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Bodies in the mirror.

Reflections on reflections

Visual Ethnography

VOLUME XIII | No 1 | 2024
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2024.1-140

Abstract
Mirrors are not accurate reflectors. They multiply images, producing reflective doubles and funhouse mirror distortions, inversions, exaggerations and deformations. They allow us to observe ourselves and feel observed, creating an uncanny overlap between the self and the other; they challenge phenomenological boundaries, creating endless possibilities. Their false transparency can provide illusory perceptions and visual tricks. Mirrors reflect back to us, and usually what we see is not exactly what we expect. Mirrors are uncanny and disturbing objects from a phenomenological and experiential point of view. Taking the mirrored perspective as a metaphor for contemporary Euro-American society, which is dominated by the primacy of the image in both the real and virtual spheres, this special issue brings together six articles, a photo essay and a short documentary devoted to evidence of the inseparability of image and body, including idealised body images, self-representation, appearance, social display, normativity, beauty work, body normativity and unruly bodies, aesthetic labour and self-reconfiguration.

Keywords
Anthropology of body; Gender studies; Beauty studies; Appearance; Embodiment.

The author
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The first article, by Caio Rotta Bradbury Novaes, uses the metaphor of the mirror to talk about one of the environments in which male subjectivity is constructed through body modification: the gymnasium. The allegory of mirrors and windows represents the tacit game of looking and being looked at in a gym, where performances take place. Novaes' ethnography, based on xxx months of fieldwork in Lisbon, Portugal, reveals the spectacularisation of the self through gymnastic exercises in the construction of stereotyped masculinity. Drawing on embodiment theory and gender studies, this ethnography reveals the subtlety of the subjective dimension in the embodiment of techniques/worldviews/dispositions among gym-goers, revealing the symbolic and material interplay between the individual and the social environment.

Marcos Moura, who reveals an extraordinary intimacy with his subject, follows transsexual women's relationship with the mirror with great sensitivity. Through the presentation of two ethnographic accounts, the author wants to take the reader to the places where these bodies are transformed and to the most important questions that arise in the daily lives of these women. By implanting prostheses or injecting hormones, fillers and industrial silicone, transsexual women attempt to achieve "*passabilidade*" (passing) as a marker of the female gender. Passing occurs when an individual presents him or herself, or is perceived by others, as a member of a social group other than the one to which he or she belongs, such as race, ethnicity, caste, social class, gender, sexuality, disability, and so on. In the specific case analysed by Moura, the concept of "*passabilidade*" refers to the quality of having an appearance and characteristics that allow the transgender person to be socially recognised as someone of the sex to which they believe they belong, without their condition being noticed or discovered, guaranteeing them the possibility of a peaceful transition without revealing their incompatibility with the sex they were assigned at birth. In a society where beauty, especially for women, is based entirely on cisnormative standards of beauty, the concept of passing is extremely demanding and places a burden on trans people of unrealistic gendered standards of beauty that many cis people neither meet themselves nor expect other cis people to meet.

Emerson Pessoa observes the reflection in the mirror of the beauty work of Brazilian trans and "*travestis*" (transvestite) sex workers in their construction of an ideal of European beauty. The aim of Pessoa's article is to understand the construction of bodily biographies of Brazilian trans and "*travestis*" sex workers who travel to Portugal and/or the European continent. Through in-depth and comprehensive interviews, and guided by a sociology of the individual and the body, Pessoa analyses the processes of body modification and the production of transnational subjectivities. Mobility to Europe proved to be a significant turning point in the life courses of these people, as it led to the

accumulation of economic, social and cultural capital, which is transformed into different types of bodily and symbolic capital. If geographical transits give substance to different bodily biographies, they all ultimately converge towards the ideal of embodying the European, in other words the acquisition of symbolic capital represented by the embodiment of resources and symbols perceived as aspects of glamour and luxury in prostitution fields in Europe. If European beauty is not a destiny or an accident, but rather a project that is constantly 'under construction', what kind of cosmetic practices, techniques, technologies and products do people use to embody or produce an ideal/desired/legitimate/attractive European body? What does the ideal, desired 'European body' look like? What are its physical contours, features and colours? What are people's motives, desires and aspirations to produce an ideal 'European beauty'? What is the pattern of beauty that is actually desired? How is the European body constructed, shaped and produced? European-ness is not something that simply is, but rather something that must be done, and this 'aesthetic self-fashioning' or 'investment in appearance' is not limited to the physical body, but also includes ways of dressing, personality, language, relationships and lifestyle. We are obviously not talking about the natural body, but about representations and fantasies of 'European-ness' that are constantly reproduced to delineate the boundaries and physical contours of stereotypical others in the European imagination. This article highlights that the idealised 'European body' depends on clothing, accessories, hairstyles, make-up and so on: in other words, 'European is who European does'.

Based on an autoethnographic photographic study and dialogue with 42 Portuguese interviewees who identify as female (age range 40-70), Pussetti's article explores how women experience ageism in relation to their changing physical appearance in the context of their personal relationships. In today's image society, we all strive to overcome ageing and its signs, especially given the ageist message in the media that only young and toned bodies are attractive and healthy. Although both women and men experience ageing, women are more vulnerable to a combination of ageism, sexism, classism and lookism. Fantasies of 'eternal youth', 'frozen age' or 'sleeping beauty' are firmly rooted in gender norms, expectations and moralising aesthetic values, linked to a neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility and self-discipline. Focusing on the body as it is presented to the world, through a multi-method research strategy using in-depth ethnography with middle-aged Portuguese women and art-based autoethnography, Pussetti describes the experience of femininity and ageing in relation to the youth-loving, male-dominated mirror of the dominant culture. By observing the signs of time in the social and medical mirrors, and discussing our ageing bodies with other middle-aged Portuguese women, she explores cultural and personal perceptions, attitudes and concerns about ageing, and reflects on the embodiment of anti-aging messages and values about bodies, beauty ideals and their relationship to age. Anti-aging advertising often adopts heteronormative, hegemonic beauty norms to establish an idealised version of middle-aged womanhood. Current media representations of ageing women not only prescribe what women should look like, but also impose an ideal of positive and graceful ageing that is increasingly linked to an ideal gender performance of normative, white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity that denies structural determinants. Anti-ageing work reveals structures of power, inequality, moral paradox, cultural complexity and political resistance in the way women perceive and choose to accept or resist the physical changes associated with the passage of time.

Federica Manfredi presents the results of an artistic and scientific exhibition as an anthropological case to look at the invisibility of vulvar diseases. Manfredi explains that our society does not recognise vulvar pain sufferers as patients with legitimate pain, confirming that an illness is not just a biomedical condition, but a social construction influenced by power imbalances. Female genital pain is socially normalised and medically under-researched, resulting in

delayed diagnosis, unresponsive interlocutors and meaningless pain that silences sufferers' voices. To survive vulvar pain, resistance is essential: political, cultural and therapeutic. Manfredi's paper presents the artistic and scientific exhibition *Vulvar Pain*, based on anthropological research that Manfredi started in 2023 to explore the experience of vulvar pain through qualitative methods with 17 Italian women. Considering the multiple lenses of the exhibitions, the article, privileging visual narratives to facilitate dialogue between biomedical discourse, social sciences and the embodied knowledge of sufferers, analyses how vulvar pain struggles to be no longer meaningless and invisible. Manfredi's article is also a statement and a struggle. It is a demand for the recognition and legitimisation of women suffering from pelvic pain and a fight for the assertion of rights and for more dialogue and education on women's sexual health.

Isabel Pires' provocative essay 'chimera manifesto' uses ethnographic data, social media research and AI-generated images to explore how women's bodies are being reconfigured in the realm of plastic surgery, à la carte aesthetic procedures and the liberal market. In Greek mythology, the chimera is a monstrous creature composed of different animals. Etymologically related, "chimeric" refers to something "fantastic or imaginary". This visual essay is dedicated to the (de)construction of the modern chimera. This fantastic female creature is made up of parts of rabbits, crows, turkeys and bats. She carries bananas on the back of her thighs and wears saddlebags. Drawing on Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, Pires has come up with terms such as 'rabbit lines', 'crow's feet', 'banana rolls', 'turkey neck' and 'bat wings' to define the unique conditions of the female body. The aim, as Haraway encourages, is above all to be blasphemous.

This special issue dedicated to reflections on reflections, with the mirror as a central metaphor and allegory, concludes with a photo essay presenting some images from the Barbara series by the multi-award-winning photographer Evija Laivina. Evija Laivina (1978) is a Latvian photographer and artist (www.evijalaivina.com). She studied Contemporary Art Practice at the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland. Her work explores identity, the body and beauty standards, with a particular focus on women's appearance and non-traditional beauty routines. Evija Laivina had worked with me on the realisation of the exhibition *Be Fu**ing Perfect*, which took place in Lisbon in September 2022, and a high level of trust had already been established prior to the project. Evija was invited to work with me as a co-author and was involved in the results of the anthropological research. With her photographs, Evija made a significant contribution to changing the way we think about and experience our physicality and our being in the world in the age of perfection. In this dossier, Evija and I have decided to work together again, mirroring each other in a female dialogue, in the presentation of the photo essay dedicated to Barbara. Who is Barbara? Barbara is a beautiful woman in her forties. She is alive and strong, with her passions, secrets, dreams and insecurities. Barbara is a reflection, she is an avatar, she is a challenge, she is a superheroine. Her surreal world draws the author and the audience in, and sometimes unexplainable things happen. Over the months, Barbara has grown and changed: sometimes Barbara is a self-portrait and sometimes she is another person, and these dynamics can change simultaneously. She is a product of uncertainty, constant questioning and analysis. Looking through Barbara as if in a mirror, Evija perceives things about herself. At the same time, the audience discovers new meanings and possible interpretations.

The special issue concludes with the short documentary *'An archive of enhancement practices in Portugal'*, made by Francesco Dragone as part of the EXCEL project, which I coordinated, and which was first shown at the ethnographic art exhibition *Be Fu**ing Perfect* in Lisbon, Portugal. This documentary opened the doors to the most curious and attentive audiences, from both the academic and artistic worlds, who are investigating the use of the body, who are questioning the meaning of hegemonic beauty and what it means to grow old.