

LH & 13 ODW

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Notes towards the Perception of Portrait

In 2007 Helen Mirren won an Oscar for her impersonation of Queen Elizabeth II. In her acceptance speech she paid tribute to the monarch. “For more than 50 years”, Mirren said, “she has maintained her dignity, her sense of duty, and her hairstyle.” The profile portrait of Elizabeth on British coins and postage stamps has been cautiously updated four times during her reign, but its essential features— including that hairdo, perfectly styled to work with a crown or a hat—remain a timeless embodiment of courage and consistency.

The profile portraits on stamps, coins and medals are conventionally associated with authority. Forward looking, self-contained. A tribute. Embossed for eternity. No gaze revealed. Analytical rather than psychological. An excessively circulated and multiplied portrait of our time is the selfie, commonly a front view. Ephemeral and inconsistent these self-portraits smoothen and adjust our faces using filters, vignettes and other applications. We are also invited to wear a crown, a hat, bunny ears or a flag face. Cute? A colourful variety of simulated masks. Fun games that strip us of our flaws and eventually our individuality. A risk we are happy to take.

In the awkward search for a self(-portrait), digging through layers of matter. Adding. Taking away. Confronted with unflattering versions of selves and others. An itchy feeling of inadequacy and intimacy. Templates of gender, social status and other determinations roll by one after another, filed. Each one of them an offer and a dictate. Stumbling over inverted apostrophes and logs. Is there any space for screamish grimaces and frazzled, knackered women?

JR