ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: VERY ANXIOUS PEOPLE: ALICE NEEL'S LATE PORTRAITS

Maura Callahan, Master of Arts, 2022

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In the mid- to late 1960s, as her previously underrecognized work as a painter started to secure visibility in the art world, the American portraitist Alice Neel (1900-1984) began to minimize her subjects' physical environments, often leaving the surrounding area a blank white field. She instead concentrated her paint within the figure, the boundaries of which became emphasized by a vivid blue outline. This attention to the figure and its borders reveals a critical nuancing of the humanist ideals her paintings purportedly defended. Rather than merely affirming the autonomy of the human subject, Neel's late portraits suggest an anxiety toward the coherence of selfhood and its sheltering within the body. This essay considers a small selection of these paintings, created between 1965 and 1982, alongside the work of preceding and contemporary artists who used portraiture to work through Western culture's shifting conceptions of the human subject to different ends. These studies ultimately explore the possibilities and limitations of portraiture in revealing and validating the subject, and how these challenges were negotiated by Neel during the culturally transformative decades which coincided with her late career.

VERY ANXIOUS PEOPLE: ALICE NEEL'S LATE PORTRAITS

by

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For Taha.

Table of Contents

Dedication……………………………………………………………………………...........................ii

Table of Contents…………………………………………………………………………………iii

List of Figures……………………………………………………………………….……………iv

Disclaimer…………………………………………………………………………………....v

Introduction……………………………………………………………………….…………….1

Chapter 1: The Underdetermined Subject…...………………………...………………………..8

Chapter 2: Bursting at the Seams…………………………………………..........................15

Chapter 3: The Pains of Posing…..24

Chapter 4: Under the Surface…………………………………………………...…………..31

Conclusion ……..…………………………………………………………………………..36

Bibliography……………………………………………………………………….....…..40

List of Figures

Figure 1. Alice Neel, *Black Draftee (James Hunter)*, 1965

Figure 2. Barkley Hendricks, *Steve*, 1976

Figure 3. Alice Neel, *Pregnant Woman*, 1971

Figure 4. Édouard Vuillard*, Interior, Mother and Sister of the Artist*, 1893

Figure 5. Alice Neel, *Georgie's Foyer (Anxiety)*, 1967

Figure 6. Alice Neel, *Ginny in Striped Shirt*, 1969

Figure 7. Alice Neel, *Carmen and Judy*, 1972

Figure 8. Andy Warhol, *Screen Test: Edie Sedgwick*, still, 1965

Figure 9. Alice Neel, *Andy Warhol*, 1970

Figure 10. Alice Neel, *Annie Sprinkle*, 1982

Figure 11. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #54*, 1980

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Introduction

"The greatest torture is feeling and then the self… the self is the greater torture," Alice Neel said in 1981, three years before her death. "We have it like an albatross around our neck."[1] In her characteristically candid interviews and other recorded conversations, Neel frequently mused over the toils of being alive in twentieth-century America, but few statements come so near to reflecting the complexity of the worldview which underlies her paintings. Over the course of her nearly seventy-year career as a painter, Neel worked tirelessly to replicate that great weight of selfhood in her portraits of family members, neighbors, fellow creatives, activists, and acquaintances from random encounters. Many have commented on the tension and anxiety that surfaces in these subjects as they appear in Neel's canvases. As Linda Nochlin, a one-time sitter for Neel, noted, "nobody is ever quite relaxed in a Neel portrait, no matter how suggestive of relaxation the pose."[2] Neel described herself as a psychological painter who was most interested in painting individuals afflicted by life's tribulations.[3] "I think that we are a very anxious people," she observed in 1978. "There's a terrible pressure on people, and it gets worse I think all the time. The pressures multiply."[4] By this point, Neel had seen and experienced much as an underrecognized artist, a single mother, and an observer and outspoken critic of injustice. Over the course of her eighty-four years, she observed the unfolding of several wars, the anxieties that followed the detonation of the first atomic bomb, and the dizzying effects of a

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[1] *Alice Neel*, directed by Andrew Neel (New York: SeeThink Films, 2007), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZObd29Jv8ks.
[2] Linda Nochlin, "Some Women Realists: Part 2," *Arts Magazine* 48, no. 8, May 1974, reprinted in *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, ed. Maura Reilly (New York, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 87.
[3] *Alice Neel: They Are Their Own Gifts*, directed by Margaret Murphy and Lucille Rhodes (New York: Rhodes-Murphy Venture, 1978), https://youtu.be/MQtSDLOg05c.
[4] Alice Neel, "Inside New York's Art World," interview by Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel Video Archive at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, 1978, video, 57:47, https://youtu.be/aLG2oNPQ5PA.

rapidly changing society. Throughout her life, she was acutely aware of the precarity of selfhood in a modern world, and it was painting that offered a way to reckon with those conditions.

Well before Neel began painting seriously in the 1920s, faith in the portrait as a credible reflection of the individual had already been shaken by the introduction of photography and the ensuing responses from the European avant-garde. The formal experiments of painters like Manet and Cézanne reflected the cultural, philosophical, and economic shifts toward undermining traditional notions of individuated subjectivity, subsuming their sitters in the materiality of the paint or fusing them with their environment. By the mid-twentieth century, most painting practices championed in the United States had abandoned the human figure altogether, making Neel an outlier in a discipline dominated by abstract expressionism. But when Neel's work finally began to surface in the art world in the 1960s, American artists such as Andy Warhol, Philip Pearlstein, and Alex Katz were already reviving portraiture. This resurgence, however, was predicated on the disruption of portraiture's theoretical foundations: In producing depersonalized, dispassionate portraits, these artists betrayed the tradition of the portrait as a window into the private world of the individual. This critical turn arguably culminated in the artists of the Pictures Generation and in particular the photographic self-portraits of Cindy Sherman, who positioned the self as nothing more than a series of performances.

Neel's late career thus coincided with portraiture's simultaneous reappearance and, ironically, an increasing doubt toward the validity of the humanist attitudes which had historically grounded the Western practice of painting the human face. The model of the autonomous human being, by the final years of Neel's life, had become the subject of critique through the subversive appropriation of the portrait. The unlikely visibility of Neel's work was made possible during this time by an interest, fueled by the growing feminist and civil rights

movements, in her reputation as a bold woman artist and in her attention toward subjects from minoritized communities and the lower classes. But as a result of the antihumanist shifts undergirding the artwork of the contemporaneous avant-garde, Neel's work has been read as a revitalization of the psychological portrait at a time when such work had been determined anachronistic. Neel herself was uncomfortable with being called a portraitist and preferred to describe her paintings as "pictures of people." Like other artists of the twentieth century, she explained, she had been conditioned to regard portraiture as a lower, outmoded art form.[5] Nonetheless, the unfashionability of "portraiture" was not meaningful enough to deter her from painting human figures, nor to disavow humanism, which she claimed to adapt to her own sense of "anarchic humanism."[6]

Much has been said and written about the nature of Neel's humanism and its impact on her portraits. For the landmark Neel retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2021, curators Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey underscored the political inflections of Neel's position as a "radical humanist," positing that through her empathetic, intersectional care toward the human subject, the artist defended the humanity of people living in an inhumane world.[7] This work builds upon that of many others invested in the social orientation of Neel's portraits. Pamela Allara's detailed 1998 book examines how Neel's portraits reflected the shifting culture of the twentieth century and suggests that Neel revived psychological portraiture "by reinvesting

[5] Neel, "Inside New York's Art World."
[6] Alice Neel, interview by Werner and Yetta Groshans, ca. 1980, Werner and Yetta Groshans papers, 1928-1997, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, quoted in *Alice Neel: People Come First*, ed. Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021), 13.
[7] "Neel meant not only to affirm the fundamental dignity and legitimacy of people in the face of an unjust world but also to recognize their agency and autonomy in the face of numerous threats, from the forces of self-interest and consumerism to those of technology, racism, sexism, and, above all, capitalism." See Baum and Griffey, *Alice Neel: People Come First*, 16.

it with its social and political aspects."[8] In connecting the artist's work to a larger cultural backdrop, Allara's study, while not eschewing Neel's life story, critically offset the biographical focus of much of the preceding writing on Neel. This tendency was symptomatic of the well-known pattern in which women's artistic production is understood to reflect little more than their personal lives, as opposed to the more expansive and ostensibly more significant implications attributed to the work of male artists. Such a misogynist preoccupation with Neel's biography is painfully evident in Henry Hope's 1979 article, in which he insisted that the psychological intensity of Neel's work was "forged out of Neel's battered life, her hopes and frustrations, her knowledge and fear of men."[9] The ongoing prevalence of Neel's story in the reading of her work, however, can also be attributed to her own frequent practice of describing it in great detail in lectures and interviews, which culminated in an 1983 autobiography pieced together by Patricia Hills from the artist's recorded statements and writings.[10]

To whatever extent the fascination with Neel's life and commentary has compelled interpretations of her paintings, authors have been apt, like Hope, to identify a psychologically penetrative power in her portraits. In 1975, at the height of the artist's fame, Cindy Nemser praised Neel's ability to "move through the barriers of class and position in order to reveal the essential traits which each sitter adds to the ongoing human comedy."[11] Twenty-five years later, for an exhibition celebrating the centennial of Neel's birth, curator Ann Temkin echoed Nemser in her claim that the artist's greatest strength was her capacity to "excavate the character beneath

[8] Pamela Allara, *Pictures of People: Alice Neel's American Portrait Gallery* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 1998), 14.
[9] Henry R. Hope, "Alice Neel: Portraits of an Era," *Art Journal* 38, no. 4 (1979): 275.
[10] See Alice Neel, "Alice by Alice" in *Alice Neel*, ed. Patricia Hills (New York, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: 1983), 11-186.
[11] Cindy Nemser, "Alice Neel—Teller of Truth," in *Alice Neel: The Woman and Her Work* (Athens: Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 1975), 7.

the surface" and "evoke the essence of another personality."[12] Such assertions have stopped short of questioning what exactly that hidden essence *is* and to what extent its legitimacy is actually affirmed by Neel's paintings. Other studies have revealed nuances in Neel's means of engagement with the human subject and with painting, such as a number of essays analyzing her previously underrecognized formal strategies, Jeremy Lewison's essay on the role of the grotesque in Neel's portraits as a means of working through suffering, and Hilton Als's moving reflections on her portraits of Black and Brown subjects from her five decades spent in Upper Manhattan.[13] But rarely are the core assumptions behind Neel's humanism—the possibility for painting to truly endow a subject with "agency" or reveal their "inner life" or "essence"—meaningfully questioned.[14] I argue that the complexity of Neel's humanism lies not simply in its political impetus, as has often been demonstrated, but also in the anxious ambivalence toward humanism's promise of subjective autonomy and coherence that surfaces in her portraits.

The psychological acuity of Neel's paintings has often been read in terms of the emotionally resonant facial expressions and poses of her subjects, and the expressive brushwork used to render these features. The impulse to focus on the figure in understanding Neel's paintings seems all the more justified as one studies her output during the final decades of her life, when many (though not all) of her backgrounds became more sparsely painted, often with large areas of the surface painted as a field of bright white or pale gray. During this period, the

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[12] Ann Temkin, *Alice Neel* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000), 13, 22.

[13] For more on Neel's formal engagements with painting, see Mira Schor, "Alice Neel as an Abstract Painter," *Woman's Art Journal* 27, no. 2 (2006): 12–16; Barry Walker, "Dividing Up the Canvas" in *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, ed. Jeremy Lewison and Barry Walker (Houston, Texas: Museum of Fine Arts, 2010), 78-91; and Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Alice Neel's 'Good Abstract Qualities'" in *Alice Neel: People Come First*, 103-113. See also Jeremy Lewison, "Showing the Barbarity of Life: Alice Neel's Grotesque" in *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, 34-63; and Hilton Als, *Alice Neel: Uptown* (New York, New York: David Zwirner Books, 2017).

[14] Tim Griffin's brief introduction to a slim catalogue of Neel's late portraits and still lifes eloquently critiques cliched discussions of Neel's ability to capture the inner life of her individual sitters, advocating instead for an understanding of her oeuvre as "an ever-lengthening record of contingency" that relies on an accumulation of subjects. See Tim Griffin, *Alice Neel: Late Portraits & Still Lifes* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Radius Books, 2012), 5-7.

figures themselves began to dissolve into the picture, sometimes with entire limbs left as unfilled, broken contours. But even in these disintegrating portraits, the figure remains the most articulated and central component of the composition. In other paintings which display more "finish," the more fully realized environment still remains minimal, with no attempt to indicate the sitter's identity or their particular world by populating the space with objects or perspectival space. To read Neel's focus on the figure as mere disregard for the world around them, however, would be to miss the greater significance of the artist's attention to the physical boundaries of her sitters. While Neel took great interest in the ways the "soul… starts and ends in your body," I suggest that this concentration of paint, color, and detail on the human form in Neel's late work does as much to draw a line between interiority and exteriority as it reveals the tenuousness of that boundary.[15] In this way, Neel's portraits are less concerned with individual identity than with the experience of being a person in the world.

Neel was frequently reluctant to fully align herself with any established ideological camp. She was at times skeptical of both mainstream communism and, especially, feminism despite her lifelong concern with the burdens of capitalism and patriarchy, equally oppressive forces in her own life.[16] This independence extended to her painting practice. Refusing to choose between the bourgeois individualism that had historically grounded portraiture and the newer models which reduced human beings to the products of social interaction and media consumption, Neel instead sought out a third option to underpin her work. In this thesis, I argue that this conception of the human being recognized an inner subjecthood which was neither separate from the body nor

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[15] Neel, "Inside New York's Art World."

[16] Although she was a party member, Neel was, in her own words, "never a good Communist. I hate bureaucracy... The Communists said [in the 1930s]—the big Communists—when there is socialism there would be no need for art. I thought they were just stupid." See Neel, "Alice by Alice," 60-61. For more on Neel's complicated relationship with feminism, see Allara, "The Women's Wing," in *Pictures of People*, 191-216; and Denise Bauer, "Alice Neel's Feminist and Leftist Portraits of Women," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 375–95, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178749.

guaranteed protection from social conditions, but was nonetheless real, even if it could never be fully accessed by the artist. This perspective crystallizes in portraits produced in her late career, which I define broadly as the last twenty years of her life, when large areas of many (though not all) of her canvases appeared unpainted and color converged over the figure. These portraits, in particular, picture the body as the shell of subjectivity while undermining its impenetrability.

Despite the overreliance of scholars and critics on Neel's words and biography to understand her work, I reject neither here, as the first paragraph of this essay can attest. After all, talking and reflecting played an active role in her engagements with her sitters during their painting sessions, and many of her subjects were important figures in her life. However, I also realize that the image of Neel as a traditional humanist generated by interpretations of her statements and life story can eclipse the complexities and difficulties of that position, the nuance of which emerges through her paintings more so than anything else. Quotes and (to a lesser extent) biographical detail are included here to complement and clarify close readings of her portraits, but not without a healthy dose of skepticism toward their ability to reveal all that we can possibly learn from her enormous artistic output. In my study of a small group of her late paintings, I will also look to the work of Barkley Hendricks, Édouard Vuillard, Andy Warhol, and Cindy Sherman to place Neel's late work in conversation with preceding and contemporaneous portraiture which approaches the autonomy, construction, or dissolution of the self. Through these comparisons, I find that Neel did not simply reject the modernist challenge to the image of the autonomous subject, but attempted to return self-determination and coherence to the individual while emphasizing the great difficulty of sustaining oneself as such under the pressure of existence.

Chapter 1: The Underdetermined Subject

The Ashcan painter Robert Henri, a prominent faculty member at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women prior to Neel's enrollment from 1920 to 1925, argued in his influential book *The Art Spirit* that the simpler the background, the stronger the portrait: "The background is more air than anything else."[17] Neel at one point owned Henri's book, and its impact on her approach to painting evolved over the course of her career.[18] In much of her early and mid-career portraiture, she appeared to heed this advice and the author's attendant warning that while best kept minimal, the background should be continually reworked in accordance with the development of the figure. Painting during the thirties, Neel tended to fill her backgrounds with shades of a single, usually muted color applied with visible brushstrokes to ground the subject, or sharp geometric abstraction to frame and echo their pose. The forties and fifties saw more lively brushwork in Neel's backgrounds, which seemed to take note of abstract expressionism and remained undefined, though she also experimented during this period with more recognizable environments in interior scene portraits such as *Hartley on the Rocking Horse* (1943). But beginning in the 1960s, Neel took the minimal background to new extremes, leaving much of the figure's environment unrepresented so that the subject instead emerged from a white void. As Jeremy Lewison points out, this development roughly coincided with the emergence of bright white backdrops in the influential photography of Richard Avedon.[19] But while Avedon's blank backgrounds, like Neel's, centered all attention on the figure, the untouched areas of Neel's

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[17] Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit: Notes, Articles, Fragments of Letters and Talks to Students, Bearing on the Concept and Technique of Picture Making, the Study of Art Generally, and on Appreciation* (United Kingdom: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1923), 33.
[18] Neel recalled owning Henri's book until she gave her copy to the writer Alejo Carpentier while living in Cuba from 1926 to 1927. See Neel, "Alice by Alice," 21.
[19] Lewison, "Painting Crisis," in *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern Life*, Ateneum Publications, Vol. 80 (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2016), 24.

canvases also suggested the incipience of the subject's world, a sense of liminality far removed from the polish and instantaneousness of fashion photography.

One particular painting from 1965 marks Neel's shift toward leaving large areas surrounding the figure void of subject matter. While a few portraits painted during the early sixties displayed sparsely painted environments, it was the circumstances surrounding the making of *Black Draftee (James Hunter)* (fig. 1) which seemed to prompt Neel to adopt conspicuously unfinished figures and bare backgrounds as a part of her style. This development came not long after her 1962 relocation from Spanish Harlem to the Upper West Side, where she would live and paint until her death in 1984.[20] Although she had left behind El Barrio's Latin American community, her new neighborhood hosted a richly diverse population of African-American, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Haitian, Cuban, and Jewish residents including and in addition to fellow artists and members of the LGBTQ community, all of whom she invited into her studio-living room.[21] *Black Draftee* depicts one of these new acquaintances, a young man who was to be sent to Vietnam within a week of his portrait being painted. In his portrait, he appears on the cusp of dramatic change. Only his head (save for the ears) and the hand it rests on are colored with the deep browns and blues of his flesh; the rest of his body and the armchair beneath him are defined only by sketched black lines. Viewed from above, the sitter seems to sink into the chair and the chair into the otherwise blank canvas, as if the figure's unpainted contours might slip away from his head, which is fixed to a single painted hand. Hunter, a stranger Neel met on the street, failed to appear for his second sitting, and as a result, the rest of the canvas was left unpainted. Why Hunter didn't return to Neel's apartment and what ultimately

[20] Neel's new Upper West Side studio was considerably better lit than her previous base in Harlem, which would account for the overall brighter palette of her post-1962 paintings. See Lewison, *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern Life*, 151.
[21] Ibid.

happened to him is unknown, although he is thought to have survived the war as his name does not appear on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.[22] But rather than scrap the painting, Neel decided it was complete as it was and signed the back, and even went on to include it in her 1974 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art.[23]

Henri's call for an economic mode of representation extended not only to the subject's background. In *The Art Spirit*, Henri wrote that in portraiture, "completion does not depend on material representation. The work is done when that special thing has been said."[24] While the circumstances of *Black Draftee*'s unfinished appearance are incidental, Neel's judgment that it already did what it needed to do—that it said some "special thing"—is justified by the loss it anticipates. In life, Hunter was still in-process; in his portrait, he remains largely unrealized on the canvas because he himself was about to be thrust into chaos that would change the way he saw and experienced the world. In Neel's painting, Hunter is both present and not present, glued to Neel's familiar striped armchair but psychologically elsewhere. "Death, the great void of life, hangs over everyone," Neel wrote as she neared the end of her own life.[25] For her draftee, that void is especially pronounced in the blankness that engulfs his body. In this space, he is coming together (as a young man still growing into a sense of self) and falling apart (into imminent destruction) all at once. He can never, therefore, be "complete."

As the painting's title indicates, the subject is both a socially loaded but obfuscating type, a Black draftee, and a named individual, James Hunter. All portraits which represent an individual inevitably if not intentionally also locate them within some type or group, whether

[22] Carl Swanson, "What Happened to 'James Hunter Black Draftee'? A Mystery at the Met Breuer," *Vulture*, March 8, 2016, https://www.vulture.com/2016/03/are-you-the-guy-in-this-famous-met-painting.html.
[23] "Black Draftee (James Hunter)," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed December 6, 2021, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/656757.
[24] Henri, *The Art Spirit: Notes*, 10.
[25] Neel, "Alice by Alice," 185.

that be, for example, nobility or the working class. Neel's title emphasizes this duality but gives precedence to the sitter's type over his name, signaling his transition from private citizen—an individual in Neel's eyes, at least—to serviceman. Given the United States military's pattern of neglect toward the long-term care of its recruits, especially those of color, the name "James Hunter" might mean even less once "Black Draftee" becomes "Black Private" and eventually "Black Veteran." As a contribution to a catalogue for a 2010 survey of Neel's work, the British painter Chris Ofili wrote a poem in response to *Black Draftee*. Apparently imagining Hunter's internal dialogue, Ofili writes, "I am shedding my skin for camouflage fatigues to blind the faceless enemy."[26] In Neel's portrait, Hunter is dissolving into a foreign landscape he does not yet know to become one nameless body fighting another nameless body. In effect, the painting acknowledges the crisis of subjectivity imposed on people in being defined both categorically and as individuals, to the extent that they are afforded that status at all. While he is defined categorically in both the painting's title and in the racist military state he is compelled to serve, James Hunter is nonetheless individualized on the canvas by the particularities of his features, expression, and pose, but also by what is absent. One senses a preemptive loss of his former self, not simply in his despondent expression but also in the literal disappearance of his figure.

Rather than restore this loss by working from her memory of Hunter, Neel must have intuited that it would be more appropriate to render him as a subject who has been partially deferred.[27] Tracing the parts of the sitter and the environment which are left undefined, the viewer is called upon to complete the image, and in effect becomes implicated in the experience of that sitter as imagined by Neel. The painting suggests what it would feel like to be this person,

[26] Chris Ofili, "Thoughts on the Love that Forgives," in *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, 96.
[27] While Neel preferred to work from life and never used photographs (except for some late-career, commissioned portraits), she did sometimes paint from memory. See Jeremy Lewison and Barry Walker, "Portraits from Memory," in *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, 166.

rather than speculating who James Hunter is as an individual. Perhaps Neel understood that she could not possibly know James Hunter, only the Black Draftee with whom she spent a few hours. Nor could she replicate on the canvas what Hunter himself felt sitting in that chair, only what she imagined of his interior world based on what little she knew of him.[28] The incompleteness of *Black Draftee* acknowledges the limitations of portraiture—it can never create a complete record of anyone—but powerfully evokes the state of living in between different lives and different selves.

Eleven years after Neel painted James Hunter, Neel's friend and fellow figurative painter Barkley Hendricks began his "limited palette" series with a portrait which, like *Black Draftee*, sets a partially disembodied Black man against a white background.[29] But far from Neel's vanishing, melancholic figure, the model in *Steve* (1976) (fig. 2) insists on an autonomy and confidence typical of Hendricks' crisp portraits. With one foot forward, both hands behind his back, and a toothpick protruding from his slightly parted lips, Steve stands tall with the grace and self-assuredness of a superstar. Modeled with faint tonal shifts, his white trench coat and pants merge with the blank expanse around him so that his head and black loafers appear in sharp focus at the top and bottom of the canvas. A narrow glimpse of a real-world environment appears in his aviators, where a reflection reminds us that Steve is in fact posing in Hendricks's studio. Just as I have described James Hunter, Huey Copeland sees Steve as "both present and absent."[30] The embedding of Steve within the white background, Copeland writes, renders him "unmoored

[28] One can easily interpret Hunter's averted gaze as a sign not of his dread for the future, but of his boredom or even annoyance over being coerced into a portrait session with a stranger.
[29] Hendricks described Neel as a friend in a taped visit to the Whitney exhibit "Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney's Collection," where he contemplated Neel's portrait of Andy Warhol. See "Whitney Stories: Barkley Hendricks on Alice Neel," Whitney Museum of American Art, June 28, 2016, video, 2:04, https://youtu.be/dnkZRqzacHk.
[30] Huey Copeland, "Figures and Grounds: The Art of Barkley L. Hendricks," *Artforum* vol. 47 no. 8 (April 2009), 148.

from the sites to which black subjects are presumed to belong," such that we must engage with the figure "on the grounds they offer rather than those that we supply."[31] In this sense, Hendrick's portrait reclaims the autonomy historically reserved for white portrait subjects. But whereas Steve presents himself to the viewer on his own terms, Neel's draftee recedes into himself and further still into the grim unknown that awaits him. Hendricks's white spaces are blank slates upon which his subjects fashion themselves; Neel's, on the other hand, suggest oblivion.

Neel was a close observer and advocate of her Black, Latin American, and immigrant neighbors in Manhattan. She invited them into her home and watched some grow into adulthood, and participated in protests against the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of people of color in the art world.[32] But for Neel, as a white woman, there was always a distance in perspective that no amount of empathy, awareness, or observation could bridge. That distance is respected in *Black Draftee*, which determines nothing of James Hunter's identity except the impossibility of its determination. To declare through painting who James Hunter was would mean only to reduce him. The subjectivity of Hendricks's Steve, too, cannot be fully penetrated, thanks to the gloss and iconic character of his posturing. Hendricks painted *Steve* well into the Black Power movement and during a period of tumultuous uncertainty for African American identity that necessitated the adoption of distinctive styles of dress and speech for "iconographic cover," as Richard J. Powell has suggested.[33] Steve's self-presentation, then, can be understood as a protective layer to preserve the coherence of his selfhood. This is no futile exercise,

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Neel joined multiple demonstrations organized by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, including the protest against the exclusion of Black artists from the 1969 Metropolitan Museum exhibition "Harlem On My Mind" and the picketing of the white-curated exhibition "Contemporary Black Artists in America" at the Whitney in 1971. See Phoebe Hoban, *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 260, 281.
[33] Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 128.

however. Hendricks grants Steve the agency to stand in bold defiance of society's threat toward his self-fashioned identity. We find an optimism (perhaps, for Hendricks, a necessary one) absent in Neel's portrait, which intimates the subject's inability to cohere and even an unwillingness on Hunter's part to resist disintegration. *Steve* is a portrait of self-possession, *Black Draftee* of surrender. James Hunter's transitory situation at the time of his single portrait session enabled Neel to paint a figure who could not be bothered with presenting an identity with any specific intent, or even troubled by looking the painter in the eye. As we will find, many of Neel's subjects in the following years reflect the desire for composure that usually comes with sitting for a portrait, but never do they grasp that self-possession with the agility of Steve. Rather, in these portraits we encounter people in a state between coherence and total unraveling.

Chapter 2: Bursting at the Seams

As evidenced by *Black Draftee*, Neel did not work from preliminary sketches and instead chose to draw directly into the canvas to work out the composition. Frequently leaving the contours of her subjects and their reassessed positions within the frame visible, she suggests the parallel nature of identity itself as always in-process and subject to as much loss as growth. Moreover, by emphasizing the place where the body and the environment, interior and exterior meet, Neel draws attention to the fragility of those distinctions, evoking the unease that permeates so many of her portraits. As Randall Griffey writes, "Neel's painting technique accentuates her subject's vulnerability; indeed, the slender lines register metaphorically as precarious lifelines threatening to trail off completely."[34] The nature of these borders as "lifelines" became more stressed with the introduction in the mid-sixties and increasing use in the seventies and eighties of Neel's exposed blue wash used to lay out her compositions. In some portraits, such as *Benny and Mary Ellen Andrews* (1972) and *David Boudon and Gregory Battock* (1970), the ultramarine lines fuse the sitters to Neel's blue-striped armchair, troubling the boundary between interior and exterior, self and not-self. In these and other late portraits, the blue is also suggestive of veins, drawing the force of blood flowing within the body out and around the figures' visible surfaces. In other ways, as we will see, Neel animates the pressure between the inside and outside of the self contained within the body. "Just as the mind makes metaphors on the basis of embodied experience," suggests Pamela Allara, "so Neel's portraits are metaphors for a concept of identity that is characterized by a continual traversing of boundaries between public and private, interior and exterior."[35]

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[34] Randall Griffey, "Painting Fruit(s)" in *Alice Neel: People Come First*, 88.
[35] Allara, xix.

This metaphor is perhaps no better exemplified than in Neel's portraits of pregnant nudes. Pregnancy, as Neel knew well as a mother of four (though she raised only two into adulthood), entails a strain of bodily containment and a shifting sense of selfhood. In *Pregnant Woman* (1971) (fig. 3), the nude figure is fully painted (apart from two vanishing toes) within a bright ultramarine contour while reclining in an otherwise sparsely rendered living room. Far along in her pregnancy, her body no longer familiar, she is on the verge of yet another transformation in which something once a part of herself will be removed and become something that is distinctly not her. The concentration of detail and color within and around the woman in Neel's painting makes the anticipation of the impending expulsion from her body painfully palpable, like a deep breath held too long. Neel seems to have reveled in painting this tension: "...plastically, it is very exciting," she said of pregnancy. Discussing *Pregnant Woman*, she observed: "it's almost tragic the way the top part of her body is pulling the ribs."[36] This bodily stress seems to spread all over the woman's figure. Her belly and nipples appear inflated near to the point of bursting, while her head is framed and locked into place by her arms, as if to keep it from rolling away. Although her body is held together within its edges, there is seepage of the sickly green hue of her flesh onto the surface of the sofa, producing a shadow of excess around her form which creeps up to sculpt the imposing male face behind her. This face belongs to Neel's son, Richard, and the nude model is her daughter-in-law Nancy, pregnant at the time with twins. Like that of the male figure in *Pregnant Julie and Algis*, painted four years earlier, Richard's head seems nearly attached to his counterpart's as if we are seeing a kind of psychological doubling. Richard's gaze directed from overhead and out of Nancy's view aggravates her loss of self-containment; she cannot see what sees her, and so she attempts to block his view with her arm. At the same time, Richard's

[36] Neel, "Alice on Alice," 162.

disembodied head, colored in patches by the excess emanating from his partner, also lacks coherence. Because we view Nancy opposite Richard, mirroring his position, that lack is then reflected in ourselves as we, too, look upon Nancy's body, which is no less anxiety-provoking in the viewer than suggestive of her own discomfort. This is not the female nude of the Western canon which endows the (male) viewer with a sense of dominion or pleasure, nor does it grant the female subject strength or dignity.

Neel painted Nancy once previously during her pregnancy and multiple times thereafter with her young children. Despite her close relationship with the model (to whom she even referred as her best friend in a late interview) Neel in this instance chose to remove her identity from the title, framing her not as an individual but as a social category which had become particularly fraught in the course of feminism's second wave.[37] By painting pregnant women unclothed and under the stress of their own social and bodily containment, Neel troubles the role of the female nude described by Lynda Nead as a "magical regulation of the female body, containing it and momentarily repairing the orifices and tears."[38] Characterized by smooth, unbroken surfaces, the female nude of the Western artistic tradition has historically assured the viewer a unified subjectivity. Given the entanglement of the body and the perception of self, the female nude can therefore be understood as "a metaphor for these processes of separation and ordering, for the formation of self and the spaces of the other."[39] Neel's distressed pregnant nude, conversely, can be seen as a metaphor for the immense energy required to maintain that separation.

[37] Said Neel, "If it wasn't for Nancy, I couldn't exist." See Murphy and Rhodes, *They Are Their Own Gifts*.
[38] Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7.
[39] Ibid.

Whereas men have historically been permitted and in certain ways encouraged to take up space, the demand for women to minimize themselves physically and socially compounds the strain we see in Nancy's confinement. This gendered double standard is apparent in Neel's portraits of heterosexual couples from around the same time, such as *Ian and Mary* (1971) and *Benny and Mary Ellen Andrews*, in both of which the male is seated in Neel's armchair with his legs spread, taking up as much space as possible, while his female partner is tucked into the space at his right. In these portraits, Neel represents social expectations enforced and inscribed onto the subjects' bodies. Her outsized, pregnant woman, however, can only attempt to curl into herself and still spills out across the canvas. As in *Pregnant Julie and Algis* and *Margaret Evans Pregnant* (1978), the area where the pregnant body and the environment meet is highlighted by a bold blue border, as if to draw attention to its own instability and evoke the pressure of Nancy's insides against her outsides, literally and metaphorically. The line itself, while more or less intact, seems to tremble.

The sitters' troubled boundaries in Neel's late portraits appear particularly stressed when compared to the paintings of her predecessors who were similarly concerned with the subject's inability to cohere as a secure whole. In a close study of Édouard Vuillard's double portrait *Mother and Sister of the Artist* (1893) (fig. 4), Susan Sidlauskas reveals how the artist diffuses energy across the domestic interior rather than exclusively within the two bodies that occupy it. While Vuillard's lively brushstrokes merge figure and ground, the two subjects display radically different states of being in relation to their surroundings, which appear equally if not more animated than the human figures. The mother, appearing as a black monolith seated comfortably in her chair, seems "condensed" while her daughter Marie hunches over to adapt herself to the claustrophobic interior, her plaid dress camouflaging with the patterned wallpaper. If she were to

stand straight, her head would go off the frame. Madame Vuillard, a single mother and the authority of the household and her corset-making business, appears stable, her boxy shape echoing that of the bureau behind her, in stark contrast to the active dissolution of her daughter into the environment.

Like Neel's *Pregnant Woman*, Vuillard's *Mother and Sister of the Artist* appeared at a time marked by advancements toward women's sexual and economic independence as well as opposition which sought to reaffirm their place in the household. Although female artisans like the Vuillards were increasingly valued in the 1890s for their supposedly natural talents for decoration, this celebration was really an effort to reestablish women's place firmly in the household, a part of the social contract of the bourgeois family which had been challenged by the independent "New Woman" of France.[40] Vuillard's double-portrait finds the older woman firmly established within the domestic space—and, in the absence of a patriarchal figure, even empowered in her enthroned and almost masculine position—while the younger woman begins to vanish within its surfaces, perhaps pulled between contested expectations of womanhood and her own evolving identity. The contrast between Madame Vuillard and her daughter indicates the artist's conception of the human being as neither fully autonomous nor entirely dependent on the exterior world, but existing in fluctuating degrees of both states to the extent that, as for Neel, a coherent self demanded considerable effort and was never a given, nor ever fully achieved.

The "ideological goal" of integrating body and place shared by the Nabis at the fin de siècle is apparent in Vuillard's interior scenes and affirmed by his journals.[41] In the figure of his sister, however, Vuillard also painted a struggle against this pressure placed upon the

[40] Susan Sidlauskas, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 101.
[41] Ibid., 94-95.

containment of the self within the body. As Sidlauskas indicates, the constricted figure of Marie suggests a pained attempt at self-containment, not unlike Nancy folding into herself on the sofa. Forever devoted to the domestic interior, Vuillard attends to all areas of the canvas with equal attention in "an agitated act of space-filling done to combat the fear of nothingness."[42] Despite the lively daubing of paint over and around Marie, this application falls short of fully concealing the blankness of the unvarnished canvas peeking beneath the brushstrokes. In her late portraits, Neel's subjects seem to shake within their physical containers or even begin to break apart, but not into a knowable interior space like those found in Vuillard's paintings. The void is instead laid bare and her subjects are at risk of being dispersed and absorbed into a blank plane in which little, if anything, is defined. Both painters intimate an anxiety toward the otherness beyond the limits of the knowable self, but whereas Vuillard disperses the figure across the painting's surface in an attempt to block out the nothingness surfacing underneath, Neel confronts and defends against the void by exposing it and by concentrating her paint within the circumscribed boundaries of the subject. In *Pregnant Woman*, Neel provides for Nancy what Marie attempts to provide for herself—unity—while signaling the inevitable seepage of her subject into the exterior world. While Nancy's swollen body anticipates this outward diffusion, the confusion of daubed brushstrokes constituting Marie and her surroundings elicits permeation in both directions: the self spreading outward and the world penetrating the self. But if Nancy and Marie are both, in different capacities, beginning to fall apart, Richard and Madame Vuillard, husband and matriarch, are more grounded in their positions, though their stability is not absolute either.

Vuillard and Neel, it appears, share a sympathy for their subjects' efforts to hold themselves together. Their difference lies in how they manifest their concern for this precarious

[42] Ibid., 107.

state: for Vuillard, through the creation of a veil formed by subject and environment over an unknown void, and for Neel, through the near-wholeness of the subject as an entity that is distinct from its surroundings. Still, like Vuillard, Neel "leaves the seams showing."[43] Subjects such as Nancy in *Pregnant Woman* appear condensed like Madame Vuillard but nonetheless struggle and ultimately fail to fully maintain that compressed unity, at risk of collapsing into Marie's state of imminent bodily disintegration. Vuillard's "seams" knit together figure and ground; Neel's repair the breakages in the body, sutures in the human subject's protective shell which she attempts to reinforce in order to separate rather than merge subject and environment. While Marie's interiority is spread out into a social space and vice versa, Nancy's is just barely contained within her body, tightly bound within a thick blue border which tellingly becomes darker (and thus more visibly asserted) around her stretched abdomen and between her head and her husband's. Neel's attention to the sitter's physical boundaries reveals a pained desire for coherence, as if her thick blue lines functioned like thread accumulating over a repeatedly re-sewn yet still fragile seam. At the same time, and like the gaps between Vuillard's brushstrokes, Neel leaves visible ruptures, unevenness, and revisions in her dividing lines.

Although many of Neel's canvases became increasingly bare around the figure post-1960, she continued to articulate the subject's environment to varying degrees in other portraits. Even the more filled-out compositions, however, rarely included distinctive objects which might act as cues to construct the human subject's identity, but rather suggested interior space or nondescript furniture. She saved her attention toward non-human objects for her still lifes and cityscapes, in which figures rarely appeared at all. An unusual painting in Neel's oeuvre, *Georgie's Foyer (Anxiety)* (1967) (fig. 5), is at once still life, room interior, and portrait, with

[43] Ibid., 123.

equal attention paid to all areas within the frame. A tropical plant arrangement occupies the center of the picture while Neel's young granddaughter, Olivia (Nancy and Richard's oldest daughter), is squeezed between the wonky side table supporting the vase and the edge of the canvas. Although Olivia did not accompany Neel to her nephew's home in Pennsylvania, where the painting was created, Neel chose to paint her into the scene.[44] Wide-eyed and frozen, the infant appears sucked into the corner of the armchair, nearly out of the frame of the image. Roughly the same size as the vase, she acts almost like its double. Her stiff, claw-like fingers resting on her lap mirror the red flowers grazing the top of the canvas, while her outline is warped into a squiggle-shaped fragment like the edge of the fragile glass vessel. Not only do the household objects here appear as fully rendered as the human subject tucked into the lower right corner; they also rival that subject's animism, much like the furniture in Vuillard's scene.

Just as the genre of the painting is neither quite here nor there, the figures (both human and plant) occupy an in-between space, the outskirts of a home. It is the child, however, who is displaced from the center of the image, which one might expect her to occupy as the sole human subject. Unlike Olivia jammed into the corner of the frame, the plant—like Madame Vuillard—is accommodated by the surrounding space, which dissolves into a halo of blank canvas around the leaves and flowers. But this too evokes the anxiety to which Neel refers in the painting's title; like Vuillard's dabs of paint, Neel's swaths of color do not completely cohere to mask the white void beneath them. And while the plant appears fixed to the top of the canvas, the vase teeters on the edge of the table; its legs bend to exacerbate the instability. That sense of uncertainty spreads: The doorframe presses against a jagged void, and it is unclear whether we are looking

[44] Ann Temkin, *Alice Neel* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000), 184.

into the home or out into the street.[45] Like Vuillard's sister, Olivia is both swallowed by and dispersed across the interior space, although, as Lacan might suggest, she is not yet aware of the ostensible centrality and unity of her subjectivity which these pressures place under threat. *Georgie's Foyer* is therefore populated with fragments, repetitions, and incongruent surfaces which collectively replicate the child's underdeveloped sense of self. Not yet having reached the mirror stage, Olivia still lacks the ideal of subjective coherence which Neel's older subjects nervously and often ineffectively hold on to as they pose for the perceptive portraitist. This is still a quintessential Neel painting to the extent that tension has been loaded onto the canvas, but rather than locate that pressure within the human body as she typically would, Neel here has diffused it across the composition. Young Olivia, blissfully unaware of the anxieties her grandmother sees and feels as a conscious individual in the world, merges with an environment from which she cannot yet distinguish herself. In *Pregnant Woman*, Olivia's mother appears at risk of losing that distinction and therefore a stable sense of individualized selfhood, but having long ago adopted the fiction of wholeness, she can never return to the state of unawareness that precedes the fear of such a loss.

[45] *Georgie's Foyer (Anxiety)* is not the only work of Neel's to be titled with a term for human emotion while minimizing or excluding physical human presence. *Loneliness* (1970) depicts an empty chair positioned in front of an open window looking out to another window across the street.

Chapter 3: The Pains of Posing

As we have seen, Neel's paintings register a sense of unease in sitters who may share little in life but that underlying instability of identity. Virginia Neel, wife of the artist's son Hartley, suggested that her portrait, *Ginny in a Striped Shirt* (1969) (fig. 6), tapped into "a certain passionate anxiety for life" which was acutely felt in the period of radical change and upheaval that was the 1960s. "It… sees in me all the aspiration, conflict, determination, doubt, certainty, expectation, passion and disillusionment that was swirling around and within me: a young idealistic and earnest member of the sixties generation who had seen just enough to doubt but still wanted to believe in a utopian future."[46] Ginny appears in the portrait to be stabilizing herself as she leans forward from a stool with uneven legs, her long toes precariously perched upon the bottom edge of the frame. As her seat dissolves into the white vacuum of the primed canvas, her hands grip her upper thighs to point toward her spread crotch just barely covered by her miniskirt. Any potential eroticism, however, is belied by her fatigued demeanor and the boxy shape of her torso emphasized by the thick blue stripes of her shirt. Her portrait is marked by the contradictory presences of stability and insecurity, sexual undercurrents and an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. Although Ginny is individualized in her portrait, her apt comment points to a sense of disquiet shared within, and likely beyond, her generation. Her visible fatigue appears in the face James Hunter; her fragile resilience is likewise reflected in her sister-in-law, Nancy. Part of recognizing individual humanity, for Neel, was registering the weight felt collectively, albeit by varying degrees and under different circumstances (Ginny's struggle is certainly not the same as nor equal to Hunter's, for example), amongst those living and surviving in the twentieth century.

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[46] Brandon Brame Fortune, "Ginny in a Striped Shirt," in *Face Value: Portraiture in the Age of Abstraction* (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2014), 128.

But if this palpable stress was a matter of the *zeitgeist* which Neel, in her expressed goal as an artist, intended to capture, it was also the result of the discomfort experienced by her subjects during their modeling sessions.[47] Ginny later described the physical pains of sitting for Neel, who would insist that the model hold her pose no matter how often she complained of aches: "Alice would keep you intensely connected to her. When she felt you were faded she would start making little noises, the kind of thing you'd do to get a horse to prick its ears up."[48] Sittings were long and frequent; Cindy Nemser, who posed with her husband, Chuck, in 1975, recalled six four-hour sessions with rare ten-minute breaks.[49] At times, intentionally or not, Neel would also provoke psychological or emotional discomfort in the sitter. The art historian Mary Garrard recalled that as she was sitting for Neel for a rare commissioned portrait in 1977, Neel asked if she was a lesbian. Despite her friendships with gay men and general enthusiasm for sexual freedom, Neel admitted to feeling uncomfortable around gay women and was frustrated with the prevalence of lesbianism in the women's lib movement, even at one point attributing her exodus from Greenwich Village in 1938 to what she perceived to be an overpopulation of gay women.[50] In Garrard's distinctly masculinized portrait, in which she sits leaning forward with her fingers tightly clasped together, the sitter appears to have sensed this attitude in Neel. "If I appear guarded," Garrard later wrote, "that was probably the reason."[51] In other portraits, anxiety

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[47] "After all, I represent the twentieth century. I was born in 1900, and I've tried to capture the zeitgeist. When painting or writing are good, it's taken right out of life itself to my mind, and put into the work." See Murphy and Rhodes, *They Are Their Own Gifts.*

[48] Virginia Neel, "Virginia Neel talks about being painted by Alice Neel," Deichtorhallen Hamburg, December 13, 2017, video, 1:37, https://youtu.be/Gt4e482-aVI.

[49] Cindy Nemser, "Undergoing Scrutiny: Sitting For Alice Neel," interview with Michel Auder, Gerard Malanga, Cindy Nemser, John Perreault, Dorothy Pearlstein, Benny Andrews, and Nancy Neel, moderated by Anna Temkin, Philadelphia Museum of Art, April 6, 1999, printed in *Alice Neel*, ed. Anna Temkin (Philadelphia, Pa.: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2000), 71-72.

[50] Alice Neel, interview with Cindy Nemser, May 14, 1975, Box 27, R37a-b, Cindy Nemser papers, 2013.M.21, Getty Research Institute, quoted in *Alice Neel: People Come First*, ed. Kelly Baum and Randall Griffey.

[51] Mary Garrard, "Alice Neel and Me," *Woman's Art Journal* 27, no. 2 (2006): 4.

seemed to be drawn out by the painting itself while remaining undetectable in the actual sitter. Linda Nochlin noted from her conversations with Neel during her portrait sessions that the artist at one point mused: "You know, you don't seem so anxious, but that's how you come out."[52]

As in most portraits (an exception will soon follow), Neel's paintings capture not simply the subject but the encounter between the subject and the artist. The dominant presence of drawing in her late works conjures an immediacy of that interaction and the sitter's presence which tends to be lost in the surfaces of more polished paintings. In effect, the portraits vividly capture her sitters' suspended struggle to compose themselves for Neel. Never are her subjects unaware of being seen. Although her early works included paintings of protests, erotic scenes, and other social activity, Neel's human subjects post-1950 are rarely shown doing anything but posing, a hyper-conscious act on the part of the subject for the artist. Even in her occasional street portraits like *Dominican Boys on 108th Street* (1955), the subjects stand in their urban environment but do not appear interrupted in the middle of their activities. They are posing, much as they would if they were pictured in Neel's studio. Had she depicted her subjects caught in interstitial moments—if she painted them, say, looking up briefly from their work or play—they might appear less weighted by their own self-awareness, less strained under the labor of what Harry Berger Jr. described as the "fiction of the pose."[53] The closest Neel came to candid portraiture in her mature work might be her two paintings of breastfeeding mothers: A disturbing 1971 portrait of a visibly tired Nancy with the newborn twins and, from the following year, a painting of Carmen Gordon, a woman from Haiti who worked for Neel as a cleaner, struggling to breastfeed her sick daughter, Judy (fig. 7). Despite their attention to their daughters, both

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[52] Nochlin, "Some Women Realists: Part 2," 88.
[53] Harry Berger, "Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture," *Representations*, no. 46 (1994): 99.

mothers attempt to pose for Neel; admirably, Carmen even manages a smile. While giving up their bodies for their children, there is still an attempt, at least, at self-possession.

Like Neel's portraits, Pop art addressed the strain of presenting and maintaining a coherent self. The Pop artist's conception of the human subject, however, was radically different from Neel's, whose paintings of people looked toward something deeper than surface level by showing signs of its emergence beneath the subject's weathered composure. For the Pop artist, nothing was to be found beneath the surface, for everything was surface.[54] Rather than suggesting an inner truth, subjectivity was now understood to be an invention assembled from images, which had become increasingly powerful in the shaping of identity through the proliferation of consumer culture and mass media in the late 1950s and 1960s. Identity was constituted not by self-governance but by, for example, the consumption and re-channeling of marketed products and tabloid photography. To the extent that Vuillard was concerned with the dispersal of the subject into their environment, his paintings anticipated the ways in which Pop art explored the externalization of interior subjectivity onto banal material surfaces. As Andy Warhol famously claimed, Pop could be described as "taking the outside and putting it on the inside or taking the inside and putting it on the outside."[55] Neel herself could not (or would not) distinguish Warhol's work from the consumer culture with which it engaged: "I think he's the greatest advertiser living, not a great portrait painter."[56]

Warhol understood that despite contemporary culture's distrust of interiority, subjects still sought to present a self-image that was unified and composed. His paintings and short films,

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[54] "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol," Warhol famously said, "just look at the surfaces of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it." Gretchen Berg, "Andy: My True Story," *Los Angeles Free Press* (March 17, 1967), 3.

[55] Andy Warhol quoted by Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 8.

[56] While she believed he represented "a certain pollution of this era," Neel did concede that "as a person, Andy is very nice," and that "his tomato cans are a great contribution." See Neel, "Alice by Alice," 138.

like Neel's portraits, exposed the pains of this undertaking. Warhol's serial silkscreen paintings, in which the same image becomes more distressed with every repetition, present a literal breaking down of the subject not entirely dissimilar to the vanishing bodies in some of Neel's later paintings. His *Screen Tests* (fig. 8), produced between 1964 and 1967, depict each participant's active struggle to project and sustain a self-image over a period of less than three minutes that seems to drag on forever. These works, while arguably portraits, often sidestepped the portrait-as-encounter: Warhol was known to wander off from the scene as the filming continued, leaving the sitter to retain their composure despite being trapped in the gaze of no one but the machine vision of the camera.[57] The experience was psychologically corrosive, prompting some sitters to tear up and others to panic.[58] As Hal Foster suggested of Warhol's *Screen Tests*, "there is no humanist redemption in the face of the camera."[59] Neel's presence by the easel ensured her subjects the human reciprocity between artist and sitter, even if her demands and interrogations provoked some distress in the process (as they did for Ginny Neel and Mary Garrard). Just as the concentration of paint within the contours of her sitters imparted some coherence while revealing the porousness of their subjectivities, Neel's active presence throughout the portraits' making provided an affirmation of their selfhood (which they would be denied if sitting for a *Screen Test*) while simultaneously prompting some unease. This duality of reinforcement and distress that unfolded both on the canvas and behind the easel distinguishes Neel's portraits from Warhol's straight erosion of his subjects' composure.

Emerging concurrently with the Pop era, Neel's late work, often devoid of fully articulated material objects, attempted to return subjectivity to the body while exposing the

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[57] Blake Gopnik, *Warhol* (New York, NY: ECCO, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2020), 355.
[58] Ibid., 356.
[59] Foster, 168.

fragility of that restoration in a society engrossed with consumer products and images. In light of this indirect dialogue with Pop, it is useful to consider her portrait of its leading figure from 1970 (fig. 9). This painting exposes the frailty of the half-nude sitter's damaged body, held together by stitches and a corset he was required to wear following the attempt on his life by Valerie Solanas two years prior to his sitting for Neel. We see Warhol's figure laboring to quite literally keep his insides inside and, by closing his eyes, the outside out. His wounded body functions as a metaphor for strained self-containment like Neel's *Pregnant Woman*, painted the following year. The traces of his sutures divide up his bare torso like the cracks between shards of a shattered plate haphazardly glued back together. Above the scars, the chest is distorted to appear as if his folds of drooping, pallid skin were female breasts. Seated on a sparingly drawn ottoman, his feet appear to dangle, somehow not quite reaching the floor despite the shallow height of his seat. In effect, the monumental art world figure appears reduced in size and authority.

Deeply aware of—and artistically invested in—the psychological exertion involved in presenting oneself as authentic and whole, Warhol seems to accept, if uncomfortably, the vulnerability he must have known Neel would register vividly in her painting. Like a prisoner who has accepted his impending execution, he clasps his hands together as if in a final prayer. While at first glance Neel's exposure of the famed Pop artist might appear brutal and unflinching (Nochlin described the portrait as "terrible"), Neel seems to have offered her subject some small acts of restorative kindness.[60] She undresses Warhol but permits him to close his eyes, perhaps a concession to his need to withhold something of what she understood as his interior self, or at least prevent the outer world from penetrating it. This allowance is noteworthy considering that for Neel, as I have indicated, the overall comfort of her sitters could be expendable in service of

[60] Nochlin, "Some Women Realists: Part 2," 87.

the portrait. Other details suggest a sense of care toward the subject: Warhol's left knee is left underpainted, as if to redirect the sense of brokenness away from his traumatized core.

Though she represents him as damaged, feminized, and isolated, stripped of the artificial veneer that characterized his own portraiture, there appears to be a reverence for his vulnerability. As one scholar expressed, Neel painted Warhol as "a hauntingly ethereal image of an androgynous secular saint."[61] But Warhol is not quite transcendent of his physical container; as in similar portraits of Neel's late career, the restriction of Warhol's interiority within his body is not without signs of weakness. Once again, the blue outline around his figure emphasizes the vulnerable boundary between self and the disturbingly unknown, unrepresented other suggested by the unpainted environment. Like *Pregnant Woman*, Warhol's porousness is indicated by the slippage of paint from within its concentration in the body into the areas just around him. Neel's portrait of Warhol represents not a test of his ability to compose himself, but a provision of sympathetic space for that composure to break down. For Warhol, a seemingly unlikely participant, to step into this space and away from his calculated public persona makes the portrait all the more startling.

[61] Barry Walker, "Andy Warhol" in *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, 152.

Chapter 4: Under the Surface

Up to her death, Neel continued to paint subjects who, like Warhol, made a practice of staging themselves for a public. Her 1982 portrait of the feminist sex worker (and later bonafide performance artist) Annie Sprinkle (fig. 10) pictures the sitter, necessarily bold and uninhibited in her own work, as an anxious and oddly unerotic subject. As Nochlin observed, Neel's Sprinkle is decidedly naked, not nude.[62] Although she appears in a black leather one-piece with cutouts revealing her breasts and pierced genitals, posing on one knee to draw attention to her right calf and stiletto heel, there is an awkwardness that makes Sprinkle seem less like a brazen seductress than someone who showed up to the wrong event thinking it was a costume party. She appears older than twenty-eight, her actual age at the time of the sitting. The arch of black brushstrokes over her head more closely resembles a crow perched on her yellow wig than a hair accessory. Her face, caked with garish, blue-tinted makeup, bears a sustained but wavering smile while her distracted eyes look just to the side of the viewer, as if dodging the gaze she is obligated to invite. The cartoonish rendering of her body in some areas, particularly the breasts, is in tension with this nuanced expression, which seems more suited to a family photo of reluctant participants than a portrait in lingerie. Rather than occupy the center of the picture, Sprinkle appears swept into the lower right corner, leaving half the canvas bare and the composition cross-sectioned diagonally, an indelicate use of pictorial space which further contributes to a sense of unease. The scrawled contours running along her left thigh and forearm not only imply the artist's revision of the composition, but also suggest the sitter's fidgeting in her pose.

[62] Nochlin, "Alice Neel," lecture, Victoria Miro Gallery, London, May 2004, printed in *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*," ed. Maura Reilly (New York, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 286.

Although Sprinkle was originally seated in a chair, Neel chose to omit the seat altogether, further destabilizing her sitter on the canvas.[63]

Any impulse on the part of the viewer to cast Sprinkle as a type (such as a whore or femme fatale) quickly becomes frustrated, despite her costume and nakedness, by the nervousness that permeates the canvas. Neel's image of an unidealized and desexualized porn star, posing self-consciously in her typical "uniform," situates Sprinkle as a worker like any other. If Neel was "not kind" to Sprinkle's body, as Nochlin suggested, this was in the service of destigmatizing the sex worker.[64] In the ultra-conservative 1980s, when a booming porn industry was threatening bourgeois "family" values and prompting reactions from feminist groups like Women Against Pornography, this was no minor gesture. But for Neel to normalize Sprinkle has nothing to do with palatability; on the contrary, Sprinkle's exposed vulva, ballooning breasts, and BDSM garb clearly align her with the world of freaks and bohemians Neel so loved. The portrait of Annie Sprinkle suggests that to be a freak—and moreover, to wear the anxiety and fatigue that comes with sustaining oneself as such in a hostile society—is to be human.

Jeremy Lewison understands the normalization of Neel's socially marginalized subjects like Sprinkle as the product of her profound ability to identify with them by "exploring their folds, creases, and idiosyncrasies with her brush, sculpting them as though they were extensions of herself."[65] Neel viewed empathy as a critical and even painful aspect of her process. "I get terribly involved," she said, "so I leave myself and I go into that person. Sometimes after the person goes, I feel just as though I have an empty inside, that I have nothing inside."[66] Perhaps, when painted by Neel, her subjects could only be extensions of herself—products of her attempt

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[63] Ann Temkin, "Alice Neel: Self and Others," in *Alice Neel*, 30.
[64] Nochlin, "Alice Neel," 286.
[65] Lewison, "Showing the Barbarity of Life: Alice Neel's Grotesque," in *Alice Neel: Painted Truths*, 50.
[66] Murphy and Rhodes, *They Are Their Own Gifts*.

to recover her own selfhood from decades of tumultuous personal and collective struggles. Despite her prolific output, Neel painted very few self-portraits in her life, the most famous being a nude self-portrait produced at age eighty. She was far more interested in being a "collector of souls" than in exploring her own image.[67] But Neel's account of inhabiting her subjects during their portrait sessions presents a rather literal description of what all portraits arguably do: embody some piece of the artist's subjectivity in the guise of another person. We can only see Annie Sprinkle as she is represented by Neel; we are closer, therefore, to accessing the artist than we are to reaching the "real" Annie Sprinkle. In this way, as Lewison suggests, Neel's sitters reflect back Neel's own persona.[68] But as I have tried to show, my impression is that Neel's portraits are not so much invested in representing identities as in reflecting back the continuously compromised persistence of her subjects' sense of self.

The idea that a "real" subject exists at all is tested by the photographic portraits of Cindy Sherman, a contemporary of Neel's in the late seventies and early eighties who continues to use her own body to explore how subjects are constituted through representation. In her series of *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman placed herself in ambiguous, cinematic scenes wherein various women (all Sherman in disguise) appear in incomplete but familiar narratives, often responding to something taking place "off-screen." In *Untitled Film Still #54* (1980) (fig. 11), Sherman poses as a blonde woman walking alone at night, her eyes scanning the darkness as she clutches the collar of her coat, a to-be victim in a film noir. She appears illuminated like a deer in headlights, exposed and powerless in a black void that threatens to swallow her. Her vulnerability carries the unmistakably erotic charge that characterizes helpless women pinned

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[67] Neel frequently described herself as a "collector of souls" in her artist's statements, lectures, and in interviews. See Alice Neel, "Bloomsburg State College Lecture," March 21, 1972, Alice Neel papers, Box 1, Folder 21: Writings, 1960-1979, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 4.

[68] Lewison, "Showing the Barbarity of Life," 52.

under the voyeuristic gaze of classic Hollywood cinema. As Judith Williamson argues, in each photograph Sherman invites the viewer to participate in the construction of the depicted mystery woman's identity, and specifically her femininity, not to reward this effort with a conclusive answer but to demonstrate that "woman" is located within the image and not in the individual.[69] The variation of feminine types across the series, furthermore, undermines the viewer's ability to settle on a singular concept of "woman"; it is always produced and reinforced by the surface of the image.

Reflecting on critic Patricia Bailey's assessment that Neel's work was "a way of diminishing her personal sense of separation from life," the artist replied: "That's right. It is my way of overcoming the alienation. It's my ticket to reality."[70] Neel and Sherman arguably occupy opposite ends of a spectrum representing the breadth of twentieth-century portraiture: At one end, representation can at least begin to bridge the gap between oneself and reality; at the other, representation itself constitutes what we perceive to be reality. As Rosalind Krauss writes, Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* reveal to us that "as far as femininity goes, there is nothing but costume."[71] Whereas Sherman compels the viewer to enact the construction of the subject's identity (and in doing so underscores its artificiality), Neel precludes the viewer's attempt to define her subjects by stripping the sitter of a physical context and by refusing the sentimentality or authority of culturally embedded configurations of represented types like those Sherman exploits in her work. And while Sherman presents herself as fictional, generic women to suggest that there is no essential truth (of herself or the characters she inhabits) to be gleaned from

[69] Judith Williamson, "Images of 'Woman,'" *Screen* 24, Issue 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1983): 40.
[70] Neel, "Alice by Alice," 183.
[71] Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993* (New York, Rizzoli, 1993), 17.

representation, Neel throws herself into her subjects in an endeavor to get at some authenticity of that person's existence, or, perhaps, affirmation of her own.

But in inhabiting her subjects through painting, Neel does not arrive at truth. She approaches the idea of Annie Sprinkle as she exists in herself, but this destination remains only a possibility. On one level, the portrait incessantly reminds us that we are looking at a painting. Between the incoherent patches of ochre and pale blue clinging to the contours of her body, and the sketchy remnants of a reconsidered composition, *Annie Sprinkle* transparently displays its own construction as an image. The figure's awkward location within the canvas, furthermore, underscores the authority of its four corners. On another level, we are reminded that the painting depicts a person who is presenting herself in a particular way that cannot amount to who she is. The portrait's campiness, evinced by Sprinkle's makeup and costume, and by the cartoonish rendering of her body, announces her self-presentation as a masquerade. In Sherman's work, there is nothing to be found behind the mask. In Neel's, the very fact that Sprinkle wears a kind of mask endears the viewer to the artificiality of her performance and the person behind it, however distant she may be. We don't get to know the real Annie Sprinkle, but we do find that there is more to her than we can ever reach.

Conclusion

Alice Neel's work achieved greater relevance in the final decades of her life through her portraits of subjects whose autonomy and individuality had long been systematically denied but were now asserted by the women's liberation and civil rights movements. Indeed, her six-decade career contributed to the history of figurative painting a vast picture gallery of sitters from groups rarely dignified by portraiture, though Neel steered clear of the sentimentality and idealization that would distort the people she believed to represent the chaos, cruelty, and transformation of the twentieth century most authentically. However, the social movements which made the appreciation of Neel's work possible coincided with new conceptions of the human being which conflicted with the foundations of portraiture. Now understood to be socially constructed and beholden to hierarchies of power, identity could no longer refer to the autonomous, Cartesian subject which portraitists had attempted to capture for centuries. But Neel was able to carve out her own space in portraiture because her model of the human being was aligned with neither the passive, socially determined subject of the twentieth century nor the bourgeois individualism of the past.

Contrary to the mind-body dualism which had characterized Western humanism, the world for Neel is experienced through the body, and the psyche is irrevocably shaped by the world. As such, her unrelenting attention to the human figure allowed her to feel through human experience in all its repression, pain, and anxiety. But although Neel understood the effects of the world and its oppressive conditions on the human being, these did not, for Neel, constitute the subject in its totality. Buried beneath the weight of self-consciousness, the subject was not fully accessible to Neel nor anyone else, but painting could gesture towards its presence. Rather than define the people she painted, Neel's late portraits impart the palpable exhaustion—the "greatest

torture”—of upholding an identity, a ubiquitous yet private experience which asserts her subjects’ humanity more than mere likeness ever could.[72] This investment in a never-complete struggle that is both collective and individual exemplifies Neel’s position that these categories are not mutually exclusive. To closely study the physical and psychological presence of a very particular individual, such as an enigmatic art world superstar or an uneasy porn performer, does not mean to sacrifice commonalities of experience—namely, the pain of asserting and protecting that sense of individuality. At the same time, picturing shared experience does not necessitate the rejection of difference, such as that between an elderly white woman from small-town Pennsylvania (the artist) and a young African American man drafted into a costly war. It is about recognizing that this distance can only be partially and never completely bridged. Understood in Neel’s portraits, then, the human being is less a fixed entity than a perpetually shifting experience, something to be more felt than definitively established. Portraiture, for Neel, was not about reflecting who a person is—this would suggest that who a person is can be grasped, and therefore minimized—but about registering how they sustained that identity. As an “anarchic humanist,” Neel believed in a kind of soul, but her portraits suggest doubt toward its existence in any stable form and refuse the power of the artist to pin it down. We can never fully know another person, but through an empathetic recognition of others, we can approach an understanding of their predicament of being in the world, and perhaps to an even greater extent, our own. Painting can be a vehicle for empathy to arrive at that understanding.

Despite asserting collective experience over insight into the sitter’s authentic selfhood, Neel’s oeuvre nonetheless fits to some degree within the contested portraiture tradition which celebrated the portrait’s ability to convey an inner quality of the individual human subject. Her

[72] Neel, *Alice Neel*, directed by Andrew Neel.

portraits evoke an undeniable psychological presence, whether that presence truly emanated from the sitter themselves, the artist's own projected subjectivity, or an encounter between the two. Though she insisted that "soul… starts and ends in your body," she also recognized that "your soul can take a little flight."[73] Neel's evacuation of herself, which she described as a part of her process—when she would "go into that person"—implies a fracturing of Neel's own subjectivity and reflects her belief in the mutability of identity. Psychological depth, for Neel, does not measure interiority as a single recess to be mined, but a network of shifting cracks in a fragile exterior. Still, we can locate in Neel's portraits the suggestion of something genuine beneath the performance of selfhood that is denied by the photography of Cindy Sherman. Neel's work struggles against the corrosive forces which threaten the coherence of the individual, forces which are conquered by the confident figures painted by Barkley Hendricks, yet she also imbues her subjects with a kind of resilience that is quickly extinguished in the victims of Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*. In Neel's late portraits, coherence is anxiously defended through the stark but imperfect division between the saturated figure and their underdetermined environment, in contrast to Vuillard's portrait of his sister, whose body he sutures to the surfaces of the domestic interior. While many of Neel's subjects face splintering into the void of the canvas, she attends to the exterior containers of their "souls," attempting to reinforce their boundaries as she simultaneously exposes the precarity and incompleteness of those very borders.

The fact that the human being could not be understood in the twentieth century as it had been before was not lost on Neel, a meticulous social observer who was born in 1900 and lived to see, from near and afar, that century's most turbulent events and transformative cultural shifts. By painting people, it was not her mission to disprove the modernist claim that identity is always

[73] Neel, "Inside New York's Art World."

porous and unstable, but to repair the breakages the modern subject inevitably sustains in a constantly changing world. Her portraits, in other words, suggest that to be human is to endure.

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