

The stranger in the mirror

A brother-sister team has designed a mirror that allows you, for the first time, to see yourself as others see you. Liesl Schillinger faces up to the reflected truth

A man who parts his hair on the right - Al Gore, Oscar Wilde's Bosie, or Clark Kent - sends a signal of weakness, even effeminacy. But a man who parts his hair on the left - John Wayne, John F. Kennedy, or Superman - radiates virility and confidence.

A woman who parts her hair on the left - Margaret Thatcher or Hillary Clinton - is more likely to be taken seriously at her job, whereas a woman who parts her hair on the preferred feminine side, the right, is more likely to be taken on dates.

These aren't just random facts to New York brother-and-sister team John and Catherine Walter, they are keys to an elaborate hair-parting theory.

John has a background in nuclear physics, Catherine was trained in cultural anthropology, and they both believe that hair parting "has a crucial impact on interpersonal relationships by affecting immediate character appraisal, perceived personality traits, self-perception and self-development".

The last thing the Walters want to do is give anybody a complex, but they would like to ask just one question: do you realise that the face you see in the mirror is not actually what you look like, not at all? But never fear, the Walters have a solution - a mirror specially designed to show you, for the first time, precisely the way others see you.

John Walter realised 20 years ago that ordinary mirrors lie, when in his teens he was convinced he looked cool, but found that nobody agreed with him. "People used to say to me: 'You're great and everything, but your expression looks so flat,'" he says. He changed his hair parting from the right side to the left, and with one swipe of a comb transformed himself from drip to dreamboat. "With my hair parted differently, people said I looked intense and perceptive, everything changed."

In fact, his sister recalls, "he got so much attention that he moved his parting to the centre, so the spotlight would go off him". (This story reminds me of a time at college when I was brushing my hair in front of a mirror in a large co-ed bathroom, and a fellow passing behind me stopped, caught by the face in the mirror. He looked at me and said sympathetically "Oh, you must think you're gorgeous," then walked off. Oddly enough, he started parting his own hair on

the opposite side soon after this, while I began wrapping Isadora Duncan-esque scarves about my head, bandeau-style, to obliterate the parting entirely.)

Five years ago, John Walter used his physics knowledge to invent a mirror that does not reverse images, so the reflected face is the same that others see when they talk to you. He calls it the True Mirror.

Last month, he and his sister opened a gallery, factory and shop in the East Village, one of Manhattan's most image-conscious neighbourhoods, to introduce their invention to the mod mod downtown world. Recently, John developed an injection mold to make True Mirrors in quantity, but for now, they are assembled by hand. Demand for self-knowledge is such that there is a six to eight-week backlog of orders.

The True Mirror gallery is located in a picturesque brownstone building. On opening night, there were True Mirrors on shelves, leaning against walls, free-standing True Mirrors, and True Mirrors placed

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face to face, enclosing small statues, reflected with brutal 3-D thoroughness, over and over again.

Local preeners quaked to the bottom of their stacked heels as they gazed at the most monstrous funhouse reflection they had ever seen: their own faces flipped 180-degrees from the image they had known since infancy.

"Some people like what they see, some people are very upset," Catherine says.

"Probably 75 per cent don't like

what they look at, at first, but maybe 10 per cent prefer it - they look at the non-reversed image, and they're like, 'Oh my God, thank you'. But most people are a little thrown because their sense of self is so wrapped up in what they see in the mirror. I tell them to wait a while, and reassure them that they look just fine."

Catherine is a pre-Raphaelite beauty with a soothing manner,

and, like her brother, wears her hair without a parting.

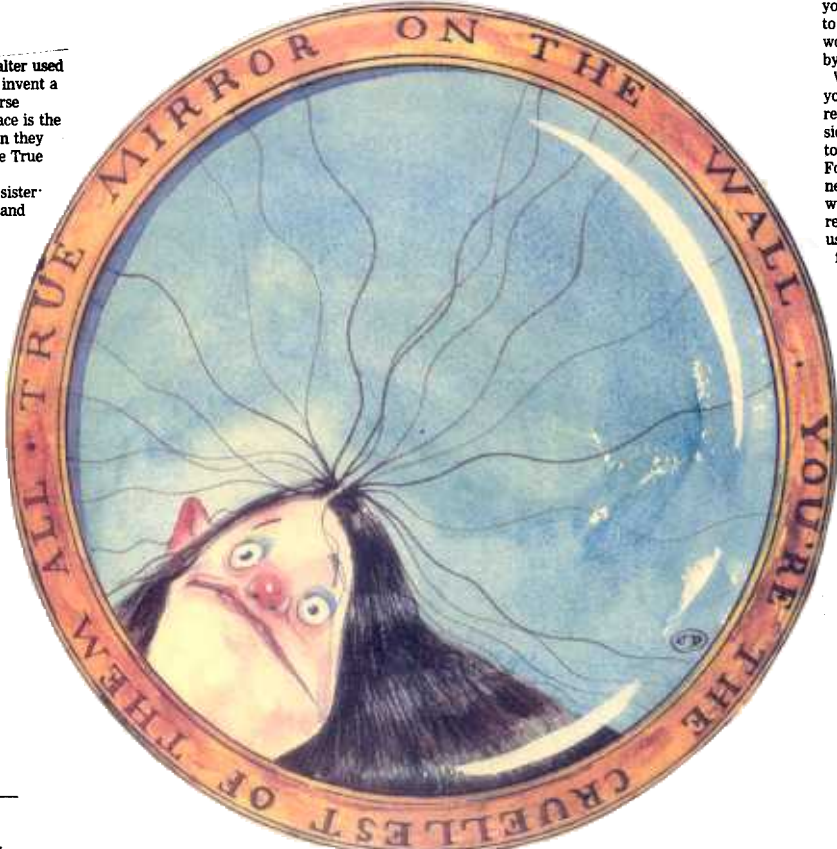
By now, she knows what makes True Mirror novices "bug out", as she puts it, and how to keep them

from fleeing the gallery. "They have to adjust to things like how they hold their head - everyone tends to lean to one side or another. It takes a while until it looks normal. And I

tell them not to worry if they think they look lopsided, because people whose faces are totally symmetrical tend not to be that interesting," she says.

This news will come as a blow to Kate Moss and Cameron Diaz. Cindy Crawford, however, may be in for a shock. If you have a beauty mark or a dimple on the left side of your face, as Crawford does, the True Mirror shows the mark on the left,

rather than on the right, which is how you are used to seeing it as you brush your teeth. The result is that the *tache de Beauté* ends up looking like just a tache. If you have a tendency to cock your head to one side, say the left, the mirror shows that, too. When you see yourself for the first time, leaning your head to the left as if your neck was a wilting zinnia stalk whose blossom weighed 1kg;



or having a funny sneery tilt to your lips that you thought was an enigmatic half-smile; or having a terrifying gimlet gaze when you had thought you had more of a misty kind of look - the "you" you see isn't necessarily the "you" you'd hoped for. In fact, you tend to look like an unkind caricature worked up in excruciating detail by an unforgiving artist.

When you are looking at yourself in a True Mirror and reach up to flick your fringe to the side, your hand instinctively goes to the wrong side of your head. For that reason, the Walters warn new purchasers: "Do not shave with this." Nor do they recommend that successful actors use True Mirrors. "It can be bad for them, because they have already learned to project an image that works," John warns, though they believe struggling actors might be able to benefit from the mirrors.

"Give yourself one month to accustom yourself to your asymmetrical features," the True Mirror order form advises. "Within two months, you will be feeling profoundly different in a positive way about your person, your essence and your life." In other words, your money back if you haven't changed for the better in 60 days. In the illusion business, that's a no-risk invitation. For \$195, you can get a 12in x 12in x 8in True Mirror (the depth allows two mirror images to bounce off each other); for \$295, a king-sized 18in x 18in x 11in version plus postage.

But why would you want one of these unsettling inventions in your house? The True Mirror web site gives the most convincing argument for ownership in the form of an exhortation from Robert Burns: "Oh wad some power the giftie gie us! To see oursel's as others see us! It wad frae monie a blunder free us, And foolish notion."

But John Walter's interest in his invention remains more practical than lyrical. "Why wouldn't you want to have some control over the first impression people have of you?" he asks. With True Mirror, he believes, nobody's parting need be a source of sweet sorrow.

True Mirror Company, 43 East 1st Street, New York, NY 10003 (212-614 6636). The office/gallery is open Wednesday to Sunday, 2pm-6pm. Web site: www.truemirror.com