comparing his own cheeks to ivory. So the very work of Ovid, as Kruse points out, has aesthetic and art-theoretical implications. This is so because the very myth of Narcissus is an explication of the limits of illusion, an aesthetically and medially self-thematizing text/work.

It can therefore be said that Narcissus is not narcissistic but simply has no idea of catoptrics and image media. He has no awareness of the medium and therefore fails to recognize his own likeness. Hence, he falls in love not with himself in the image but with the other whom he sees: his dilemma is grounded in the mirror medium.<sup>15</sup> Describing the characteristics and staging the pool–mirror as an image medium in the *Metamorphoses* is thus one of Ovid's greatest achievements. The image appears on the surface and cannot be captured. As Kruse points out, there is no apter description of the paradoxicality of the medium, the simultaneous proximity and distance of the image, its illusionary quality and unreachability. Ovid thus defines perception as the illusion of the eye. The beholder and the beheld are one and the same person in this medium. It is only after some time that Narcissus discovers this, becomes aware of his own mortality and begins to understand the nature of the image medium. So he goes through the following three stages: perception of the reflection as a really-present other; discovery of the illusion and sojourn in the world of illusion; thematization of the medium and realization of the rules that govern it. Another advantage of the Narcissus myth is the fact that it shows two possible moments of the mirror: clear and disturbed.

Also Philostratus (3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE) describes in one of his ecphrases a painting depicting Narcissus and underscores the self-thematization of the medium, which anticipates Alberti's view. The work begins by equating the surface of the picture with the surface of the water. The thematization of the medium is a precondition to dismantling the mimetic illusion,

whereupon we only perceive a painted or reflected image, and Narcissus becomes aware of both his mistake and the potential of painting. Narcissus's self-recognition thus entails recognizing the medium. According to Kruse, it is highly probable that Alberti independently — after Ovid and Philostratus — identified the aspect of medium thematization.<sup>16</sup> He was indeed the first, since antiquity, to focus on this aspect, and consequently described Narcissus as the inventor of painting, and thus distanced himself from the moralistic interpretations of the myth that were dominant in the Middle Ages.

When Alberti writes about Narcissus as the inventor of painting, he is not referring explicitly to the mirror as an equivalent of the painted image; he describes painting allegorically, as the act of embracing the surface or plane of the spring pool. This reference to the plane is of key importance throughout this author's treatise because the use of perspective makes it possible to project three-dimensional objects onto it. There appears to be a clear awareness here of a strong connection between the concept of the image as reflection, the image as a mirror, and the perspective convention with its construct of vanishing point.<sup>17</sup> And then the surface of every pool that Narcissus embraces corresponds to a flat cross-section through the pyramid of vision and an open window, i.e. the two definitions of painting that Alberti proposes in his essay. The pool-mirror and the open window become metaphors for the support of the image. Both the pool-mirror and the window are not incidentally characterized by transparency, which makes it possible to transfer reality into the image: it is for this reason that Alberti recommends using a velum between the eye and the object. Narcissus — the inventor of painting — thus metaphorically embraces the pool as the support of the image (picture), or the picture-pool.<sup>18</sup> The author of the first Renaissance treatise on painting suggests that painting connotes duration because it accomplishes a metamorphosis of Narcissus's mortal body into an immortal work of art. Alberti's identification of Narcissus as the inventor of painting can therefore be read in the following anthropological context: man invented painting as an artificial image medium to compensate for his natural death.

In contemporary video (installation) art which references the myth of Narcissus, the surface of the mirror as a metaphor for the image medium takes on a special meaning. It evokes associations with the picture-pool, reminding us of the self-thematization of the medium and the aesthetic and art-theoretical implications, signalled already by Ovid. The phenomenon of metanarcissism on today's art scene not only draws on that tradition but also engages in intertextual interplay with the history of painting. The medium is memory<sup>19</sup>, which engages in interaction with the viewer's memory and imagination in the course of transmedial perception. Video art therefore cannot be narrowly defined as the aesthetics of narcissism because the very notion of narcissism decisively transcends the field of psychoanalysis, having been, from its inception, imbedded in art-theoretical contexts and opening up a meta-perspective for debate on the status of the image.

One of the modern-day embodiments of Narcissus was shown in the 2002 video *Narcissus* by the Australian artist James Cochran. For five minutes and twelve seconds we can view the performance of the artist himself who, having knelt down on a busy pavement in a big city, contemplates his own reflection in a puddle of water. As opposed

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Ibid., p. 103.

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Cf. Claudia Blümle, 'Die Blindheit des Narziss. Zum Ursprung der Zeichnung bei Alberti, Cigoli und Derrida', in *Narziss und Eros: Bild oder Text?*, red. von Eckart Goebel und Elisabeth Bronfen, Göttingen, 2009, pp. 106–108.

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Christiane Kruse, op. cit., p. 105.

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Rosalind E. Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory*, Cambridge, MA and London, 2010, p. 19.

to Narcissus's situation in Caravaggio's painting, the footage is framed in such a way as to prevent the viewer from noticing the reflected image, focusing instead on the concentration and the frozen body of the street Narcissus. The man's gaze is so riveted on the reflection of his own figure that he notices none of the numerous passersby. Sometimes, we can spot the blurred and ephemeral reflections of their moving figures in the water. Preoccupied with their own business, the passersby pay hardly any attention to the weirdo gazing intently into the water.

In Cochran's version then Narcissus is no longer shown in the serene scenery of a spring pool in the woods, but rather in the very heart of the hustle and bustle of a street. He is an island of tranquillity in a sea of commotion, which even more intensely draws the video viewer's attention towards him. His situation touches the issues of solitude in the crowd and the other's indifference: while, in the *Metamorphoses*, it was Narcissus who proved indifferent to the love offered him by the nymph Echo, it is the passersby who are indifferent to his alienation in the Australian artist's video.

Leaning and frozen in one pose, Cochran–Narcissus's silhouette forms an isolated microcosm, existing for and in itself. It remains simultaneously in and outside time, suspended between the modern day and the sphere of myth. The image–reflection arising in the mirror of water on the footway must be hypnotic and seductive. We cannot see him but the *Metamorphoses* and the images of Narcissus known from the history of art come alive in our memory. The medium, as memory, plays transmedially with our memory, and stimulates questions about the status of representation. Reality is replaced by simulacrum, which may prove more convincing than what is real.

A question also arises as to who is more narcissistic: the artist–Narcissus himself or perhaps the passersby, completely preoccupied with and immersed in themselves, passing indifferently by the hypnotized figure? In my opinion, in his self-portrait reflected in the puddle of water, Cochran subversely reflects in his own image — like in a mirror — the condition of contemporary society, diagnosing its narcissism. We live in a culture of narcissism, seems to be the message suggested by the artist, whose thinking brings him close to the thesis proposed by Christopher Lasch, who observed this fact as early as the late 1970s.<sup>20</sup> Cochran–Narcissus is frozen, subject to illusion, and he sinks into a kind of narcosis. As Marshall McLuhan points out, the name Narcissus comes from the Greek word *narcosis*, meaning the state of being numb and becoming closed in a self-referential relationship with oneself: 'This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. [...] He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system. Now the point of this myth is the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves.'<sup>21</sup> As Jean Baudrillard points out, it is 'a matter of the mirror as an absence of depth, as a superficial abyss, which others find seductive and vertiginous only because they are each the first to be swallowed up in it.'<sup>22</sup> So it is also about seduction and self-seduction, which by its very nature is narcissistic.

In Cochran's video, Narcissus thus remains within the stage of illusion, letting himself be overwhelmed, incapacitated by it. He does not recognize the medium but remains

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Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, New York, 1978.

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Marshall McLuhan, *Zrozumieć media. Przedłużenie człowieka*, trans. Natalia Szczucka, Warszawa, 2004, p. 79. (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York, 1964, p. 42)

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Jean Baudrillard, *O uwodzeniu*, trans. Janusz Margański, Warszawa, 2005, p. 68. (English quote from Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer, Montreal, 1990, p. 68.)

motionless, charmed by the beauty of the face in the reflection. In this case we do not know whether he takes it to be an image of another or an extension of himself. If he believes that what he sees is another, he metaphorizes in this way the modern-day idolization of all manner of celebrities, or, if he is admiring himself, then his attitude can be interpreted as an allusion to our culture and its inclination to indulge in the beauty of one's own body. The monitor on which we are viewing Cochran's video then becomes a mirror for *us*, and enables us to realize our own condition. In turn, the puddle with the invisible reflection indicates that the seductive power of illusion is not only far from disappearing, but may actually have grown. 'Bending over a pool of water, Narcissus quenches his thirst. His image is no longer "other;" it is a surface that absorbs and seduces him, which he can approach but never pass beyond. For there is no beyond, just as there is no reflexive distance between him and his image. The mirror of water is not a surface of reflection, but of absorption.'<sup>23</sup> Cochran's video shows the mirror of water exactly as an absorbing rather than reflective surface: the artist–Narcissus completely abandons himself in it. Paradoxically, the image that is invisible to us becomes the focal point of attention and the centre of the filmed intrigue. The circulation of gazes shown in the video directs our interest towards him, making us realize — through Narcissus's situation — that we often chase illusions and concentrate on phenomena brought to our attention by the fact that someone else has become interested in them. The invisible, ephemeral image, which we can only speculate about, can completely absorb us — modern-day Narcissi.

Moving on, the interactive video installation developed by Monika Fleischmann and Wolfgang Strauss in 1992–1993, *Liquid Views: The Virtual Mirror of Narcissus*, places the viewer in two potential situations: either exactly in Narcissus's position or as a voyeur sneaking a peek at his intimate relation with his own reflection. Leaning over a horizontally mounted monitor, we perceive our own reflection. And then when we touch it, the picture sharpness is disturbed, and the image gets blurred. This is accompanied by a sound simulating the contact of a hand with water, i.e. the characteristic splashing sound. The image–reflection in the monitor is simultaneously projected onto a wall where, considerably magnified, it shows the face of the specific person stepping into Narcissus's shoes. Vectors of directional tension are thus generated by gazes, between the viewer enacting the role of Narcissus, leaning over the monitor–pool, and his/her own reflection, but also between the gaze of each of the Narcissi and the gaze of the viewers looking at the projection on the wall. Narcissus is then not only stuck in the closed and self-referential system of gazes, but also watched from the outside: we can see his/her silhouette leaning over the pool, and also — through the oversized projection — we have visual access to what Narcissus is contemplating in the mirror of water. The introverted gazes at himself/herself are redirected to another. We are therefore seen as well, caught, as it were, by Narcissus's gaze when sneaking a peek at the ritual of contemplating one's own reflection. As a result of this type of ploys, the intimacy of the Ovidian protagonist's relations with himself is disturbed by the presence of external viewers, who can 'slip in' between the reflected person and the surface reflecting him/her, and also watch his/her arched body, leaning over the mirror–monitor. This voyeurism, however, is taking place

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Ibid., p. 67

in very comfortable conditions: we are watched as we watch, so we do not hold absolute power. We can become Narcissus ourselves, but we can also look at a parade of Narcissi who succumb to the charm of their own reflections. A medial *mise en abîme* mechanism is in operation here.

Fleischmann and Strauss's work thus puts us in an unusual situation, giving us the choice to either become Narcissus or look at him/her from a distance. When we lean over the monitor, contemplating our own reflection, we realize that we are being seen, which in turn makes it possible to abandon ourselves completely in illusion and sink into ourselves. This is so because the intimacy of the relation is disturbed and subjected to surveillance, which can be read as a metaphor of our modern time, in which — much like in a large panopticon — we are ceaselessly watched by the glass eyes of the cameras.

Relying on the findings of the iconology of the gaze, one could conclude that Fleischmann and Strauss used artistic strategies which turn a gaze into an object<sup>24</sup>, making it, such as it is, the centre of attention. "The window and the mirror are symbolic places, in which we perceive our own gaze [...]."<sup>25</sup> The mirror casts our gaze back, reflecting it. And then, through the window, we cast our gaze at the world. Painting reaffirms the gaze through the window. The iconology of the gaze underscores the correlation between video and the mirror, at the same time implying the metanarcissistic aspect.

Analyzing Fleischmann and Strauss's work, I cannot omit the question about who is the modern-day Narcissus, leaning his face over the monitor-pool. In a fragment above I used both feminine and masculine pronouns, being aware of the fact that both men and women can approach the screen. Everyone can be Narcissus. Artists then make it possible for a host of female Narcissi to appear, whose very presence causes their gazes to be on par with those of men. A woman can watch not only her own mirror image, but also male Narcissi, as they contemplate their own faces on the surface of the screen-pool, thus deconstructing and violating the phalloculocentric order.

Fleischmann and Strauss are confronting us — Narcissi by choice, irrespective of our gender — with that phase of the myth in which the perception of one's own image as someone else causes a haptic fever and a desire to make contact with the figure in the screen-pool. As a result of the touch, we disturb the sharpness of the image, i.e. we find ourselves in the kind of situation in which Narcissus became aware of the presence of a medium. The interactive video technique enables us to experience this event in real time: from the reflection to its disturbance by touch; from a clear image to an unclear image; from a smooth surface to a rippled one. The process of recognizing the medium involves our narcissistic bodies<sup>26</sup>, which — due to the potential of video — enter the situation experienced by Narcissus. An experience of this kind would be impossible in front of a painting. Fleischmann and Strauss's video installation then enables the viewer to become aware of such aspects of the myth which could not be shown in painting.

The disturbance of a sharp reflection entails the loss of a stable recognizable image on the one hand, and opens up a space for imagination on the other.<sup>27</sup> It drove Narcissus into despair because it made him realize that he would never embrace the object of his love. The inability, however, was compensated with the discovery of the potential of

24 Cf. Hans Belting, 'Der Blick im Bild. Zur einer Ikonologie des Blicks', in *Bild und Einbildungskraft*, red. von Bernd Hüppauf, Christoph Wulf, München, 2006, pp. 122.

25 Ibid., p. 123.

26 According to N. Katherine Hayles, despite the fact that the body remains in front of the screen, we are not rid of the body or disembodied within the act of perceiving video art. See N. Katherine Hayles, 'Embodied Virtuality: Or How to Put Bodies Back into the Picture', in *Immersed in Technology. Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Ann Moser and Douglas MacLeod, Cambridge, MA and London, 1996, pp. 1–28.

27 Gottfried Boehm, 'Unbestimmtheit. Zur Logik des Bildes', in *Bild und Einbildungskraft...*, pp. 243–253.



illusion and of the medium. The blurred images show us how the theory of representation and the theory of *mimesis* do not fit them, shifting the focus to the viewer's imagination.<sup>28</sup> The myth of Narcissus and its modern-day version decipherable in *Liquid Views: The Virtual Mirror of Narcissus* thus tell the fundamental tale of the two types of image: sharp and blurred, one compliant with the *mimesis* theory and the other violating the rules of imitation and shifting the emphasis to the viewer's imagination. In their metanarcissistic work, Fleischmann and Strauss confront us with two types of representation, directing our attention towards the *liquidity* of the image and its oscillation between sharpness and blurredness. While our eyes expect a sharp image, our imagination prefers indeterminacy as an aspect inviting interaction. The use of the video technique thus makes it possible to show the processuality of images and their undulation within the image–body–medium constellation, which remains in continuous motion. A blurred image resulting from the disturbance of its surface is therefore indispensable to understand the essence of a sharp image: it connotes not only loss but also gain. It stimulates the imagination and injures representation, redefining the concept based on exact reflection. Then Narcissus, and also we in his role, experience both kinds of image.

What is situated on the boundary line between them is touch. By revealing the meta-artistic threads in both Ovid's work and Alberti's treatise, *Liquid Views: The Virtual Mirror of Narcissus* makes us aware of the surprising role of touch in moving from one phase of reflection to another, from the clear to the unclear one. Narcissus then, as the inventor of painting, unexpectedly draws our attention to the potential of this underrated sense, for centuries situated lower in the hierarchy than sight.<sup>29</sup> During his brief existence, he himself did not touch anyone and was touched by none. According to Hagi Kenaan, the story told by Ovid may be read as a fable with a moral about avoiding touch and the consequences of this avoidance.<sup>30</sup> In the first part of the piece, Narcissus refuses, almost belligerently, to touch others; in the second, he wants to touch the one he can see in the reflection but this proves impossible. He remains profoundly blind to his own need to be touched, which consequently proves decisive for his personal drama.

The inability to make contact with the reflection through touch and the tactile disturbance of the image sharpness open up, however, a path towards noticing the potential of the medium. The nature of Fleischmann and Strauss's interactive project develops with unique intensity the strategy of highlighting the significance of touch in exactly this process: it enables us to touch directly the reflection in the screen–pool, and thus allows for the transformation of the image, from one phase into another. The touch animates the *liquidity* of the images.

A subversive fulfilment of Narcissus's dreams, i.e. the recognition of another in the mirror, is offered by another interactive video installation, Lynn Hershman-Leeson's *Paranoid Mirror* (1995–1996), shown at the Seattle Art Museum. A visitor to the exhibition rooms notices from a distance a round mirror in a gilded, moulded frame hanging on a wall, and upon approaching it what (s)he can see in the reflective surface — instead of himself/herself — is someone else. Having activated a sensor in the floor with his or her presence, the viewer initiates motion inside the mirror: seen from behind, an elderly

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Bernd Hüppauf, 'Zwischen Imitation und Simulation. Das unscharfe Bild', in *Bild und Einbildungskraft...*, p. 256.

29

Cf. Robert Jütte, *Geschichte der Sinne. Von der Antike bis zum Cyberspace*, München, 2000, p. 73.

30

Hagi Kenaan, 'Touching Sculpture', in Peter Dent (ed.), *Sculpture and Touch*, Dorchester, 2014, p. 47.

31  
Robin Updike, *Mirror, Mirror On The Wall. Exhibit's Reflections Are Thought-Provoking*, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19950817&slug=2136939> (accessed 23 March 2015). See also Lynn Hershman: *Paranoid Mirror*, ed. Florian Rötzer and Lynn Hershman-Leeson, trans. Don Reneau, Seattle, 1995.

32  
Milorad Pavić, *Siedem grzechów głównych*, trans. Danuta Cirić-Straszyńska, Warszawa, 2007, p. 121. I would like to thank Professor Wojciech Batus for drawing my attention to this anthology.

33  
Marcel Paquet, *René Magritte 1898–1967: widzialna myśl*, trans. Edyta Tomczyk, Kolonia, 2003, p. 5.

34  
Kathy Cleland, *Image Avatars: Self-Other Encounters in a Mediated World*, Sydney, 2008, p. 81.

35  
Seppo Kuivakari, *Fertile Eye*, <https://www.inter-disciplinary.net/ci/cyber%20hub/cybercultures/c3/Kuivakari%20paper.pdf> (accessed 23 March 2015).

36  
Seppo Kuivakari analyzes Lynn Hershman-Leeson's *Paranoid Mirror* in the context of deconstructing *mimesis* as a logic based on visual reproduction. *Ibidem*.

lady's head with her hair combed into a bun slowly turns towards us, then suddenly blurs away and leaves us with an image of our own face; or a young woman appears in the mirror and speaks in French about her desire to disappear, which she finally accomplishes. The residents of the mirror's interior also include an African-American singer, and a man in a white lab coat, who talks with an accent reminiscent of Sigmund Freud.<sup>31</sup> A mirror operating in a similar way is featured in a literary piece by the Serb author Milorad Pavić: 'In the morning you want to shave in front of a new mirror. You foam your face, run the blade across your cheek, as always. You look and see that there is no one shaving in the mirror. Some pretty girl is sitting in there and combing her hair.'<sup>32</sup>

So this is an inhabited, paranoid mirror where, instead of our own eyes, we encounter the presence and gaze of others, who make contact with us and then vanish into thin air. Until we get accustomed to the bizarre situation, our first reaction is confusion and we are startled by these unsterotypical circumstances. In my opinion the mirror was subversely used by Hershman to negate mimetism, and in consequence pointed to the potential of the medium as memory. The mechanism is also activated on the transmedial basis because the *Paranoid Mirror* was inspired by the role and shape of the mirror in the famous *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* by Jan van Eyck, where it enhances the picture's internal space by including depictions of figures standing across from the two main figures. I would also include in this dialogue the 1937 work of René Magritte, *Reproduction Forbidden (Portrait of Edward James)*, in which we see the back of the portrayed man, both in front of and inside the mirror. When we stand in front of the *Paranoid Mirror*, the first thing we see is the rear of the elderly lady's head and automatically confront the view with the question about the absence of our own reflection. Working in new media and creating an interactive installation, Hershman thus intercepts a selected aspect of the Belgian surrealist's strategy, in order to extend it transmedially to accommodate themes relating to the condition of the medium and Narcissus as the inventor of painting.

Marcel Paquet, an interpreter of Magritte's work, notes that the very moment of panic is more important than its explication.<sup>33</sup> What, however, also becomes significant in Hershman's project is the analysis of that moment of panic, involving a cognitive dissonance in perception. Kathy Cleland<sup>34</sup> and Seppo Kuivakari<sup>35</sup> have put forth the suggestion that we are dealing here with Freud's *das Unheimliche*, 'the uncanny', because what we experience in the process of perception is anxiety, caused by something that has the characteristics of something mysterious and alien and at the same time appears to be a familiar phenomenon.

That anxiety in turn leads to questions about the status of representation and challenges *mimesis* as the foundation of art.<sup>36</sup> The mirror–pool–medium which is being approached by the viewer–Narcissus does not, however, allow him/her to freeze in the contemplation of his/her own face, but rather exposes him/her to others' gazes and to confrontation with them. Perhaps Ovid's Narcissus would have been delighted by the ability to perceive another because then his love would have had at least some chance of fulfilment but in the context of the modern times the moment of panic, which involves a persistent feeling of being watched, makes us realize that the *Paranoid Mirror* is somehow

quintessential of the current situation: that of permanent surveillance. From a distance, Hershman's project gives a false hope that it will be possible to create a narcissistic closed system involving our own reflection, and then unexpectedly makes us realize that we are the object of somebody else's gaze — and that at a time when we are counting on a moment of narcissistic intimacy. Thus the artist thematizes the gaze as an object per se, and at the same time questions the mimetic paradigm of the mirror, and (re)presents the medium as memory and a transmedial bundle of conventions. Narcissus encounters the other in order to identify the aesthetic and art-theoretical implications — as in Ovid's work — but this time these implications are adequate to the post-medium era, and not to the context of defining painting.

Among works involving reflective redactions of the myth of Narcissus as the inventor of painting, a new problem is posed by the 1974 black-and-white project *Waterpiece* by John Sturgeon (7:11 min).<sup>37</sup> The American artist examines the relation between real time and video time as well as the potential of the monitor as a kind of mirror.<sup>38</sup> At first we briefly see a screen with static inside the video, followed by a rather odd self-portrait of Sturgeon, who, having immersed his head underwater, facing the camera, stops breathing, and the clock seen in the bottom right corner counts the passing seconds. The artist interchangeably pauses and activates the loud video player, to produce the final effect by editing a *mise-en-abîme* video and manifest his re-filming strategy. When the footage showing his face underwater is paused, a pair of hands with a compass appear and measure the air bubbles. The absurd ritual is repeated a number of times, the more forcefully to bring home the point that we are dealing with a video within a video. The compass thus encompasses only the image of the bubble rather than its real volume, a fact that can be perceived in the context of examining illusion. In the ensuing sequences we are not always able to tell whether Sturgeon–Narcissus is actually underwater or just his image is reflected in its mirror. Or perhaps the camera is underwater and follows the face leaning over its surface? Sturgeon creates a double medial distance in relation to the viewer, which Henri de Riedmatten, in his analysis of Bill Viola's works, describes as bimedi-ality.<sup>39</sup> Water, as a natural medium, meets a technological medium: one mirror reflects another, and the reflection reflects a reflection. The artist is playing with the degree of reality that the image can reveal to the viewer, and the 'truth' of the image is revealed to us only through the disturbed mirror of the water.<sup>40</sup>

Focusing, as he declares, on the dreaming and subconscious 'I', the artist inadvertently also examines the image–pool–medium as a carrier of illusion: he touches the water surface with his hand (and we cannot be certain which hand is reflected, which one is real, and which is moving underwater), floats plastic cubes on it, disturbs its calm with air bubbles released from his mouth, pours a stream of water from above, and finally arises into a seated position so that the abrupt motion of the upper part of his body breaks the boundary between the two zones: above and under water. A question could be asked: what is the water surface and what the plane of the monitor. Another aspect is introduced by the presentation of an upside-down image, in which the artist's face is situated in a position similar to that of Narcissus's reflection in Caravaggio's painting. In *Waterpiece*,

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The video is available at: [www.johnsturgeon.net/archivedproject/waterpiece/](http://www.johnsturgeon.net/archivedproject/waterpiece/) (accessed 23 March 2015).

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I. Schubiger, op. cit., p. 85.

39

Henri de Riedmatten, *Narcissus in Troubled Waters: Francis Bacon, Bill Viola, Jeff Wall*, intro. Victor I. Stoichita, trans. Alison Anderson, Roma, 2014, p. 182.

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Ibid., pp. 167, 168.

however, we can see only the upturned reflection, and the potential figure that could be its source remains outside the frame. Actually, there is again no certainty as to whether we are watching the actual human figure underwater or just his reflected image.

Sturgeon is thus an outstandingly active Narcissus — one, I would say, who is already past the three phases described by Ovid and, as he has not died of pain, he is now trying to conduct a meta-theoretical examination of the very medium as a carrier of illusion and image. Exploiting the capabilities of video, in a sense he *gives life* to Narcissus's reflection, making it/him breathe underwater and suddenly rise to cross the boundary between the worlds. When the viewer looks at his image, (s)he herself/himself is put in Narcissus's position for a brief while. His/her gaze and that of the artist meet, for that instant making the viewer the *alter ego* of the artist. Sturgeon's emerging from the water and deconstructing the potential of its surface as the mirror-medium explicitly and definitively shatters the illusion. The artist's wet naked body appears before us much like the Lacanian Real: it shocks us with the impossibility of situating him within the symbolic order of the Narcissus myth. I would therefore describe this situation as subversive in relation to the ploy of 'breaking the barrier of the picture surface', from 1639 onwards spectacularly used by Rembrandt to intensify the illusion and enhance the play with the viewer.<sup>41</sup> Sturgeon enhances the play with the viewer, but deliberately dismantles the illusion that was so important to the Dutch master.

Furthermore, in *Waterpiece* the artist also plays with us Narcissi in that he equates the water surface with the monitor, and just a moment later shows that it is actually viewed from a distance as additional elements come into frame (e.g. clock, hands). The image-pool does not always let itself be embraced then, continuously dodging the possibility of establishing a stable view. It is fluid, disturbed, processual, and ceaselessly changeful. It keeps subjecting itself to self-critical analysis, initiating the operation of the medium and immediately challenging the idea of *mimesis* as visual repetition of reality. It creates illusions, albeit a far cry from that of perspective and the mimetic convention of painting. In the end, Sturgeon emerges from the water and breathes deeply, which I would interpret as manifesting the feeling of relief that the medium can be reinvented anew each time.

The aspect of the temporal and spatial conditions of reflection is also examined by Bill Viola in his 1976 metanarcissistic video *Migration (For Jack Nelson)* (7:00 min).<sup>42</sup> In the opening seconds, the artist shows us an interior through a window blind. Gradually it becomes clearer and clearer, and finally a person inside removes the blind, so we get to look inside the room. The subsequent shots focus our attention on a still life placed on a table, and also on an upturned reflection of a face seen in the mirror of water in a bowl. Over time the reflection of the same face — upturned as well, but more deformed — appears in drops of water that drip rhythmically from a tap. In none of the successive shots do we notice the man's face that is the source of the reflected images: the framing of the footage consistently keeps it outside the field of vision. As in Jan van Eyck's painting (*Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*), the reflection serves to enhance the space inside the picture and enables the viewer to perceive what is outside the frame.

Narcissus-Viola (as we are dealing with a self-portrait again, just like in Sturgeon's work) thus initiates the coming into being of images and reflections of a very ephemeral

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Cf. Antoni Ziemia, *Iluzja a realizm. Gra z widzem w sztuce holenderskiej 1580–1660*, Warszawa, 2005, p. 176.

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I. Schubiger, op. cit., p. 183.

status and on various supports. The image in the drops is strongly deformed, anamorphous<sup>43</sup>, restless and ceaselessly changeful. Its fluidity correlates with the liquidity of the dripping water. The reflection in the bowl is much more stable, but also inconstant and dependent on Narcissus's position. The circular vessel forms a kind of frame, which, on the one hand, I would interpret as a reference to the shape of convex mirrors and tondo (self) portraits, such as the famous juvenile *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* by Parmigianino, painted in 1524, and on the other: as a visual echo of the glass balls and cups of glass chalices in which painters in the Low Countries showed reflected interiors and human figures (a feature particularly characteristic of the work of Simon Luttichuys). As aptly pointed out by Irene Schubiger, in this video Viola is referencing the miniature self-portrait tradition in Netherlandish still lifes<sup>44</sup>, engaging in dialogue with the painting tradition.

The migration in the title of the work can therefore be read in several contexts: as an allusion to transmedial migration of images, which — in the new media — remember and initiate strategies known from the traditional media, as a way of underscoring the transformations of reflections observed at various scales, or finally as a way of highlighting the migration of images between their various supports. Migrations of this type require considerable concentration on the part of the viewer, to avoid missing the details and notice as many nuances of the (im)perceptible images as possible. Narcissus–Viola thus examines the status of representation and — playing with anamorphosis — demonstrates that a reflection does not always convey the image of what generates it. *Mimesis* is not something obvious then, and what is more, a reflection may reverse an image and set it in motion. The drops dripping from the tap also evoke an association with Narcissus's tears which — falling on the surface of the water — in addition to disturbing the image of the beautiful youth, must have also captured the image of his leaning figure for an instant, reversed and deformed it in line with the curves of the drops. *Migration* is therefore, in my opinion, a video treatise on the condition of image in the post-medium era, in which (un)obvious instances of referencing the myth of Narcissus (the inventor of painting) make it possible to develop — in a particularly multifaceted way — a self-critical and self-differentiating metareflection.

The issue of the disappearing image–reflection is analyzed by Oscar Muñoz and Sophia Pompéry. While, in the Columbian artist's work, the image disappears because the water which is its support leaks away, in the German artist's video she drinks the water herself and thus depraves the image of the medium that hosts<sup>45</sup> it and makes it visible.

Muñoz's black-and-white silent video entitled *Linea del destino* was made in 2006 (1:54 min): captured in a tight frame is the inside of the palm of a hand cupped to hold water whose mirror reflects a man's face — we are probably dealing with a self-portrait here. The image shudders, floats around, undulates in ripples, undergoes continuous deformations and disturbances. It is as liquid and fluid as its support; the nature of the support is imparted to the image. Gradually the water leaks out of the cupped palm and the image becomes smaller and smaller. Finally — together with the last drops flowing out — it disappears completely, confronting us with a view of the lines of the palm, including the eponymous line of destiny.

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See Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorfozy albo Thaumaturgus opticus*, trans. Tomasz Stróżyński, Gdańsk, 2009.

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I. Schubiger, op. cit., p. 158.

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The reference to the image being hosted by the support (carrier) is a paraphrase of Hans Belting's divagations on media: 'In art history, [...] media are considered to be genres and materials through which the artists express themselves. I, however, define media as carrier media, or host media, which images need in order to become visible, thus as image media.' See Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, München, 2001, p. 27. (Quotation translated from the German original; English edition: Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap, Princeton, 2011.)

Muñoz is playing with the impermanence of the image–reflection, putting to the test the viewer–Narcissus’s perception as (s)he mentally attempts to halt the leaking away of the water being the support–medium and retain the fading facial features in his/her memory. What became the undoing of Ovid’s Narcissus was his prolonged gaping stare at his own reflection; what can drive us to despair in the version proposed by the Columbian artist is the final absence of the image and our inability to stop the process of its gradual disappearance. The reflection processually dodges visibility, thereby manifesting the significance of the connection between the image and the support that brings that image into visibility. The image therefore has to move into the mental sphere of memory, where it is bound to undergo deformations and transformations with time, all the way to effacement involved in forgetting. Paradoxically, in Muñoz’s version Narcissus is not then yearning for himself, but rather for the constancy of the image. Namely, in *Linea del destino* its fluidity is brought to extremity: to flowing apart and leaking away. The key role is played by time, which unremittingly seconds the gradual disappearance of the reflection. Perhaps this aspect could also be interpreted as a suggestion that the phenomenon of fast-flowing images in today’s world is un-stoppable and un-rememberable?

When we take the artist’s place and become his *alter ego* — as is actually the case with any self-portrait created with the use of a mirror — we are overtaken by the artist’s emotions as he intently stares at us and burdens us with his gaze. As Narcissus (did), we begin to form a closed and self-referential system, inside which we become aware of the situational, processual, changeful and fluid condition of the transmedial image. Mimetism and repetition of reality are impermanent and *de facto* imperceptible, elusive, and the viewer must not stop at mere contemplation: (s)he has to co-create the image and activate the memory mechanisms. Also working in the background is the recursive medium, as memory and a bundle of conventions, whereby the reflection in the mental mirror is of a hybrid and self-differentiating nature. Therefore I think that what Muñoz is showing is not the destiny of Narcissus, whose palm map we get to study like palm readers in the final sequence, but of the images per se.

The other work, the 2009 video installation *Miralamentira* (4:33 min) by Sophia Pompéry opens with a shot of an oval plate filled with water. At some point, the artist’s head enters the screen from the bottom edge, leaning over the mirror of water and reflecting in it. We can see both the head and the reflected face, so we are standing behind the Narcissus’s back and watching him/her from above. The feminine Narcissus–Pompéry contemplates her own face for a brief while, whereupon she begins to drink the water, and with it to absorb her own image. She is thus performing a peculiar act of cannibalism and iconoclasm, as a result of which the image–body–medium constellation accumulates in the body. The body becomes the medium and support of the image, and Narcissus saves himself/herself in this subverse way from eternal gaping into his/her own reflection. The mirror does not become a fatal and fascinating trap, as Jacques Derrida would put it.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, in my opinion, iconoclasm in this case consists in a kind of internalization of the image, connected with the consumption (consummation) of the relationship between Narcissus and his/her reflection. The image becomes interiorized, incorporated,

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Jacques Derrida, *Psyché. Invention de l’autre*, Paris, 1987, p. 28.

and absorbed, pulsating in the personal museum of imagination. To paraphrase Hans Belting, I would say that it occupies the body and does not circulate in a bodiless state.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, *Miralamentira*, just like Muñoz's *Linea del destino*, forcibly demonstrates that the medium makes the image visible and brings it into visibility. The image is an ephemeral guest, temporarily embedded into some support in order to leave the body and then come back to it. Pompéry thematizes the temporariness and inconstancy of images, and also their circulation, dependence on the medium and connections with the body as the dwelling for their mental versions. In the final sequences, we can see a blind mirror, showing an empty space formerly occupied by an image understood as a reflection of reality, and self-de(con)structing as an icon of *mimesis*.

Another body of work that fits into the metanarcissistic pattern is a succession of video installations by Nicolas Baginsky, who developed his projects entitled *Narcissism Enterprise* and *Public Narcissism* over the period from 1993 to 2004. In both cases, viewers would enter dark rooms, accessible to only a small group of people at a time, where they would be watched by two cameras: one fixed and the other attached to a mobile arm that followed the movements of a specific person. Everyone was photographed a number of times, and the shots were accumulated in a database, to be used later to show, on monitor screens, faces generated dynamically as collages or hybrids, each composed of fragments of several people's physiognomies. Narcissus thus was not reflected in a mirror but rather his face was filmed and photographed: he looked at himself in the mirrors of the cameras and was subjected to ubiquitous surveillance, to finally recognize himself in the computer-generated images.

And therefore I perceive both *Narcissism Enterprise* and *Public Narcissism* as sub-verse play with the Lacanian mirror stage, which enables us to establish our own identity and, as a result of this self-identification, to see ourselves as a separate being.<sup>48</sup> Baginsky reflects our faces but does so in a metaphoric distorting mirror; playing with fragments of our faces, he recomposes them into new wholes. While Jacques Lacan's mirror stage comprises self-recognition and fusion into a whole of body parts previously perceived as discrete and belonging to the mother's organism, in Baginsky's video installations the reflection leads to a renewed fragmentation and generation of new wholes in which we cannot recognize ourselves. Elements that have been arbitrarily selected from our faces merge into the virtually-created physiognomies and elude our perception. We become a small part of artificially-generated figures or characters to whose identity we contribute like a tiny cog in a large machine, punished, as it were, for our narcissistic desire to see only ourselves. It unexpectedly turns out that I am somebody else.

*Narcissism Enterprise* and *Public Narcissism*, like most metanarcissistic video installations, dismantle the *mimesis*. Although a specific face is reflected in the mirror of the camera, there is no finding it in the final image. The process of generating the image is thus shown as differentiation, rather than reflection or repetition, of visibility.

Baginsky's projects — in the context of activating traditional artistic strategies in new media — also bring to mind the anecdote of Zeuxis and the maidens of Croton told by Cicero in *De inventione* and by Pliny in *Historia naturalis*.<sup>49</sup> An artist set out to

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H. Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie...*, p. 11.

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Compare with Victor I. Stoichita's remarks in his introduction to Henri de Riedmatten, op. cit., pp. 11, 12. Stoichita, and also Riedmatten, write about deconstructing the Lacanian mirror stage in various redactions of the Narcissus myth. According to Stoichita, the book author's conclusions point to the fact that Freudian narcissism, combined with the Lacanian mirror stage, remain distanced from the myth per se. Namely, Narcissus as perceived in Riedmatten's approach has never been part of the experience of narcissism.

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Hermann Ulrich Asemissen, Günter Schweikhart, *Malerei als Thema der Malerei*, Berlin, 1994, pp. 14–19.

embellish the temple of Juno by painting beauty epitomized by Helen, but in order to do so he required a number of models because he wished to imitate the perfection of the best-shaped details of each of the maidens' bodies, which he put together into an ideal whole. The anecdote thus pertains to the issues of idealization and imitation, and also — to use modern-day terminology — creation of hybrid images or montage images. With the use of virtual tools and modern technologies, the principle is in many respects realized in *Narcissism Enterprise* and *Public Narcissism*: what is generated is ideal physiognomies, which do not exist in reality, and their gazes are crossed with ours, making us aware of the advent of the posthumanist era. In this case, caught in the trap of publicly admiring himself, Narcissus is looking into a mirror that dynamically transforms images irrespective of their original appearance in reality. Paradoxically, the relations with those processed images can be as disconcerting as Narcissus's gaping into his own reflection because, in both cases, the focus is on the issues of identity and self-determination.

Andrzej Bednarczyk's 2014 video installation *The Tower of Narcissi*<sup>50</sup> demonstrates the potential of the myth described by Ovid from yet another perspective. Eight sculpted figures of Narcissus are leaning over video screens in poses identical to that in Caravaggio's painting. Placed before the figures to replace the pool in the woods, the screens show a great variety of stills and footage. The Narcissi form a circle, each of their backs turned on all the others, whose presence none of them seems to notice. We are witnessing a mysterious ritual in which each of the participants is strikingly lonely. Jean Baudrillard's thesis that has already been cited here, namely that the mirror has no depth and appears as an abyss underneath a surface whose seductive and vertiginous power stems from the fact that everyone is prepared to let themselves be absorbed, is, in my opinion, also exemplified in *The Tower of Narcissi*. What is of key significance is that the mirror-pool has turned into a video screen and continues to fulfil its function in a technologically-enhanced manner. The modern-day mirror that seduces Narcissus is the screen and its hypnotic power. Living in a culture of narcissism, it is in the media that we hope to see our own idealized image and take a look at the screen as we would in a mirror, which is why we allow the ceaseless stream of images that oozes out of it to take over our imagination.

Each of the figures is somewhat different but, by way of generalization, I would say that the aspect that they share is the medialization of their bodies. They become carriers of various images: collages made of movie stills cut out from original 1960s film magazines or fragments of more recent advertising leaflets distributed by supermarkets, blown-up newspaper headings, maps of the Earth and outer space. Conspicuous in many places on their bodies are eyes, which intently convey our gaze and make us feel uncomfortable about viewing the Narcissi closed in self-referential systems. We are caught indulging in voyeurism, which is particularly acutely expressed in the figure whose back, partly skinned, reveals numerous, almost swarming, black-and-white depictions of eyes, cut out from various newspapers. The skin of another Narcissus is completely covered with this motif, which makes the figure an embodiment of simultaneous vision in all directions. Paradoxically, however, this dispersion of gazes to all sides takes place only on the surface of the body and is directed outwards, and thus incapable of disturbing the



## The Narcissus Effect

Marta Smolińska

inner preoccupation and concentration with which this Narcissus is contemplating what is shown on the video screen in front of him. Besides, growing out of his body, much like a porcupine's, are equally-distanced red pointy spikes, which seem to be both wounding and protecting him from the outer world and from the viewers' gaze, intensifying the sense of isolation.

The stillness and hypnosis of the frozen Narcissi is further amplified by the video shown on the various screens. One shows a black-and-white spiral, whose centre is additionally pointed to by a pendulum suspended above it. Continuously rotating, the image pulls in and overwhelms the figure, riveting him to it like an abyss (of the surface). On two other screens, we recognize the familiar 'no signal' condition: one emits the visual and audio static known from old television sets, the other displays a uniform blue field, characteristic of multimedia projectors to which no source of visual signal has been connected. The absence of the picture, however, paradoxically always becomes a picture<sup>51</sup>, when the depth of the blue begins to evoke associations with monochrome paintings by Yves Klein. Furthermore, being a cold colour, blue generates an impression of optical depth, either of water or of the sky, producing connotations of transcendence. Images based on the absence of image, much like the spiral, have the potential to rivet the gaze and hypnotize. A similar effect is caused by the view of the surface of the Earth, seen from far above and resembling a green carpet. Narcissus can have an intoxicating impression of hovering above treetops, streets, lakes or cities. His body is covered with a map, and the feathers stuck in his arms are a hint of 'wingedness'. But the journey is a purely virtual one, a simulation involving no change of location: taking place only in front of a screen showing the Google Maps application. Narcissus is not experiencing reality, but merely its simulacra.

The other extreme is represented by videos based on dynamic editing, attacking the eye with a torrent of rapidly changing data. In one we can see fragments of black-and-white 1960s movies, in another clips from music videos, news, cooking shows, talk shows, wildlife documentaries... Each sequence is accompanied by a different language, which further underscores the 'shredded' structure of the video and the impossibility of putting it all into a whole. The resultant effect is that of insane television channel-hopping, where no programme is capable of grabbing our attention for a length of time. As if it were not enough that video footage is considerably richer in information than a still image, due to the ongoing transformations of the optical structure<sup>52</sup>, Narcissus is additionally impacted by the rate at which the successive sequences appear on the screen. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz described the auditory unsharpness involved in hearing the roar of the sea, where you cannot tell apart the sounds of the specific waves, and yet the roar attains a tremendous force.<sup>53</sup> To paraphrase Leibniz, in the case of *The Field of Narcissi* we can talk about visual unsharpness, which — despite the impossibility of distinguishing the various images — is also very intense. This is so because, on yet another screen, the images supersede one another so fast that our perception completely fails to keep up with the ongoing changes. You cannot remember, isolate, stop them — all you can do is let yourself be showered by the waterfall of them and be seduced by their energetic pulsation. Paradoxically, they have

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See Marta Smolińska, 'Brak obrazu jako obraz: pamięć medium i gry z toposem pustego płótna w wideomalarstwie', in Ryszard W. Kluszczyński and Tomasz Załuski (eds), *Wideo w sztukach wizualnych*, Łódź and Lublin, 2015.

52

James J. Gibson, *Die Sinne und der Prozeß der Wahrnehmung*, übers. von Ivo und Erika Kohler und Marina Groner, Bern, 1973, p. 290. (James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Boston, 1966.)

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G. Boehm, op. cit., p 250.

the same kind of hypnotic and overwhelming quality as the spiral, the bird's-eye view of the Earth, or the images produced by the absence of video signal. After all, they all have the potential to put one in a trance and a state similar to narcosis, which in turn reminds us of the Greek etymology of the name Narcissus.

*The Tower of Narcissi* thus highlights the fact that an image that is nearly motionless and one that is insanely dynamic are less different from each other than might be expected. Confronted with either of them, and stung by narcosis, the Narcissi lose themselves, falling into isolation from their surroundings and merging into the virtual world. Video as the technologized successor of the mirror engenders the Narcissus of the mass media era, in which the transmission of images never stops and continuously assaults perception. According to Henri de Riedmatten, in many modern-day redactions of the myth Narcissus is stuck in exactly the same illusion stage, comparable to the one in which we find today's television viewer, trying to see through the screen and enter it in order to take part in whatever is shown to be going on in there.<sup>54</sup> Namely, (s)he is incapable of perceiving the divide between the real and virtual worlds as set by the medium.

The set of videos described above is complemented by a video self-portrait of Andrzej Bednarczyk, stared at by a Narcissus whose body is defined by black inscriptions on a white background. Only singular words which make no sense whatsoever can be deciphered from his body; they are much like the Futurist 'words at large' — void of logic and removed from the context of coherent sentences. What correlates with this effect is the peculiar articulation of incomprehensible syllables uttered aloud by Narcissus–Bednarczyk. The artist seems to want to say something important but, despite his attempts, pursing his lips, blowing up his cheeks or sticking out his tongue, he is unable to say anything comprehensible. He makes eye contact with the Narcissus sculpture and with us, peeking from behind the leaning figure's back, but no communication takes place. The words, like the images, do not form a coherent message, are fragmented, appear to be empty sounds conveying no specific information.

*The Tower of Narcissi* thus introduces us to the problematic of modern man's relations with ubiquitous images and words. Bednarczyk's Narcissi are the acid test to diagnose the condition of the consumers of the pulp supplied by the media, including the Internet, making us realize that, despite the constancy of the structure of the eye, perception as such is historical. We used to stand in front of a picture; now we are inside what we call visual.<sup>55</sup> Perception has continued to change with the advent of film, television, Internet, montage..., which — absorbed without any moderation — make the viewer a self-referential closed system, isolated from reality, experiencing the world only in an indirect, mediated manner. From the physiological point of view, a human being using technology continues to be modified by it.<sup>56</sup> As a gadget lover<sup>57</sup>, Narcissus seeks himself/herself in the stream of images: in film characters, in the perfect bodies of models, actors and actresses in television series, and in virtual travels. (S)he waives reality exactly because of the excess of the appearances of reality<sup>58</sup> that offer hypnotic and seductive images. His/her senses are completely intoxicated.<sup>59</sup> (S)he is stuck in the illusion stage, but this illusion is entirely different from the kind that we know from painting based on *mimesis* and defining the

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Henri de Riedmatten, 'Narziss in trüben Wassern — Medienreflexion und Selbstrepräsentation im Werk des Photographen Jeff Wall', in *Automedialität, Subjektkonstruktionen in Schrift, Bild und neuen Medien*, red. von Jörg Dünne und Christian Moser, München, 2008, pp. 196, 197.

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Régis Debray, *Jenseits der Bilder. Eine Geschichte der Bildbetrachtung im Abendland*, übers. von Anne H. Hoog, Erich Thaler und Thomas Weber, Berlin, 2007, p. 260.

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M. McLuhan, op. cit., p. 86.

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Ibid., pp. 79–87.

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J. Baudrillard, op. cit., p. 64.

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Markus Brüderlin uses this term to describe the power of impact of the electronic media. See Markus Brüderlin, 'Von der analytischen Malerei bis zum digitalen Impressionismus', in *Claude Monet... bis zum digitalen Impressionismus*, Basel, 2002, p. 191.

mirror as an implement reflecting nature. The video screen, continuing the function of the mirror in a technologically-enhanced manner, has made it possible to bring into existence the moving and fluid pictures that the Ovidian Narcissus conjured up on the surface of the picture–pool, driven by haptic fever and the desire to touch the figure seen in the reflection. Nowadays, as demonstrated by the video installation *The Tower of Narcissi*, the medium has become an infrastructure of mobility<sup>60</sup>, which — in my opinion — can be anachronously deciphered already from the original version of the Narcissus myth.

To recapitulate, in order to provide a common framework for video installations and videos classifiable as part of the trend that I have identified and called metanarcissism, I would point primarily to the de(con)struction of the *mimesis* convention defined as ‘visual repetition of reality’. According to Arne Melberg, at its earliest beginnings, *mimesis* also encompasses another dimension, as what becomes manifest here is also the difference anticipated as early as the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the founders of the aesthetics of similarity.<sup>61</sup> The relation of art towards reality thus remains largely disjunctive and negative<sup>62</sup>, and not merely imitative. Those differences and mimetic tensions are excellently demonstrated by works in which references to the Narcissus myth can be discerned. It is in these works that the self-critical operation of the medium, as well as the aspect of transmediality, combined with the figure of Narcissus as the inventor of painting, problematize the status of representation in a particularly insightful manner. The trend of metanarcissism shows that art is born out of art and dismantles the mimetic illusion, pointing to the mediation, disturbance and self-differentiation of images. Consequently, the psychoanalytical instrumentalization of the myth<sup>63</sup> or the reduction of video art to the aesthetics of narcissism, as done by Rosalind E. Krauss, not only fails to exhaust the topic, but definitely narrows it. My goal, formulated polemically in relation to the research attitudes identified above, has therefore been to situate metanarcissistic works in the context of the tradition of representation and the history of art, as well as to reiterate the question how modern-day embodiments of Narcissus in the new media thematize the condition of the medium as an infrastructure of mobility, continuing to employ strategies characteristic of what would be called the old media. A medium as a recursive structure that brings something into visibility, which must always be reinvented anew, is both a physical support of the image and a bundle of conventions. Its correct identification, as the experience of Narcissus teaches us, shatters the illusion, creating instead an unstable and changeful image, oscillating between clarity and unclarity, sharpness and unsharpness.

The mirror–pool in which Ovid’s hero is reflected is thus an instrument of perception, problematizing the theory of representation at a given stage of history. In contemporary metanarcissism, the emphasis is on the fluid image, defined by Georges Didi-Huberman — after Walter Benjamin — as unstable and uncertain in relation to both the generated meanings and the proposed interpretations.<sup>64</sup> In the context of the topos relating to Narcissus-the-inventor-of-painting, I would however also point to a certain literal quality of the fluidity of the image produced by the reflection in the water surface, only to be disturbed by the touch of the hand and the dripping tears. As early an author as Jean Jacob Rousseau perceived the mirror of water as a picture of changefulness, which inspired his

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Rosalind E. Krauss, ‘Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition’, *October*, 116 (Spring 2006), pp. 55–62.

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Arne Melberg, *Teorie mimesis. Repetycja*, trans. Jan Balbierz, Kraków, 2002, p. 62.

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*Ibid.*, p. 220.

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Henri de Riedmatten, *Narcissus in Troubled Waters*, p. 92.

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See Andrzej Leśniak, *Obraz płynny. Georges Didi-Huberman i dyskurs historii sztuki*, Kraków, 2010, p. 148.

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A. Melberg, op. cit., pp. 153, 154.

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B. Hüppauf, op. cit., pp. 256, 266, 267.

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Gottfried Boehm, *Bildnis und Individuum. Über den Ursprung der Porträtmalerei in der italienischen Renaissance*, München, 1985.

68  
Michel Foucault, 'Inne przestrzenie', trans. Agnieszka Rejniak-Majewska, *Teksty Drugie*, 6, 2005, pp. 120, 121. (English quote from Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics*, 16, 1 (1 April 1986), p. 24.)

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Quoted from: 'Jak mgnienie. Jerzy Olek rozmawia z Janem Berdyszakiem', *Fragile*, 2, 2014. <http://www.fragile.net.pl/home/jak-mgnienie-jerzy-olek-rozmawia-z-janem-berdyszakiem/> (accessed 25 March 2015).

philosophy of movement and gave him an impulse to formulate his theses of the ceaselessly changeable nature of reality.<sup>65</sup> In some way the French thinker used the experience of Narcissus to point to the potential of the blurred image for revealing a phenomenon which would remain imperceptible in a sharp and clear image. Unsharp and fluid images show us how the theory of representation and the precepts of *mimesis* do not fit them, evoking a truer impression of reality than its ideal, sharp reflection.<sup>66</sup>

I would also consider significant the fact that many of the artists whose projects I have classified as part of the metanarcissistic trend work with their own likenesses. As Gottfried Boehm points out, during the Renaissance the relation between the optical reflection and the autoreflective gaze directed at oneself led to the crystallization of the self-portrait as an autonomous genre.<sup>67</sup> This aspect is continued in video, which emerges as the technologically-enhanced function of the mirror. The issue of the condition of the mirror is problematized with particular intensity in metanarcissistic works which correlate with Michel Foucault's thesis situating the mirror between utopia and heterotopia:

I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place (*lieu sans lieu*). In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.<sup>68</sup>

Foucault's theory can also be applied to the role of the mirror in the process of problematizing the status of representation in the context of the myth of Narcissus as the inventor of painting and a uniquely inquisitive examiner of *mimesis*.

What I find particularly important, and never before analyzed in art history, is that the transmedial migrations of Narcissus take place not only between painting, video (installation), life-size sculpted figures (as seen in *The Tower of Narcissi*) and our bodies, but also appear to be related to the so called pre-photography or ephemeral photography.<sup>69</sup> The terminology has been proposed by Jan Berdyszak to describe the most primordial reproduction of reality made possible by reflective surfaces found in nature. As this artist and art theoretician points out, 'mirror reflections of reality on water and in water are pre-photographs appearing ephemerally, which take place just now as instances of glances and viewings. [...] Ephemeral photographs that come into being in connection with water are always reflections/images transposed by nature and its circumstances.' In turn, these

circumstances cause the resultant image to be changeful, impermanent, unstable, often rippled and not always clear. I would therefore say that, when leaning over the pool in the woods, Narcissus develops a pre-photograph in the form of an ephemeral print, existing solely for him for the duration of direct viewing. This aspect further problematizes the status of representation, as what it adds to the metanarcissistic discourse is photography — the phase between painting and video art, the link between the old and new media. Invoking Berdyszak's theoretical propositions thus additionally strengthens the position of Narcissus as a figure whose successive embodiments enable the de(con)struction of the status of representation.

Metanarcissistic works also incline me to put forth the thesis that the figure of Narcissus as such becomes a metaphoric mirror reflecting the video (installation) viewers, asking the question about their own identity. As assumed by the iconology of the glance, they are inside the image even before they encounter the image — this is the only reason why it is possible to write a history of perception that is concerned not only with historical changes but also with the individual and societal diversity of gazes in the mirror of images.<sup>70</sup> Narcissi, and their transmedial *Nachleben*, from the myth to modern day, thus operate like mirrors which, in addition to testing the status of representation, reflect our condition. They can make us aware of the ubiquitous surveillance, approaching critically its modern technologies. In this day and age of a changing hierarchy of senses, they also remind us of the importance of touch, which enabled Narcissus to disturb the sharpness of the reflection and recognize the potential of the medium. And then, as pointed out by Hagi Kenaan, Ovid's protagonist is a figure for a visuality indicating our relation to the ground we stand on.<sup>71</sup> The attitude of his body over the horizontal mirror of water enables the gaze to remember the weight of our body, the rhythm of the pace and the desire to touch, and thereby points to the importance of sensorimotor and bodily perception, interconnected with the fluid image that is so characteristic of our modern times: 'On the mirror surface, the body has a bodiless image, which, however, we perceive bodily.'<sup>72</sup> As shown by the metanarcissistic works, also a woman can be Narcissus, which results in the de(con)struction of the of the phallogocentric order. The history of the media culture thus appears to be parallel to the history of the body, and the image–body–medium constellation remains in constant motion.<sup>73</sup> Despite all the internal shifts, none of the three components is ultimately extinguished: the image remains neither in the body nor in the artefact, but rather works fluently and freely in the field between them, every time (re)producing anew, in a self-differentiating manner, the Narcissus effect.

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H. Belting, *Der Blick im Bild...*, p. 121.

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H. Kenaan, op. cit., p. 52.

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H. Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie...*, p. 23.

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H. Belting, *Der Blick im Bild...*, p. 122