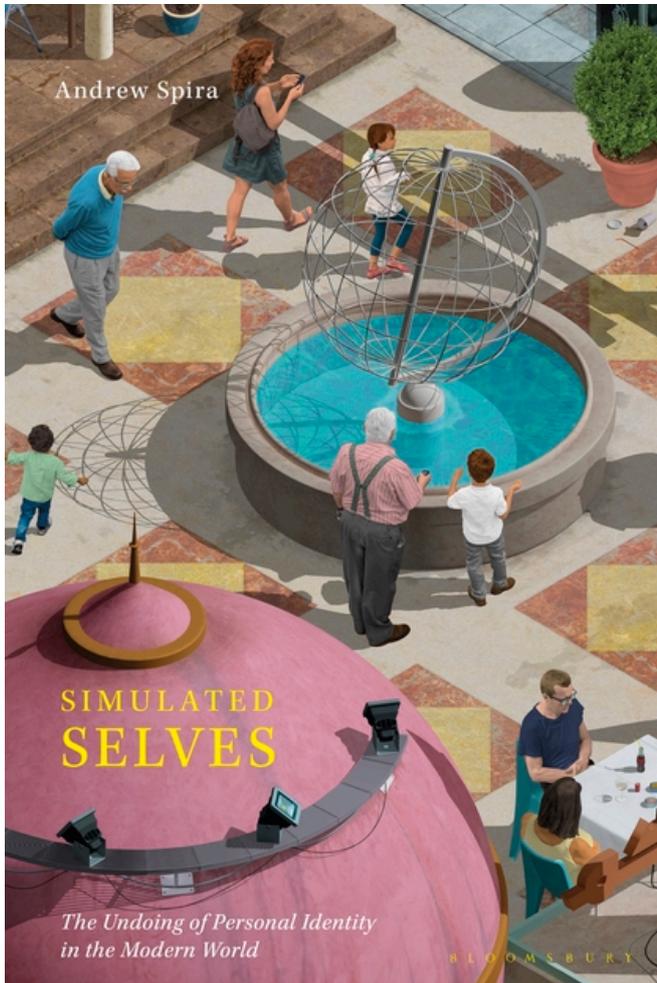


# Simulated Selves: the Undoing of Personal Identity in the Modern World

Andrew Spira



The notion of a personal self took many centuries to evolve, reaching the pinnacle of autonomy with Descartes' formulation 'I think, therefore I am' in the 17th century, and enjoying a century of reason and pleasure in the 18th. It was only following the French Revolution and during the course of far-reaching industrialisation, that this personalising of identity came into question, subject to broader, more impersonal forms of agency that emerged at this time. *Simulated Selves: Undoing Personal Identity in the Modern World* addresses the notion of personal identity in the West and how it has been eclipsed by the development of new technological, social, art historical and psychological infrastructures over the last two hundred years.

The status of the personal self as a mental or linguistic construct has been debated for many years, resulting in its painstaking dismantling on the grounds of solipsism and internal inconsistency. *Simulated Selves* approaches this subject from a completely new point of view. It exposes the provisional nature of the self, not by challenging it philosophically, but by observing changes to the environments and cultural conventions that have supported it for centuries. Its scope is wide-ranging. Firstly, it embraces shifting perceptions of history and community, and the industrialisation of manufacture and communication, all of which invested agency in new conventions and circumstances that transcended the individual; thus while Renaissance scholars had laboured to chart the impact of the heroic individual on the course of history, the theory of evolution side-lined it. Secondly, the book documents the disintegration of the phenomena with which the self-sense had traditionally identified itself - the dissection of the *mind*, by practitioners of the new science of 'psychology', into an indeterminate conglomerate of functions, and the

descent of naturalistic 'art' - once a very mirror of personal identity - into abstraction and visual incoherence. In so far as *Simulated Selves* narrates both the dismantling and the incapacitation of the personal self, it records its *undoing*.

Like *The Invention of the Self: Personal Identity in the Age of Art* to which it forms a companion volume, *Simulated Selves* straddles the disciplines of cultural history and philosophy. On the one hand, it identifies forces that inform the course of cultural history at a most fundamental level but which are frequently overlooked. On the other hand, it highlights how the self is not necessarily the self-authenticating abstraction - only accessible to introspective

scrutiny - that it seems to be. It is also a cultural and historical phenomenon. Indeed because it is by engaging in cultural conventions (as we must) that we subscribe to systems of identity-formation, waxing and waning with them, it is arguably in these conventions that we may get to see our self-sense - and its transience - best reflected. By examining the traces that the trajectory of the self-sense has left in its environment in this way, *Simulated Selves* offers a radically new and practical approach to the question of personal identity, asking not only 'how and why is it under threat?' but also 'given that we understand the self-sense to be a constructed phenomenon, how and why do we cling to it?'



'Astonishingly brilliant and well-informed. While the concept of the self lends itself amply to philosophical and psychological analysis, through logic and introspection, this is not the approach taken here. *Simulated Selves* identifies the self-sense from the traces it has left in the historical environment and this is central to the book's originality.' —Charles Lemert, John C. Andrus Professor of Social Theory Emeritus, Wesleyan University, USA

'Erudite, elegant and wide-ranging; a fascinating history of the modern undoing of the self by and through art.' —Sacha Golob, Senior Lecturer in Philosophy, King's College London, UK

'A sweeping and suggestive account of how the "self-sense" of modern subjects came to be undermined by the cultural forces that earlier fostered its construction. Spira's dialectical vision and lucid writing style make this a compelling read.' —Patrick Coleman, Research Professor of French and Francophone Studies, University of California, USA

The notion of a personal self took centuries to evolve, reaching the pinnacle of autonomy with Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' in the seventeenth century. This 'personalisation' of identity thrived for another hundred years before it began to be questioned, and became subject to the emergence of broader, more inclusive forms of agency. In this expansive study, Andrew Spira addresses the 'constructed' notion of personal identity in the West and how it has been eclipsed by the development of new technological, social, art historical and psychological infrastructures over the last two centuries.

*Simulated Selves: The Undoing of Personal Identity in the Modern World* straddles cultural history and philosophy. By seeing the notion of personal identity in relation to the development of public institutions, the mass production of everyday commodities and the origins of abstract art, Spira offers a radically new approach to the question of personal selfhood, asking not only how and why it is under threat but also, given that we understand the self-sense to be a constructed phenomenon, why we cling to it.

**Andrew Spira** is an Art historian and educator who has worked as a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum and Programme Director at Christie's Education London, UK.

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