

# Shifting Identities in the Internet Age

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Humans have long believed that we can determine a person's nature given the size of the head, the furrows in the brow, and arc of the smile. Dating back to before Aristotle, the concept of physiognomy, the relationship between an individual's outward appearance and inward nature, has intrigued us. Through the Renaissance, we have striven to draw connections between physical and cognitive traits in an attempt to classify people. It has been the artist's job to record these outward features, our physical information, in order to capture the subject's biography within a portrait. Now as we enter the Internet age, however, a new, separate digital identity is beginning to emerge. By participating in Internet culture, building profiles, making searches, and communicating online, we produce myriads of digital information divorced from physical reality. Service providers and third parties alike collect this new digital information to identify our habits, preferences, and persuasions, categorize our behavior, and anticipate our needs and desires. While these digital troves mainly provide a glimpse into our digital identity, they represent a burgeoning new method for measuring natural identity as well. As our technique for understanding identity transitions from the physical art of observation to the science of data gathering and storage, artists must reconsider both the form of portrait and the content that informs it.

It was not so long ago that we believed that souls dictated humans' actions, and that faces were the best reflection of those innermost motivators. Portrait artists were heralded as both interpreters and documenters of their subject's life. Rodin, a sculptor acclaimed for his skill in capturing the nature of his subjects, believed that "... there is no artistic work which requires as much penetration as the bust and the portrait."<sup>1</sup> He believed the greatest artworks must bear a deep likeness to their subjects. While artists must not alter what they see, nor should they aspire to simply create a picture perfect copy of life. Rodin believed that, "The resemblance which he [an artist] ought to obtain is that of the soul."<sup>2</sup> Although this proposition may appear to be contradictory -- not to alter what one sees, but to represent the soul that cannot be seen -- it demonstrates Rodin's belief that artists are capable of seeing past superficial traits and into their underlying causality. When Rodin speaks about discovering the subject's soul, he is referring to that person's deepest nature. Such nature, comprising of our habits,

persuasion, disposition, and desires, was encoded within a subject's body and measured as physical information. Great artists, trained in the way of physiognomy, would uncover a subject's nature and communicate it by capturing the meaningful traits, as they perceived them, within a portrait. In this way, artists created works that represented the sum of the subject's actions; "a whole biography."<sup>3</sup>

Now, as we increasingly assimilate digital tools, communication, and culture into our lives, a second type of biography, distinct from our physical one, can be found within our interactions online. Internet technologies are revolutionizing the world. Email and social media are developing broader global communities that transcend nationality and language barriers. Search engines and Wikis are producing advances in information sharing, comparable to those of written word and print. Wearables and smart devices are providing new insights into our bodies and routines. These new digital tools are extremely powerful and have quickly replaced their analog counterparts. With over a billion people across the world now connected, sharing, and collaborating, we are entering a creative revolution some have described as a second Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> The Internet is not only a frontier for new functionality, but also a site of self-discovery. As the Internet becomes a space for entertainment and personal communications, we entrust it with and allow it to inform more intimate aspects of our lives. Kevin Kelly, founding executive editor of Wired magazine and self-proclaimed technophile, compared his own experience surfing the web to an "Aboriginal walk about."<sup>5</sup> The stream of consciousness exploration, leading us through hyperlink rabbit holes into a wilderness of information, can be revelatory. It so much becomes a part of us that many native web users describe being denied access as akin to the loss of an appendage.

The differences between physical information conveyed in classical biographies and the new digital information lie within their methods of encoding and retrieval. Whereas physical information is naturally encoded into our bodies over time, our digital information must actively be compiled by registering our online presence, a service now provided by almost every company. Each time we build a profile, search a phrase, purchase a product, post a comment, or message a friend online, we exude data that is being collected into virtual databases. Companies then retrieve the necessary information from these databases to find our habits, persuasions, dispositions, and desires; the same

traits Rodin sought in his art. Whereas the key to Rodin's search lay in discerning minute physical traits indiscernible to the everyman, ours must be retrieved by finding patterns formed within the swaths of digital information now available. Evan Roth, digital artist, activist, and self-proclaimed "bad ass mother fucker," demonstrated one method for using accumulated digital history to chronicle his own online exploits in the "Internet Cache Self Portrait Series" (Fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> Each portrait is composed of images from the artist's Internet cache, a collection of content stored on web browser accumulated while traversing the web. In doing so he visualizes not only the specific content he has been viewing in a given span of time, but also the quantity of media he has been consuming. Yet, despite the extensive scope and private nature of the content, these self-portraits are not (nor are they intended to be) nuanced depiction of the artist. They do not describe patterns for the viewer, possibly omit the most revealing content, and make no reference to ties between the data and any physical implications. By displaying all of his data with equal weight, Roth shows an un-curated version of his biography. It is impossible for the viewer to separate important aspects of the artist from the mundane. Nor is it a complete biography. Due to the very nature of the media cache, the most sensitive content could easily have been omitted by simply searching covertly. Finally Roth's portraits also refuse to acknowledge any physical implications within his digital history. Without the physical implications or a curated search for nature, Roth's series is a means for discussing only web walkabouts, not replacing classical portraiture.

While our physical information cannot be used to measure our digital identity, our digital information is continuously containing larger portions of our physical one. As greater number of devices acquire sensors and become attached the Internet, we are able to track more real-world events with digital data. Already smartphones, wearables, and information appliances are collecting information and context about our lives that tie our digital interactions to physical underpinnings (searches tied to location, suggestions based on time of day, etc.). Mike Wing, IBM's vice president of strategic communication, explained the growing ties between digital and analog processes in his 2010 talk *The Internet of Things*. "We have seen the emergence of a kind of global data field. The planet itself – natural systems, human systems, physical objects – have always generated an enormous amount of data, but we weren't able to hear it, to see it, to capture it. Now

we can because all of this stuff is now instrumented. And it's all interconnected, so now we can actually have access to it.”<sup>7</sup> It is believed that these digital depictions of physical identity and context will increase in resolution dramatically over the next decade as we develop keener sensors data and teach computers to draw stronger inferences. The implications of this transformation would mean that our digital information may contain a more complete, or at least accessible, physical biography of our lives than what can be gleaned from the face.

As artists enter this new world in which our lives are divided between two interconnected but separate identities, both measured using digital information, they must reconsider how to best portray the human character. Where once our souls were bound to our bodies, they now exist simultaneously between both the physical and digital realms. Artists can no longer look towards the subtleties of a furrowed brow and half smile to understand their subject. To continue just representing faces in portraits would reduce the art form to depicting only half of our character. Not only would it neglect the entire part of our being wrapped up in the digital world, it would become a misplaced symbol, conveying physical information to an audience that increasingly looks towards digital information to penetrate identity. Engaging digital media within portraiture is not a question of remaining timely so much as accepting what a full biography contains in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now, just as it has always been, patrons will be happy to commission a likeness of their face that bears no resemblance to their soul. But, as Rodin advises, the artist “must go his own way and find all his pleasure, all his reward, in doing his best.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gsell, *Rodin on Art*, translation by Mrs. Romilly Fedden (New York: Horizon Press, 1971), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gsell, *Rodin on Art*, 124.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gsell, *Rodin on Art*, 125.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Viking, 2010), 246.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants*, 323.

<sup>6</sup> Evan Roth, “Internet Cache Self Portrait,” *Evan Roth: BAD ASS MOTHER FUCKER*, 2015, <http://www.evan-roth.com/work/internet-cache-self-portrait/>.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Wing, “The Internet of Things” presentation on IBMSocialMedia, March 15, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gsell, *Rodin on Art*, 133.

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## Figures



1. Auguste Rodin, *Bust to the Illustrious Master (Victor Hugo)*, 1883, Musée Rodin  
<http://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/collections/sculptures/victor-hugo-known-bust-illustrious-master>





Evan Roth, *Internet Cache Self Portrait*, 2012, Paris



Sam Oliver, *Quantified Self Portrait*, 2015, Michigan