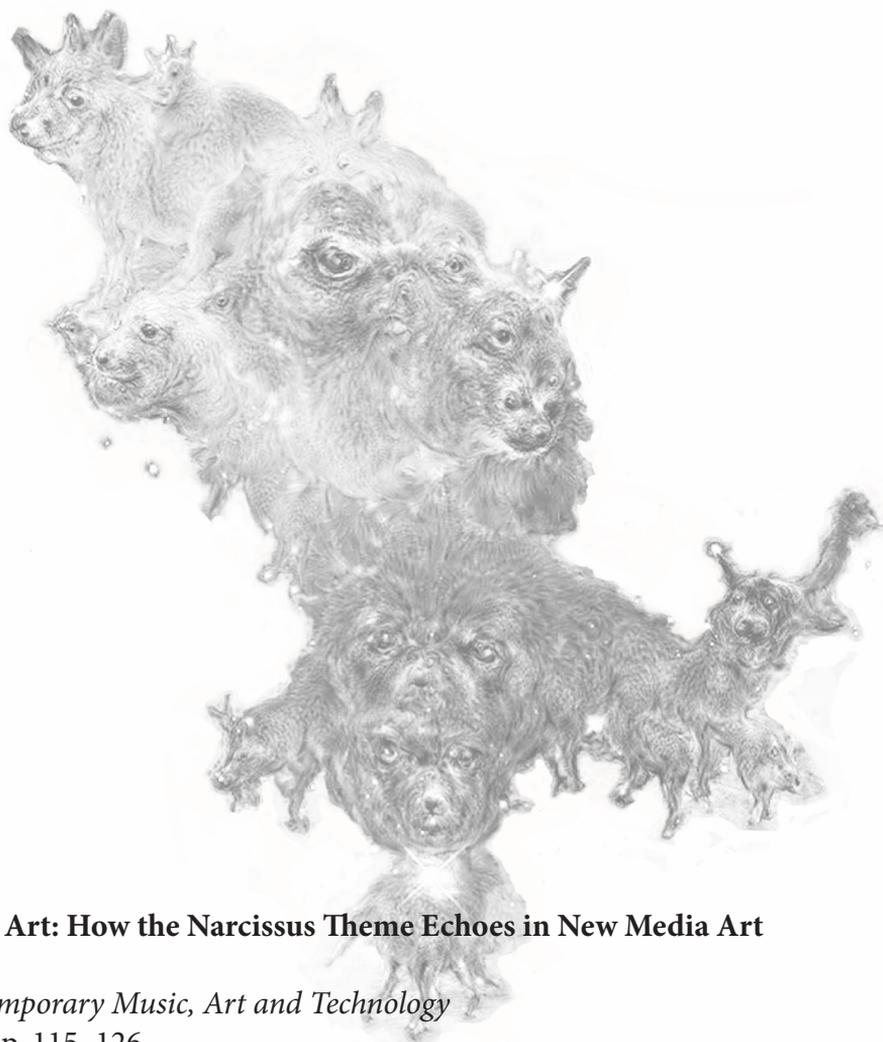


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The Intelligent Work of Art: How the Narcissus Theme Echoes in New Media Art

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Abstract: This paper will deal with the mythological figure of Narcissus in new media art. In visual arts in general, this myth is usually used to reflect on the relationship between the artist and his actual work. There are countless examples of artists from antiquity to the present age that deal with subjectivity in their work by recurring the Narcissus theme. But different to those adaptations, works of the New Media Art since the 1970s reflect more about the technology and subjectivity of the observer through the theme of Narcissus. The use of time-based media allows the artists to address the observer immediately through interaction and let him become a part of the work and therefore become a part of the cognitive process. The argument of this paper is that only through the use of time-based art could the self-awareness of the observer be discussed instead of only a reflecting on the work itself and the reception-process. Against this backdrop, the paper will focus on the use of AI as a 'material' in contemporary art and how it extends this cognitive process. In addition to other works from the history of new media art the work *Narciss* (2018) by the German art collective Waltz Binaire will be in the center of this discussion about AI *in* and *as* artistic practice.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, consciousness, media-awareness, Narcissus, new media art, self-awareness, Waltz Binaire

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Figure 1: Waltz Binaire, *Narciss*, 2018, installationshot.
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Figure 2: Waltz Binaire, *Narciss*, 2018, installationshot.
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Narcissus as a theme in art

“[...] the project Narciss uses this scientific milestone to raise a question at the core of human experience: What do we always look at, but never fully understand? Ourselves”
(Waltz Binaire 2019)

Like the claw in a vending machine this work is looking for something. The robot-arm goes up and down, to the left and to the right, at its end a camera lens is looking into a mirror. It is whirring when it does so, and it seems like it is seeking something. This work described above is called *Narciss* (2018) by the German art collective Waltz Binaire. It is an AI based installation that tries to find itself (Fig.1 and 2).

The *Narciss* installation consists of common computer parts and a movable camera lens mounted on a vertical rectangle. A screen is located on the back of this

construction. Opposite to the bare computer equipment, connected by a metal frame, is a circular mirror. It cannot be denied that the two opposing forms can remind one of a one (1) and zero (0), as the artists themselves write: “Narciss is a robot, built to analyse its own physical embodiment. Its design uses a reduced visual language with a high density of intended associations. The two opposite components, a circular mirror (O) and a computer (I), are designed to symbolize the duality of input and output (I/O)” (Waltz Binaire 2019).

Visual minimalism, the unveiled display of the hardware, as well as the reference to the binary of 1 and 0, make clear the intention that this should be a technological archetype. Here, attention should not be drawn to a design, nothing should be hidden, but the viewer should concentrate on what Narciss is actually doing: looking into the opposite mirror with the camera eye, interpreting this image of itself using an image recognition software, and showing this interpretation in the form of text on a screen. “By constantly panning and zooming, Narciss receives a feed of different perspectives and sub-regions of its hardware. This restless choreography resembles an urge of intention, a never-ending curiosity, and the self-looping nature of narcissism” (Waltz Binaire 2019).

In this way *Narciss* deals with fundamental questions about consciousness and self-awareness in the context of humanity and AI. Therefore, by choosing this title for their work the artists place their work into a widely traditional category of art, as the Narcissus theme is central to western culture concerning consciousness and self-awareness. Fundamentally, it is based on a depiction of a man written by Ovid in the third book of his *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 1922, 337–434). Although the story is fairly well-known, it seems reasonable to recall it briefly here.

The myth tells the tragic story of the young Narcissus, son of the nymph Liriope and the river god Cephisos, whose appearance was admired by everyone. However, Narcissus spurns his countless admirers and harshly rejects the love of the nymph Echo. Disappointed and angry, the rejected nymph curses him: he shall be destined to the same fate as her, he shall fall in love just as eternally and this love will remain unrequited. Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, fulfills this wish by making Narcissus fall in love with his own reflection, which he sees in a pond while hunting. Instead of recognizing it as his reflection in the surface of the water, Narcissus considers the object of his desire to be someone else. Only when the image becomes blurred when Narcissus attempts to embrace this stranger by touching the water does he realize that it is his own image and that his love can never be reciprocated. In mourning and disappointed at this fate, his strength leaves him, and he dies on the shore of the pond. His body disappears and at the place where he had kneeled in front of the pond, a crocus-colored flower grows instead, this flower is then called the narcissus.

There are a lot works that explore the meaning of Narcissus in Western culture, but I like to concentrate on its impact on contemporary new media art like *Narciss* by Walt Binaire.¹ To do so, one has to understand that there are two major works of

1 For the impact by the Narcissus theme of art and culture in general see for example: Barolsky, Paul.

art which defined the discourse surrounding Narcissus until the later 20th century: one created by Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio, and one created by Salvador Dalí.²

In *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937) Dalí makes it possible to experience the transformation from man to flower in the two-dimensionality of an image. The left half of the picture schematically shows a naked man kneeling in the water with his head lowered. Like the rocky landscape in the background, he is kept in earth tones and only stands out through illuminated features. The right side of the picture, on the other hand, is dominated by a stone-like hand holding, in its fingers, an egg from which a narcissus grows. Its form and contour are similar to that of the kneeling figure; this repetition of form occurs a third time in the rock formation found in the background of the upper righthand corner of the picture. The psychoanalytic symbolism of the egg, the ants, or the carrion-eating dog is evident and widely-known (Lomas 2011, 27 et seq.). In this context it is more important to examine how Dalí unites the different stages of the metamorphosis in the pictorial plane. Here, the stages of the metamorphosis are depicted simultaneously within the pictorial space but cannot be perceived at the same time. Only from a distance can the figure on the left be recognized as a kneeling person; the figure on the right, however, can only be recognized as a hand and not just as a rock formation at a close range. The third repetition of the form can only be seen by a concentrated view of the background, which limits the field of vision accordingly and ignores the other two forms. Therefore, Dalí breaks with the perspective axiom of the eye point by applying a process that takes into account the spatial situation of the observer, as can be also found in his other optical illusions and stereoscopic images (Lomas 2011, 30 et seq.).

Dalí illustrates the metamorphosis by transferring the process of transformation to the viewer. The process of observation is thus no longer that of Narcissus, who observes his mirror image, but the process in which the recipient observes Narcissus.

Louise Vinge also understands Dalí's representation of narcissus in a classical iconographic tradition. For Vinge, the kneeling pose, the reddish hair, and the bent arm posture can be traced back to Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1594–96) (Vinge 1966, 44). This reference certainly makes sense, since Caravaggio's *Narcissus* was often

1955. "Very Brief History of Art from Narcissus to Picasso". *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 90, 255–259.
 Cole, Michael. 2002. "The Demonic Arts and the Origin of the Medium". *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 84, 621–640.
 Sennett, Richard. 1977. "Narcissism and Modern Culture". *October*, Vol. 4, 70–79.

2 "This Narcissus [by Caravaggio, D.B.], which for many years received virtually no attention, represents the best-known pictorial representation of the myth and the one that is most germane to our understanding of the theme today – with the probable exception of *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* [by Dalí, D.B. ...], which was created 350 years later. Caravaggio was considered to have based the details of his depiction 'too closely' on Ovid's account. At the time, no-one was interested in emulating the intense portrayal of the connection between Narcissus and his reflection, whilst his external appearance was rejected as being too coarse. Only when Freud's theories of narcissism began to be recognized did people realize that in this painting Caravaggio had shown himself to be far ahead of his time, and that his Narcissus, like modern humanity, was seeking self-knowledge" (Welsch 2012, 23).

understood as a homoerotic motif and corresponds to such psychoanalytic concepts as drive and repression which were frequent themes dealt with in Surrealist Art.

At the same time, Caravaggio emphasizes the boundaries between Narcissus and his mirror image like no other work of art has. The water edge of the spring forms the horizontal central axis of the picture, almost cutting it into two symmetrical halves. Narcissus and his mirror image are also separated by color. While the mirror image is only a shadow image that almost disappears in the darkness of the water, Narcissus stands out from the unspecific black background through the use of light accents found in Caravaggio's chiaroscuro painting. His bright robe, his illuminated arms, and his protruding knee are only partially reflected by the water.

Caravaggio holds Narcissus in suspense, he leaves him undefined, because it is not clear whether Narcissus bends forward, closes his eyes completely, and approaches the surface of the water for a kiss, or whether his left hand touches the water making waves and tearing Narcissus from the illusion causing him to wrench open his half-closed eyes in horror. In Caravaggio, Margrit Brehm, too, does not see a juxtaposition of different points in time, but rather understands Narcissus as in a 'floating' moment, which becomes comprehensible through the "tense posture in which the ambivalence between the pull exerted by the mirror image and the powerful support of oneself, i.e. the counter-movement, becomes apparent. This magical attraction is also emphasized by the closed circular form shaped by the real and mirrored arms in the compositional scheme" (Brehm 2001, 338).³

Starting from this ambivalent composition, Christiane Kruse discusses Caravaggio's *Narcissus* with regard to the difference between the mediator of representation and the theme of representation. In this way, she describes the artist as a media theorist and reception aesthetician at the same time. She understands the circular figure formed by the arm position of Narcissus and his mirror image as "the imprisonment of the ignorant boy in his own illusion" (Kruse 2003, 342). The void that arises within this circular figure is dominated by the "oversized phallus" that "pushes itself like a barrier between the youth and his image," Kruse continues (Kruse 2003, 342). However, a space opens up between the picture and the image, but it does not fall into an illusionistic depth but into a plane of undefined darkness. This can be understood through Kruse's description of the ambivalence of painting and spatial illusion as the thematization of the medium and its reception, and according to her, the "cool transparency of the mirror image and the opacity of the canvas soaked in impenetrable black [function as] polar guiding metaphors of the medium that thematizes itself" (Kruse 2003, 343). At the same time, Caravaggio involves the viewer in the sense of the *rilievo*, in that the young man stands out from the flat black background through the virtuoso *chiaroscuro*. It is not the moment of recognition nor the tragedy of the myth that is emphasized here, for here all the matter of touching the water is negated. Instead, the desire is emphasized as the boy's body and knees stand out, which is also supported by the common biographical-

³ This and the following german quotes are translated by the author.

homoerotic reading of this subject.

Contrary to this more stereotypical reading, Kruse states that Narcissus believes he looks at someone else; unlike the viewer, he does not recognize that it is his mirror image. She understands the Narcissus myth as a process of media knowledge. The first stage of this process is ignoring of the medium, in which Narcissus fails by perceiving the illusion as real; in the second stage, Narcissus recognizes his mirror image as a mirror image, but against his better judgment he allows himself to continue to be deceived and thus moves only in an aesthetic world; in the third stage, Narcissus recognizes his mirror image but he no longer allows himself to be deceived, instead he questions it with regard to its medial qualities and reflects on its function as mediator between the real and aesthetic world. Whether Kruse believes that Narcissus actually reaches this third stage of reception is not clarified because she denies that he has this level of insight at the beginning: “He [Narcissus, D.B.] not only knows no mirrors, no mirror images, he knows nothing of the laws of catoptrics, he also knows no visual media. [...] In other words: Narcissus lacks what I would like to call media-awareness” (Kruse 2003, 309–310).

Self-awareness and media-awareness

Marshall McLuhan, one of the great media theorists of the 20th century, finds that the figure of Narcissus has importance in the context of media, too:

“The Greek myth of Narcissus is directly concerned with a fact of human experience. As the word Narcissus indicates, it is from the Greek word *narcosis*, or numbness. The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system” (McLuhan 2001 [1964], 45).

Like Kruse, McLuhan describes a similar imperfection and lack of media-awareness held by the figure of Narcissus. The inability to recognize himself as a mirror image on the surface of the water leads Narcissus to becoming trapped in a cycle causing him to appear, at least from the outside, as narcotized, numb, or unconscious. In this respect, self-awareness and media-awareness are mutually dependent. Only by being aware that the surface of the water is a reflection could Narcissus gain awareness that he is looking at an image of himself. Such a reading is precisely the opposite of the psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism that one is trapped in admiration for oneself. McLuhan also enables the persistence of negative interpretations with his reference to *narcosis* and numbness. However, his contextualization of the narcissist within media theory allows a way out of this

stereotypical interpretation that appears to be primarily understood by artists.

Since the 1970s, artists have employed this theme in their work, especially with regard to new technologies. The relationship between the self and medialization is particularly virulent in the close-circuit installations like the ones created by Nam Jun Paik and Dan Graham. In the context of the raising popularity and usage of video and media art since this time, Rosalind Krauss speaks about video as an “Aesthetic of Narcissism” (Krauss 1976).

In contrast to the “reflection” of material art, such as paintings, which deal with the relationship between image and image carrier and thus move at the threshold of two entities, video art is more often characterized by its “reflexiveness” (Krauss 1976, 56). Therefore, she understands technical-material components of the video (camera, monitor, etc.) not as actual objects, but as a constellation. In this constellation the artist is not reflecting about the technical equipment itself, but he is instead constantly experiencing reflexiveness of his own image, because this new media gives him endless feedback:

“Unlike the other visual arts, video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time – producing instant feedback. The body is therefore as it were centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; second is the monitor, which re-projects the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror” (Krauss 1976, 52).

The technical closed-circuit situation in which performance and recording actually happen is, for Krauss, the analogy of Narcissus' mythological viewing situation; the situation in which Narcissus is trapped and from which he is only able to escape with his death corresponds to the 'closed circle' of the video installations, in the endless loop of media in which the performer finds himself. Although Krauss mentioned Lacan and the viewing situation she is just focusing on the aspect of production and not of the actual exhibition of video art. The double-bind of the mirror stage – to oneself as a whole but at the same time as some else – which Krauss assumes to be the starting point for the “Aesthetic of Narcissism,” therefore cannot be applied to the medium of video in general but just to the special case of a close-circuit performance, in which an actual encounter with a media counterpart takes place. After all, the actual figure of Narcissus does not play a prominent role in this context because it lacks to consider the viewer. Moreover the focus lies on the psychoanalytical dimension of narcissism and its relevance concerning the artist. But instead of Narcissus as subject, Narcissus as observer has become an increasingly evident theme in art since the 1990s and at a time when digitality determines the discourse about new media art.

In Nicolas Anatol Baginsky's work *Public Narcissism* (1999–2001), for example, visitors were filmed on the escalator of the VW Group's World of Experience in Wolfsburg, from which a face-finding software extracts individual faces and makes

them into portraits. These portraits are then shown on one of the displays next to the escalator, so that the visitor is suddenly confronted with their own portrait. Next, these portraits are assigned to classes and superimposed so that they create an oversized image of a chimera which appears on another big screen. The fact that the work focuses on Narcissism – and not Narcissus – makes sense insofar as the visitors, who see their own portrait on the screens, recognize themselves and, unlike the mythological youth, do not mistake themselves for someone else. In this way, the work deals more with the psychological component of reception, evoking emotions such as surprise, ecstasy, shame, and also fear of surveillance in the visitors. However, in the superimposed portrait, the visitor is confronted with something different. Based on the classification, the software generates a portrait that theoretically contains parts of each visitor at that time. Because this picture no longer shows a clear face, the viewer becomes aware that the digital calculation does not correspond to the human demand for a face, but to an ideal of beauty determined by the AI. The media-awareness comes precisely from the fact that the viewer is aware of himself and can thus distinguish himself from the digitally calculated model.

A similar effect can be found in the work *Liquid Views – The Virtual Mirror of Narcissus* (1992–1993/2008) by the German artists Monika Fleischmann and Wolfgang Strauss, but on a different, more sensual level. In this installation, the recipient sees themselves placed in the actual role of Narcissus by viewing and touching their own mirror image on a screen. Through the technology of the touchscreen, the installation registers the touch and animates the virtual mirror image with ripples. Like a “tactile shock” (Becker 2016, 95), the user now understands that the work is not a simple close-circuit-installation, but that his portrait is filmed, rendered, and animated – without a temporal delay being perceived, it all happens synchronously to the moment of touch – making the viewer aware of the technical constellation. This form of human-machine-interaction was by no means familiar at the beginning of the 1990s, since at that time a large computer in a separate room had to be borrowed for the technical implementation. The narrative setting with the narcissistic subject and the animation of the familiar image of oneself therefore served to familiarize people with the new and strange technology. In this case, it is the shock or eureka effect, in relation to Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, which shows the user the condition and abilities of technical media in the digital age.

In these works, where the recipient is integrated in and basically slips into the role of Narcissus, self-awareness and media-awareness are mutually dependent, and maybe even more so, as only through the consciousness of self-reflection do the media conditions become conscious.

Me, myself, and AI

Narciss by Waltz Binaire is different, because the recipient is not a user who participates in or interacts with the work, but rather a viewer who watches the

process of an observation. And yet, the work differs from classical art, such as the piece by Caravaggio, where one 'only' looks at the represented Narcissus. More than any other media in art, electronic media, through its time-based nature, allows processes to be thematized. Not just a moment, even if the moment can be embedded in an anticipatable narrative, but the transformation through the before-after can be represented, as well as the process of knowledge itself. With *Narciss*, the viewer can simultaneously observe how the camera eye searches the mirror image of its uncovered hardware and how it interprets what it sees using its AI. These interpretations, which can be very different, are shown to the viewer on the display, for example: a toaster oven, a video game controller, a city by night, a bicycle is parked in front of a television, a pair of scissors sitting on a table. At the same time there are also interpretations that come very close to the real situation: a man looking at a laptop, a person's reflection in the mirror, a person is taking a picture of their reflection in a mirror.

The AI of the installation is controlled by an application based on openFrameworks. The snapshots are analyzed by the im2txt caption generator in Google's Tensorflow framework and textualized into descriptions of what can be seen in the picture. This could be seen as an entertaining gimmick, because the work neither recognizes itself as what it is, i.e. a work of art, nor can it go beyond the status of an animal that does not know or recognize its mirror image. But this is not the intention of the piece either, simply because the text output is descriptive (a ...) and not reflexive (I am a ...), this means that the point of the exhibit is not about the self-knowledge of the AI. The artists are much more concerned with the concept of the viewer's self-confidence in their own self-awareness and how they project it onto the robotic Narcissus: "The project *Narciss* aims to question our self-righteous model of self-awareness, the quality of our subjective findings while investigating ourselves and the resulting unequal distribution of dignity" (Waltz Binaire 2019).

Waltz Binaire themselves write that they were inspired by Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage and Gordon Gallup Jr.'s mirror self-recognition test. Lacan introduced the mirror stage as a psychological phenomenon in the 1950s, manifesting the assumption that self-awareness is one of the fundamental characteristics for intelligence in regard to social participation. In psychology, the mirror-test originally created by Gordon G. Gallup in 1970 and later also done by Beulah Amsterdam in 1972 examined the self-recognition and -awareness by animals as well as infants. Here, the ancient myth of the adolescent Narcissus serves as blueprint not only for pathological self-indulgence but also for the conception of the self in general. But how relevant is this question of self-awareness and self-knowledge in the work of Waltz Binaire? This question only makes sense if one does not relate it to the autonomous work, but to the contemplation of the piece by the viewer – do we see ourselves in the installation that searches for itself? In regards to the role of the observer, "[t]he human observer is excluded from this internal cycle, yet invited to participate as a superior judge" (Waltz Binaire 2019). The viewer is a

judge who judges whether the object is intelligent enough to belong to a social group and whether it can satisfactorily imitate intelligent human behavior, such as in the 'Turing Test' or 'Lovelace 2.0 Test of Artificial Creativity and Intelligence.'

To understand viewers as passive judges gives away a certain potential of the work. Thus, only the question of body-spirit dualism is continued and runs from René Descartes to Otto Rössler's Endophysics all the way through Western intellectual history and precisely does not do justice to the transition from the body to the disembodiment in the Narcissus myth. Narcissus is about touching, seeing, and, in relation to the nymph Echo, hearing. A poly-sensual experience, which also takes place in *Narciss*, occurs when one understands the installation as a reflection of one's own technical infatuation. In fact, the American philosopher Shaun Gallagher defines the minimal nature of a self as the "immediate subject of experience, unextended in time" (Gallagher 2000, 15). The experience of a now and here is therefore the difference between a classic piece of timeless art and an idealistic nowhere of seeing everlasting archetypes. That is why Krauss' "Aesthetic of Narcissism," where she also refers to Lacan, is not expedient here. Narcissism deals with a moment of awareness and the mirror-gazing of the artist, whereas the work by Waltz Binaire focuses on becoming aware of the difference between the networked-based, almost humanoid AI and the actual, bodily human condition. In a certain way *Narciss* reacts here to a social condition based on an enduring acceleration in culture by automation.

Narciss is not a temporary installation, it is partly a work-in-progress dealing with machine learning and seeing. It is also against the psychological position to preserve the status in sterile tests. To understand the work narcissistically means to see oneself in it, a performative, searching, unfinished self. It not so much raises the question if the robotic installation is intelligent in anyway, but moreover what is the concept and idea of human intelligence and consciousness itself. The opposite would be to touch the installation, to capture the camera lens, and to freeze the image. But that would be an action that would have the consequence of allowing one to cling to the present, without self-awareness, and without media-awareness. But at least there is a flower.

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THE INTELLIGENT WORK OF ART: HOW THE NARCISSUS THEME ECHOES IN NEW MEDIA ART (Summary)

The paper has shown how the classic Narcissus myth influences the arts and, in particular, new media art. Starting from early milestones in art history focused on this context such as works by Caravaggio and Salvador Dali, we discussed to what extent the self-awareness associated with Narcissus always includes media-awareness. It is emphasized that this subject always functions on a double level: on the one hand it functions on the representation of the image, and on the other hand it functions on the reception of the image. Following up with this aesthetic dimension, the paper focuses on new media art especially in the context of digitization. It shows to what extent the media conditions of new media art such as interactivity or time-baseness are suitable for more deeply illuminating the relationship between medium and reception. The Narcissus myth was revived in the 1990s, because new and foreign possibilities of media experience were made possible and allowed for a new examination and understanding of the myth. Just as the literary Narcissus experiences the medium of the mirror image in the narrative of the myth, the recipient experiences the media conditions through his performative action. Against this background, the focus shifts to the work *Narciss* by the German artist collective Waltz Binaire, which takes a more

current look at the Narcissus theme.

The reason why this work is central here – and is important throughout this paper – is that it uses AI to represent the Narcissus myth. At the same time, it ties in with classical art historical works in which the viewer merely observes the scenery. Through this combination, the work creates a reference to newer approaches in neuroscience. In particular, the execution of the work by AI raises the question of whether a Narcissus is observed in the actual sense, or whether the entire installation situation, including the viewer, represents the myth and the robot-esque component is only the mirror image of him? Finally, this is theme is seen against the backdrop of the philosophical dualism of body and mind. Here the concepts of self- and media-awareness refresh a general and continuous view of Western culture and history.

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