

Narcissism

He was watching you. – What did he see? I was wondering.

My Body – Emily Ratajkowski

0

I moved to Berlin some months ago and met a few new people. With some I went for a drink or dinner, and they often talked a lot about themselves. People talk a lot about themselves everywhere, but one usually has some shared history, to buffer the demanded effort to engage. These people however, were artists I was potentially befriending. As the scenario repeated, I felt implicated in a decision: I was either going to listen a lot, or I was going to start dropping information on my person and my work whenever there was a long enough halt in the conversation to jam it in. Was this even a choice?—I thought, as I talked and talked. And I still do, as you're reading this text. Because one of the most fulfilling aspects of being an artist is the feeling of belonging. And it's nice to talk about oneself. In fact, sometimes it's nicer to talk about oneself than listen to others. One gets to replace mere words with provisional, vernacular artistic discourse, while also seamlessly adapting who they are, time and time anew.

I

I read somewhere that artists are people who try their best. It was a quote by someone in a book written by someone else, and the writer said that they initially found the quote to be quite underwhelming, but with time they thought how that actually can't be said of many people.

Everyone can be cynical, and, at times, everyone is. But people also look for something—something sublime and otherworldly—hoping to experience it just enough times, to keep things worthy, but real. Artists make and think, and want to be seen for that. This is what I tell myself. I am an artist, and I used to be a performer. Artists become their artistic drives, or their drives become them—and their lives and output and relationships become entangled and interchangeable and borderless. For relationships among artists are personal, with the ever-lurking potential of turning professional.

If wanting to be clinical, one might define the drive to create and want others to interact with one's (silly little) creations as narcissistic. And, we must not forget, these are narcissistic times we're living in. Probably many people have some narcissistic traits¹—being an artist just blows them up and pushes them to the forefront. I googled artists and narcissism and came across a thought that grandiose ideas, inflated self-esteem, and being unemphatic might have a purpose in arts—those with such qualities usually have more lucrative careers—as opposed to the business world, where they make companies lose money. Yet, the article appeared to consider artistic success only from a financial standpoint. Another article argued a more grounding thought: that some narcissism is necessary for artists to keep creating when faced with rejection, which is inevitable. It is calming to think that narcissism can act like an animalistic defense mechanism.

One tries to do the best that they can, but it seems that doing exactly that comprises embracing one's narcissistic traits and allowing them to do their magic—in rendering the artist confident, resilient, and pushing them to seize opportunities. Enjoy the fall, is what I tell myself. Do what you have to, I tell myself as well. In 2020 I made an exhibition that contained a text titled *35 Years Later*, in which I gloriously exclaimed that I wasn't going to perform anymore. My identity was flashed back at me mercilessly, in the documentation images of myself, and I felt that showing one's face, one's body wasn't as powerful an act as it used to be in the past. However, with time, *35 Years Later* started to corrode and I began to see that I didn't get rid of performing entirely, and probably never will, as long as I participate in the art world. Even though the direct stages were forgone, the indirect stages in bars, parties, exhibition openings, lunch tables, studio viewings, jobs, beds, sofas, queues, and bathrooms were popping up for my beautiful stories to be told—while I dissociated—letting the performer in me do what she does best. I often say that deep down I am a performer: after doing without performance in my work, it only remained in who I was as a person, like a dormant virus looking for a fitting cause to fire up again.

II

The relationship of the body being synonymous with work led me to read *My Body*, a memoir by Emily Ratajkowski, an often-nude supermodel and bikini designer.

If I had your body, I'd never have clothes on, people often say to me. It's just not that simple, I want to respond, but I know that then I'd have to tell them about how I dissociate when my body is being observed, how I don't even really recognize my body as me.²

I hoped that the way Emily dealt with her body was going to tell me something about art, performance and narcissism. She notes how, “for better or worse”, she was always drawn to overexposure and that it gave her a sense of security. *My Body* at times critiques the system which purports its operations, but at times it also discusses the pleasures of being seen, of being watched, of being famous. Emily realized she was born with an asset—a body society deemed perfect—and she went for it. She made a decision to play the “game”, or that's what it feels like now when she puts it into words, or maybe it was just like many other life decisions and callings—it was never really made, until it was too late for it to be unmade—and now she's trying to find ways to unplay it or loosen its grip. She says: *money means power, I thought. And by capitalizing on my sexuality, I have money. The whole damn system is corrupt and anyone who participates is just as guilty as I am. What am I going to do? Go live off the grid?* Enjoy the fall, I tell myself again.

Even though reading earlier that being exploitative and unemphatic can be financially viable in the arts, I think that most artists I know are, at the end of the day, trying to live a life far away from cynicism. They might not appear so in daily encounters, but to be an artist means total dedication, and that cannot be cynical. What artists do is a lot like what Emily does—they expose themselves, in various ways, some aspects of exposing they like, others they don't, but they do it nonetheless, disassociating a bit along the way—always oscillating between participation and isolation, probably as long as they make art.

Emily did the best that she could—she told it as it was. My refusal claim made me realize that performing was just a part of artist’s interactions, both when making friends and when getting shows. Perhaps in the past I would have seen the fact that I didn’t entirely free myself of performance as a failure, but today I just think that I’m doing the best that I can. For truth and reality are always complex, and humans seem to contradict themselves a lot.

It is both so extraordinary and so common, the way our bodies take us through our lives.

¹ It’s important to note that narcissism is a trait, but it can also be a part of a larger personality disorder. Not every narcissist has Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), as narcissism is a spectrum. People who are at the highest end of the spectrum are those that are classified as NPD, but others, still with narcissistic traits, may fall on the lower end of the narcissistic spectrum.

WebMD: Narcissism Symptoms Signs

² All quotes henceforth: My Body – Emily Ratajkowski, 2021

