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## Summary

Living the life of an artist. Influences on the image making of modern artists  
*Auguste Rodin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Francis Bacon*

Art historians find it important to know who made a work of art. Knowledge of the life of the artist can provide insight into his education, his clients and commissions and therefore enhance our understanding of his subject matter and style. When a painting can be attributed to a famous master, this will of course affect its value on the art market and its public appreciation. Moreover, the life of the artist is a dominant textual model in art historical discourse, particularly in the monograph and the catalogue raisonné, both of which use the artist's life as guiding principle. Concentration on the life of the artist usually increases when special circumstances come into play, such as illness, a tragic death, a special relationship (for instance artist-couples) or certain ethnical or cultural identities. However, too much attention to the private life of an artist can distract from the work itself. Furthermore, biographical data is often used to contextualise the artist and this can lead to stereotypical image making. An artist who is confronted with a biographical image that he or she does not like can withhold comment but also has the option of participating actively in the (re)making of his or her own image.

This dissertation is not intended as a plea for a renewed biographical approach to art history. Rather, it offers an analysis of biographical approaches and is concerned with questions such as: by whom, by what means and – if traceable – with what purpose has the biographical image making of modern artists been influenced? Biographical images originate when artists, or others, suggest that there are connections between the life and the work. Many different people can contribute to shaping this image, from (surviving) relatives, biographers and art historians to art critics, photographers and film directors. Since the public image of the artist and a biographical slant to the explanation of his work can be of substantial importance to an artistic career, the main question posed by this dissertation is this: to what extent have artists influenced or corrected the process of their own image making, perhaps even posthumously? Or are artists always at the mercy of the interpretation of others?

In this dissertation *image making* is conceived as a mental process; an interaction between images that develop in the minds of people and the material ways in which such images are created. Until now, there has been insufficient awareness of the material side of image making in the cultural field. However, the visual and textual means that are used to manipulate or control image making lie at the core of this study. An artist is not only a public figure, with an image that can be manipulated, but also a private person. Subsequently, we can speak of *biographical image making* when knowledge of the life lived by the artist is used in the interpretation of the work.

Part I of the dissertation *The seductive life* consists of four chapters. The first chapter discusses how in the eighteenth century the rise of concepts of genius, originality and expression resulted in a cult of the artist. This obliged the modern artist, who depends mainly on the free market and on exhibitions and the resulting art criticism, to make a name for himself. In order to achieve this, he could use new media such as newspapers and magazines, photography and film. A strong image contributes to a successful career and growing media attention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave rise to the phenomenon of celebrity artists. In the second chapter the historiography of artists' biographies is sketched, from the earliest texts by Duris of Samos and Plinius the Elder to Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the artists* (1550/1568). Vasari's rhetorical strategy of praise and blame and the telling of recurring anecdotes typical of artists' biographies, is examined. We note in particular the influence of these

strategies on later, more modern, biographical texts. Several genres, that are still being used, developed from the early collections of artists' biographies: the artists' dictionary, the catalogue raisonné, the monograph and the biography of the individual artist. The issue of topoi related to artists is examined in chapter three, using the well-known but still relevant studies by Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist. A Historical Experiment* (1934) and Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, *Born under Saturn. The Character and Conduct of Artists: a Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (1963) as guidelines. Further, some of the most dominant stereotypical notions about artists are examined. Although these stereotypes, such as the bohemian artist, the tragic artist or the mad genius, developed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, they maintain considerable influence on the biographical image making of modern artists. That stereotypical anecdotes about artists are even more dominant in the representation of fictional artists (in genres varying from the novel and vaudeville to the motion picture) is argued in the last section of the chapter. The last chapter of part I focuses on the theoretical debate concerning the biographical approach in art history. Although the biographical model - that uses the artist's life as a guideline for art historical texts and monographic exhibitions, as well as (auto)biographical texts as source material - has been questioned, it is still rooted deeply within art historical discourse. Art historical institutions still focus upon artists, and thus on *proper names*. The problem of the intention of the author (or artist) is dealt with in two ways in this dissertation. Firstly, it comes into view when others seek an explanation for a work in the life of its creator. And secondly, it arises when the creator tries to control the image making of himself or the interpretation of his work.

Part II *The representational life* presents the methodological framework of *Living the life of an artist*. Chapter 5 starts with a theoretical discussion of the supposed difference between word and image as means to influence the image making. It is argued that it is not relevant whether the word or the image is deemed the more powerful of the two, since they tend to be used in a continuous interaction with one another. Moreover, when we have only one photograph of an artist but hundreds of his letters, as is the case of the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, which of the two leads in establishing his image? In the methodology that I have formulated, all of the visual and textual means that the artist or another person can use to manipulate the image making are included. The concept of manipulation is fundamental. Does the artist cooperate with a photographer? Does he allow cameramen in his studio? Does he give his biographer a free hand or does he apply censorship? The question about the objectives of artists and others in manipulating the image making is addressed, though it is often a difficult one to answer. In the following two chapters the influence of both others and the artist himself on the biographical image making are thoroughly examined. Others may use textual means such as art criticism, interviews, art historical publications, edited publications of diaries and correspondence, the obituary and the biography. Their visual means may include portraits, cartoons, photographs, documentaries, and the biographical motion picture or *biopic*. The artist has different means at his disposal. His textual means are the diary, correspondence, an autobiography, artists' texts, a last will and testament and the formation of an archive. His visual means include his house and studio, a personal museum or mausoleum, clothing and self-portraits. And of course an artist can also try to influence the visual and textual means of others.

Part III, *The life of an artist* focuses on three case studies: the French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), American painter Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) and British painter Francis Bacon (1909-1992). Together, they are used to represent the artist in the modern area with its rise of new media. They have been selected as case studies mainly because of the wealth of relevant visual and textual material available. Each case study has its own focal point, but taken collectively they permit just about all the visual and textual means referred to in the methodological framework of the

dissertation to be analysed. In the case of Rodin the central focus is on the realisation of both the Musée Rodin in Paris and the house and museum of the artist in Meudon. What makes him an especially interesting case is the fact that the development of photography and subsequently film runs more or less parallel to his artistic career and Rodin consciously made use of photography as a means not only to study and promote his own work, but also to promote his image. The large number of photographs that exist of O’Keeffe was the main reason to include her as a case study, as well as the suggestive interpretations of her art that were made by critics. The influence of art dealer, renowned photographer and later O’Keeffe’s husband, Alfred Stieglitz, is also of great relevance. O’Keeffe wrote a semi-autobiography and was in the later years of her long life involved in preparing the posthumous opening of her Abiquiu house to the public and plans for a monographic museum of her work. Finally, Bacon is fascinating as a case study because he was interviewed frequently, so that much material about him has been recorded in writing, on tape and on film. His physical features were also captured by many photographers. Bacon was very much inclined to control the interpretation of his art and allowed his studio to play an important role in his image making.

Rodin, O’Keeffe and Bacon all became famous during their lifetime and were highly visible to the public eye. Their fame is partly related to their strong and clear public images. Rodin cultivated the image of neglected genius and fed this image by repeating over and over again the story of how a jury wrongfully questioned his talent and integrity in the case of the *The Age of Bronze* (1877) statue. Stieglitz knew very well that by emphasising the link with female sexuality he could get people to notice O’Keeffe’s work. The image that O’Keeffe, initially with the aid of Stieglitz, introduced as an antidote to the sexualised image – namely that of an American pioneer painter – was equally clear and affirmative of the longing of Americans for their own identity and culture, free from Europe. Bacon, on the other hand, was the ultimate bohemian, leading a life of gambling and drinking, destroying many of his paintings and apparently disinterested in material possessions.

It may seem that all these artists were very calculating in their efforts to manipulate their images, but this was a process that gradually developed and it constituted for the most part a response to already existing image making. For Rodin, O’Keeffe and Bacon, their art came first. It was as though they felt forced to interfere in the discussion of their work in order to have at least some influence on how it was being interpreted. Through the controversy around *The Age of Bronze* Rodin came to realise the importance of contacts with critics, particularly since they could help him to defend and promote his work. O’Keeffe became aware of the effect of Stieglitz’ photographs of her on her image only after these had been exhibited in The Anderson Galleries in 1921. Initially she had trusted in Stieglitz’s contacts in the art world, but once interpretations of her work began to emerge that were far from her own ideas, she began to interfere with the image making. Bacon knew the importance of criticism long before he was successful as an artist, though it took him years to gain full control over a medium such as an exhibition catalogue.

The lives of Rodin, O’Keeffe and Bacon were interconnected with their work. Rodin believed in hard work and put his private life clearly in its service. His wife Rose Beuret was originally his model and studio assistant, he had his affairs for the most part with his models or fellow artists, and eventually he lived in Meudon amidst his work, his studios and his museum. O’Keeffe sought inspiration in the places where she lived and in the travels that she made. In her case, work shaped the way she lived and she married her discoverer and art dealer. Bacon used themes from his life for his work, such as a link between his gambling and his working method and his use of friends and lovers as models.

The result of this interconnection between life and art is that not only the public, but also critics and art historians, are inclined to read the work biographically. As is argued in chapter four, the

most common biographical interpretations concern the identification of persons, the establishing of a connection between a work of art and a certain event, or the making of claims about expressive content. However, one does need foreknowledge of the life of artists to be able to give such interpretations. For example, would O’Keeffe’s early abstract drawings ever have been linked to female sexuality if critics did not know that these had been made by a woman?

Another factor that stimulates a connection between the life and the art is the attraction of using artists’ topoi in the image making of the artist. Not only biographers and other writers make use of them, such as Frederick Lawton who writes of Rodin that he was so engaged in his work that he forgot everything around him, but artists themselves also like to tell this kind of story. Rodin told how as a child he made figures out of dough that were too large to bake and O’Keeffe related that she remembered being fascinated by colour and light as she sat in the sun on a quilt when she was only 8 or 9 months old. These anecdotes drawn from early childhood were meant in both cases to illustrate that the speaker was born to be an artist. Bacon, for his part, kept emphasising the year 1944 as the moment when he became an artist, ignoring an earlier period of over 15 years when he struggled as interior designer and painter to find his own style. The telling of such stories, whether by a biographer, an art historian or the artist himself, has a legitimizing function; they convince the public, and indeed the artist himself, that here is a true artist.

The degree to which biographical interpretations are given by others can be related to factors such as public knowledge of the life of the artist (through (auto)biographies, interviews, biographical motion pictures, etc.), the availability of autobiographical sources (letters, diaries and self-portraits), a tragic or otherwise remarkable life, and events that are similar to typical artists’ topoi. The amount of visual and textual means available seems to be generally proportional to the fame of the artist, and in the case of very famous artists the stream of new means even continues after they have died.

The influence of artists on their biographical image making – even after their deaths - turned out to be much greater than I had originally suspected. Both Bacon and O’Keeffe (Rodin to a lesser degree, perhaps) maintained a strict control over their images. They all nourished contacts with art professionals and critics and chose the projects they wanted to cooperate with – or not. They posed for photographers in the clothing and setting of their own choice (though both O’Keeffe and Bacon refused to be photographed at work), gave interviews, demanded the right of editing texts about them, etc. But even though they might have given the impression of being very much on top of things, absolute control remained impossible. For instance, Rodin was criticised as early as the 1880s for his image of being a simple workman who locked himself away in his silent studio. The truth of his busy and frequently visited studio at the Rue de l’Université was after all very different. And although Bacon endlessly emphasized that his paintings were not narrative or illustrative, it is hard to ignore the references in his work to the death of his lover George Dyer. O’Keeffe, who managed to create a successful new image of American pioneer painter, never truly got rid of the stereotype of the woman artist, especially as it was revitalised by feminist art historians and critics in the 1970s.

Looking at these case studies we can note that artists not only used visual and textual means themselves, but that even more often they exerted influence on the means used by others. Rodin had a large network of people writing about him and he was involved in several large projects with writers who even quoted his thoughts about his work. He manipulated the work of photographers who worked for him and was careful in his choice about who could photograph the master himself. O’Keeffe was very influential in the way she posed for photographers and in her slightly ironic way of telling her recurring stories. These turned her life into a series of important moments, all of them related directly to her art, such as the choice to start living in New Mexico from 1929 onwards. The most important

means that Bacon used to influence his image was his apparently chaotic studio. According to some people, it was a conscious construction, inspired by the studios of Picasso and Giacometti. He used it not only as a source of inspiration for his paintings, but since he was continuously photographed and even filmed in the studio it was an important tool for his image making, too.

But how did the influence of these artists continue posthumously? A lot of biographies and other publications about them have appeared and archival material that was once sealed has become open to the public. Even biographical films have been made of their lives. Yet, there have also been initiatives more directly related to their work. A Musée Rodin was realised both in Paris and in Meudon, a Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and Research Center was built in Santa Fe, and The Francis Bacon Studio Project resulted from the moving of Bacon's London based studio to Dublin. The scholars connected to these institutions have become the authorities on the artists: H  l  ne Pinet, Barbara Buhler Lynes, Martin Harrison. One could see them as the successors of the onetime personal assistants of the artists, in the way that they continue to put the oeuvre first and to safeguard the image of the artist.

The houses and studios of the three artists were important during their lifetime and remain so posthumously, because in one way or another they have all been preserved. Rodin received visitors from all over the world, both in Paris – where he occupied the H  tel Biron during the last decade of his life – and Meudon. Both houses can be visited, although the feeling of authenticity is gone because of all the alterations. O'Keeffe's studio house in Abiquiu was preserved the way she left it in 1984 and is currently open to the public, giving them insight in her most important source of inspiration: the landscape of New Mexico. The transfer of Bacon's studio to Dublin was widely debated because of its artificiality, and the posthumous analysis of his source material seems to betray some of his carefully hidden sources and to contradict the way he himself wanted his paintings to be seen. However, the reconstructed studio does show the importance of this place, if only because of the large database that can now be consulted.

Control of the image making is something that grows slowly. Only seldom have artists consciously created an image at the start of an artistic career. Mostly, they have reacted to already existing images. Artists have to deal with the fact that they need a public image, since the institutional system still revolves around names. This can result in a feeling of pressure or lack of privacy, especially when an artist has become famous. Although the biographical approach to their work by the public, critics or scholars can be very powerful, the artist is still not helpless. He can use a great many visual and textual means to influence the biographical image making. But it will not be easy to eradicate an existing image, particularly when that image resembles stereotypical notions about artists. A strong new image, that can exist independently next to the old and stereotypical one, has a better chance of being successful.

It may seem obvious that in order to avoid biographical interpretations of his art, an artist should refrain from giving interviews, give no information about his life, refuse to have his photograph taken, and not publish a single word. However, even with such precautions taken the work will still be interpreted biographically since the audience will want to know the land of origin or the gender of the artist. The artist who wants to resist or correct interpretations he does not like, will have to participate in the debate rather than withdraw from it. The more means he uses, the greater his influence will be. But here lies an interesting paradox: while the use of more visual and textual means allows the artist greater control of the image making, it will also excite new biographical approaches to the work.