From Self-Portrait to Selfie: Contemporary Art and Self-Representation in the Social Media Age

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Abstract: Defined as a self-image made with a hand-held mobile device and shared via social media platforms, the selfie has facilitated self-imaging becoming a ubiquitous part of globally networked contemporary life. Beyond this, selfies have facilitated a diversity of image-making practices and enabled otherwise representationally marginalized constituencies to insert self-representations into visual culture. In the Western European and North American art-historical context, self-portraiture has been somewhat rigidly albeit obliquely defined, and selfies have facilitated a shift regarding who literally holds the power to self-image. Like self-portraits, not all selfies are inherently aesthetically or conceptually rigorous or Contemporary Art. But—as this project aims to address via a variety of interdisciplinary approaches—selfies have irreversibly impacted visual culture, contemporary art, and portraiture in particular. The essays gathered herein reveal that in our current moment, it is necessary and advantageous to consider the merits and interventions of selfies and self-portraiture in an expanded field of self-representations. Selfies propose new modes of self-imaging, forward emerging aesthetics and challenge established methods, proving that as scholars and image-makers, it is necessary to adapt and innovate in order to contend with the most current form of self-representation to date. From various interdisciplinary global perspectives, authors investigate various subgenres, aesthetic practices, and lineages in which selfies intervene to enrich the discourse on self-representation in the expanded field today

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1. Introduction

Due in large part to the advent of the selfie, self-imaging has become a defining factor of globally networked contemporary life. Defined as a self-image made with a hand-held mobile device and shared via a social media platform, the popularity of online users sharing selfies on social media sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram led *Oxford Dictionaries* to proclaim "selfie" as its 2013 word of the year. Since then, there has been a continued proliferation of self-imaging and great popular and intellectual interest in selfies. Not only are they a ubiquitous part of contemporary life, selfies are a complex form of social interaction, an emerging aesthetic, and they are

having an irrevocable impact on self-portraiture. While there is increased scholarship on selfies, the complexity of selfies remains under-articulated. Many selfies, for example, are in a rich lineage of radical performative self-portraiture committed to challenging representational politics, canonized aesthetics, and the parameters of portraiture, but this is an area that is yet to be significantly explored.[1] In its very definition, self-portraiture is both specific and amorphous. It is a representation, a production, and a creation of someone made by that same individual, but the specifics of how and why are unarticulated. The advent of the selfie has highlighted the problematic politics of this fickle definition. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a self-portrait as "a portrait of oneself done by oneself," [2] while *Oxford Dictionary* defines self-portrait as "a portrait of an artist produced or created by that artist" [3]. What a self-portrait is and what its aims are remain up to the maker. The distinction about who is authorized to create a self-portrait—"oneself" or an "artist"—is at the core of the contention around self-portraits and selfies. Through an art-historical perspective, questions around the ontology of self-portraiture do not seem so new. While not definitively stated, the question of whose self-portraits have been considered legitimate along with the expected aesthetics and artistic intent of the self-portrait have remained constant points of contention throughout art history. Scholarly discourse around selfies has moved these contentions to the fore.

2. A Brief History of Self-Portraiture, and the Evolution of Self-Representation

Self-portraiture has a long-standing art-historical tradition. Although not always explicitly stated, in the Western European and North American art-historical context, self-portraiture has been associated with the work of canonized artists made within specific media-based, aesthetic, and conceptual frameworks, and visual traditions. In Western art, this translates into the canonization of self-portraits by recognized artists produced using traditional and established materials. Historically, in Western art, the aesthetic aims of the self-portrait were to render oneself as true to life as possible, and the materials used and the resulting composition were also expected to reflect tradition. For example, paintings made using oil on canvas and sculptures made of bronze or marble have been widely revered in the canon of Western art for centuries. Painted self-portraits depicted the artist from the waist or chest up, either in frontal or three-quarter view, and sculptural self-portraits were expected to be in bust form or a life-like rendering of the subject. The 16th-century artist Albrecht Dürer is widely recognized as a foundational figure in the genre of self-portraiture

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[1] For example of one such exploration see: Murray (2015).

[2] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "self-portrait," accessed August 9, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-portrait.

[3] *Oxford Dictionaries*, 3rd rev. edition, s.v. "self-portrait."

and was a prolific self-portraitist. In what may be his most recognized painting, titled simply *Self-Portrait*, from 1500, Dürer painted an image exemplifying the aesthetic expectations of self-portraiture that are still present today (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait*. Source: Dürer (1500).

The oil on canvas image depicts the artist from the elbows up in a frontal pose, cropped on the sides at the shoulder with a small space above his head; he is positioned in front of a dark background, and a soft sidelight illuminates his likeness. His eyes look out of his emotionless face directly at the viewer. The shallow pictorial plane, the scant amount of negative space around the subject, the frontal orientation and the lifelike rendering are tenets of self-portraiture that have persisted for centuries.[4]

Ideologically, the portrait in the Western European and North American context is bound up with a cultural belief that through a masterful representation, one can transmit the essence of the person depicted. In *Self/Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject*, Amelia Jones writes: "European-based cultures conceive of representation as both collapsing and maintaining the gap between subject and object." (Jones 2006, p. 13). Jones observes that our cultural tendency—especially

[4] Artistic merit and skill could be judged based upon the closeness with which the resulting image matched the corporeal reality. For more on Albrecht Durer's self-portraiture, see: Stumpel and Kregten (2002). Also see: Boeckeler (2017), Stamm (2019), Erlanger (1962), and Schlief (2004).

when it comes to portraiture—is to conflate the representation, the image, and the portrait of the person it represents.[5] In his text *Portraiture*, art historian Richard Brilliant observed that "There is a great difficulty in thinking about pictures, even portraits by great artists, as art and not thinking about them primarily as something else, the person represented" (Brilliant 1991, p. 23). Even when we know that the image has been craftily rendered, highly fabricated, and intentionally produced, we tend to view the image *not* as an image but as the *person* depicted. The culturally constructed belief in the ability of a portrait to convey something about the identity of the subject, *beyond* their surface aesthetics, is particularly important when we consider the canon of self-portraiture in the Western art-historical context.

It is both widely known and contested that Western art history has traditionally privileged the male Caucasian subject. Visual studies scholar Mieke Bal has observed that it is via the canon of portraiture in the Western European and North American contexts that ideological value systems are continually reified. Bal eloquently argued, "the dominant classes set themselves and their heroes up as examples to recognize and to follow, and it is barely an exaggeration to say this interest is visible in the cult of portraiture" (Bal 2003, p. 22). The art-historical tradition of the canonization of self-portraits of Caucasian, masculine corporealities is highly disproportionate and suggests that these subjects should be deeply considered and understood as infinitely nuanced, complicated, and revered. Sidelining and erasing representations of other subjects from the canon of self-portraiture in this art-historical tradition symbolically marks non-imaged constituencies as not valuable to said culture.[6] Although portraits other than those of Caucasian men have circulated art-historically, they have not regularly been self-portraits, and they have appeared in limited numbers. When such images are produced, they are often imaged by members of dominant cultural groups, and from a mainstream ideological perspective, due to the belief in the ability of the portrait to transmit knowledge, such images often culturally reify problematic and demeaning beliefs about constituencies other than Caucasian masculinity.[7]

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[5] Western art-historical and social conceptions of representation originating in the Renaissance. It was during this time that the belief in the ability of the artist to render truth and insight into a subject through representational likeness was established. For more on the discussion of conception of representations as subject originating in the Renaissance, see: Jones (2006, pp. 2–5, 13–14). Also see: Sekula (1984, pp. 3–21) and Hall et al. (2013, pp. 15–64).

[6] Cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer, and visual studies scholars Mieke Bal and Richard Dyer, among others, have observed that it is in the visual field that identity constituencies and livable subjectivities are negotiated. See Hall (1981).

[7] At stake here is that the limited visual examples of figures of "otherness" become stereotypic representations and are thus devoid of nuance or narrative and rendering in ways that reinforce stereotypes about said constituency. For more on the way stereotypic representations have been produced by Western ideological positions and in service of domination, see Hall et al. (2013) and Hall (1985). Also see Said (1979) and Bhabha (1991).

Over time, due to innovations in technologies, artistic and conceptual shifts, and artists pushing the limits of materials, aesthetics, and the very ontology of self-portraiture, the genre has changed. As self-portraiture and the discourse around it has evolved, the complexity of self-portraits and the boundaries of the genre have been revealed, challenged, and nuanced. A significant conceptual and aesthetic intervention was made in the field of self-portraiture when Cindy Sherman produced her 'Untilled Film Stills' (1977–1980).[8] Sherman's series of 70 black and white 8×10 photographic prints visually reference stills from film noir movies and image Sherman in a variety of stereotypic Caucasian, feminine roles. Appropriating the visual language of film noire cinema, Sherman's self-images appear in constructed scenes that reflect the look of film noir aesthetics but do not correspond to any films ever made.

While technically an image of herself made by her, Sherman's use of self as representative of interchangeable femme fatale archetypes expands the definition of self-portraiture. Paying close attention to setting, costume, performance, and mise-en-scene, Sherman inserts herself as a malleable subject, changing her physical appearance from one image to the next as she mimics femme fatale icons found in film noir era cinema. Sherman's performances underscore the rigidity with which female roles have been constructed not only in cinema, but in visual culture at large, while the level of artifice present in the project underscores the way in which self-portraits are fragile fictions that are always fabrications. Reflecting on the place that dominant culture suggested she occupy as a young Caucasian woman and pushing back with a critique, Sherman mobilized the self-portrait as a performance capable of intervening in stereotypical representations of women in film, while also intervening more broadly in to the way representations are enmeshed with ideological systems of domination and the constitution of identity formations. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Scholar Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 2009) observed that cinema often imaged the female subject as a passive consumable body for the enjoyment of the male gaze. Mulvey's observations, along with work of other second-wave feminist scholars and artists like Sherman, prompted a reworking of systems of representation mainly with regard to how the female subject was portrayed in mainstream visual culture.[9]

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[8] For more on Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills, see: Sherman and Galassi (2003), Jones (2006, pp. 43–55), Kérchy (2003), Heiferman (1997), Schwabsky (1997), Mauer (2005), Childs (2006, pp. 85–94) and Mauer (2005).

[9] Mulvey's methods combined poststructuralism, feminist theory, and psychoanalysis to consider the way cinema structures women as objectified and passive objects of the masculine cinematic voyeuristic gaze.

Sherman's 'Untitled Film Stills' complicated and revealed how the self-portrait is an encounter in which meaning is created. The space between the image and the person imaged is a vast, complex, critical zone wherein the image-maker engages with how the person imaged is perceived. Sherman's project on the whole expanded the parameters of what a self-portrait could be and to what ends it might be produced. Her work was part of a growing discourse around the relationship between visual culture, representation, and identity. Her use of self-portraiture as a social and conceptual device transformed the genre irrevocably and has impacted ensuing artistic practices and scholarly debates ever since. The impact Sherman has had on the radicalization of self-portraiture is widely observable in the contemporary art world today. In the wake of Sherman and influenced by other postmodern and feminist artists and informed by scholarly interventions like those of Mulvey, contemporary artists continue to turn critical attention to expanding the concepts and aesthetics of self-portraiture, exploring the ontology of self-portraiture, interrogating the complexity of the gaze, and intervening in the intricacies of identity formations.[10]

3. Selfies: Visual Culture Intervention

The massive impact selfies are having across a vast array of aspects of contemporary life is illustrated by the growing corpus of research on selfies from scholars in disciplines ranging from psychology, to anthropology to art history and beyond. A significant portion of the research on selfies deploys intersectional methods to unpack their indelible impact on art, self-portraiture, social life, and visual culture. The establishment of the Selfies Research Network, conferences like the Kern, which is based out of Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), and research focusing on the complexity and specificity of selfies reflect the growing interest in selfies. Art historian and visual studies scholar Derek Conrad Murray argues that the power of selfies lies in their ability to enable new forms of self-representation and their redistribution of the power of self-imaging. Looking predominantly at selfies made by women, he observes, "taken en masse, it feels like a revolutionary political movement—like

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[10] There are many examples of artists using self-imaging as means of granting agency to constituencies from representationally marginalized positions. For the sake of making a critique of Western art-historical tradition, I have focused on the example of Sherman. Scholarly interventions in art and visual culture that pushed thinking on systems of representation and difference include but are not limited to culture by the likes of African American feminist scholars Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, and legal studies practitioner Kimberle Crenshaw; and queer theorists José Esteban Muñoz and Sara Ahmed. Contemporary artists specifically dealing with representation, identity politics, and self-portraiture include but are not limited to Kahinde Wiley, Kalup Linzy, Adrien Piper, Mariko Muri, Shirin Neshat, Pushpumala N. Ana Mendieta, Glen Ligon, Sarah Lucas, Tracy Emin, Yasumamsa Murimura, Nikki S. Lee, and Pipolotti Rist. For more scholarship on artists using photography to explore identity formations, see Cotton (2004), Bright (2005), Maggia (2008), Wells (2003), Bailey and Hall (2003), Noel (2014) and Qualls (1995).

radical colonization of the visual realm and an aggressive reclaiming of the female body" (Murray 2015, p. 1).[11] The radical potential of selfies for Murray can be seen to build on the work of artists like Sherman and to continue the legacy of changing representations of otherwise objectified subjects.[12] Ana Peraica takes an art-historical and psychological approach to consider how selfies utilize pictorial space and how they are deployed to work through conceptions of self (Peraica 2017). Edgar Gomez Cruz and Helen Thornham theorize selfies from an ethnographic perspective, finding selfies to be interstices of contemporary communication (Cruz and Thornham 2015). For Media Studies scholars Mehita Iqani and Communications scholar Jonathan E. Schroeder, the selfie is both an "object and a practice" (Iqani and Schroeder 2015, p. 405), providing significant insight into the workings of people's psyches as well as our relationship to consumer culture and art history.

Situating selfies in an art-historical lineage of rupturous self-portraitists, the proliferation of self-imaging that selfies have fostered reveals that there are vastly more possibilities for self-actualizing than previously imaged and imagined, particularly when it comes to hybrid intersectional identities, gender expression, sexual visibility, subculture aesthetic affiliations, and identities not depicted in mainstream visual culture. For example, while mainstream visual culture images and validates a narrow set of trans identities via showcasing a handful of trans celebrities, including Caitlin Jenner, Laverne Cox, and Janet Mock (all of whom reflect aspirations to perform within normative binary gender structures, heteropatriarchal systems, and capitalist models of success), a search on Instagram for the hashtag #transgender reveals over 8.7 million images.[13] These images are predominantly selfies, and even a quick perusal of the hashtag search results reveals myriad intersectional, radical corporealities of self-identifying trans-self-image makers. The images reflect a myriad of ways to be trans. The massive proliferation of trans self-images represents a plethora of non-binary gender identities, including a vast array of ethnic and racial identifications and a wide variety of body types, abilities and self-image makers who reside in numerous geographic and subcultural locations, and it showcases many sexual orientations, ages, and self-imaging aesthetics. The diversity of self-images found when searching #transgender reveals that selfies are exponentially diverse

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[11] Murray thoroughly demonstrates that selfies disrupt dominant traditions in art history and visual culture that privilege representations of and by Caucasian men.

[12] Overall, selfies are facilitating the exponential circulation of a diversity of subjectivities in visual culture. Several subgenres of selfies have fostered watershed moments of change in the politics of representation. For example, it has been widely observed that representations of women in visual culture in the Western art tradition have produced subjects without agency as viewed through the consuming gaze of heteropatriarchal ideologies. Women's bodies have primarily been subjected to display and perusal. Moreover, the artistic merits of women artists have been sorely undervalued and their perspectives overwhelmingly sidelined. See: Nochlin (1971).

[13] This figure is as of August 2019.

and often visually and ideologically disruptive of mainstream culture and art in critically engaged and significant ways. The new genre of trans selfies demonstrates a radical potentiality of selfies—that they facilitate the visualization of new identity constituencies. Furthermore, they challenge the indexicality of the photograph and illustrate how gender and racialization are articulated and regulated in the visual encounter.

4. Narcissism: Reactionary Rhetoric

A significant portion of the discourse on selfies reflects efforts to undermine selfies and their makers. When constituencies normally not imaged by dominant culture begin to appear in visual culture, members of the dominant group—i.e., those benefiting from Caucasian and heteropatriarchal power structures—tend to produce reactionary rhetoric aimed at re-establishing existing regimes of power. Selfies have been chastised by several scholars for ostensibly being made by narcissists and people with other personality disorders. Articles like Gwendolyn Seidman's "What is the Real Link between Selfies and Narcissism?" (Seidman 2015) and Fiona Keating's "Selfies Linked to Narcissism, Addiction, and Mental Illness, Say Scientists" (Keating 2014) reflects the ethos of such articles focusing on the negative impacts of selfies on the image-maker's self-esteem and subjects' alleged psychological shortcomings. Much of this type of research on selfies predominantly focuses on girls and young women, arguing that selfies are damaging and reflective of a fragile psyche, and ignoring male and non-binary identities.[14] In "Selfie Culture in the Age of Corporate and State Surveillance", Henry A. Giroux argues that selfies are part of a "narcissistic consumer culture" (Giroux 2015, p. 156) and part and parcel of a rampant "anti-intellectualism" sweeping Western culture. While I agree there are problems with our rampant consumer culture and a current anti-intellectualism sweeping the US in particular, as evidenced by the current state of US politics, selfies are no more interrelated to these phenomena than any other part of contemporary

[14] This rhetoric is also understandable. When scholarship and research regarding selfies is conducted by researchers who are invested in looking at the world through the framework of diagnosis and medicalization, it should come as no surprise when their findings pathologize. For more examples of articles deriding selfies, see: Gregoire (2015), Seidman (2015), and Keating (2014). Through an art-historical approach with consideration for the ways in which women have appeared throughout history as the subject to be perused rather than revered as serious image-makers, the gendered dimension of the writing off of selfies seems quite political. Similarly, representationally marginalized subjects such as those discussed by Pinney had to use collaborative and nontraditional means to self-image. The derision of selfies seems more to be a reaction to the changing landscape of who has the power to self-image than a reaction rooted in their aesthetics or conceptual dimensions.

life. In fact, selfie-makers are often critically and astutely engaged with contemporary art, culture, and representational politics.[15]

The aggressive, reactionary attempt to discredit and demean radical self-image makers reflects the long shadow cast by heteropatriarchal, Caucasian supremacist ideologies that have presided over Western art and visual culture. Attempts to discredit selfie-makers are impulsive reactions to representationally disenfranchised constituencies taking control of how they are represented in visual culture. Suggesting that selfie makers suffer from low self-esteem and personality disorders is deeply troubling when one considers the sexist connotations. Derek Conrad Murray observes the main targets of the narcissism debate are young women. Murray suggests that the derision of selfie makers is a "more benign counterpart to political, legislative, and ideological attempts to manage women's physical and mental health" (Murray 2018, p. 7). The attempt to pathologize selfie-makers reflects art-historical tradition rooted in patriarchal impulses to regulate who has the power to self-image, the maintenance of self-imaging aesthetics, and the means of circulation. Significantly, the scholarship proposing that selfies are indicative of personality disorders overwhelmingly fails to attend to the visual aspects of selfies. Murray's work is instructive in that he frames selfies as a visual culture phenomenon and in relation to art history. Offering an art-historical analysis of selfies reveals that if any broad claim is to be made on their behalf, it would be more accurate to say selfies overall are radical self-representations made by otherwise visually marginalized constituencies.

Postcolonial scholar Ray Chow's research demonstrates that calling others narcissistic in an attempt to discredit them is a common reaction from people in positions of dominance who are feeling threatened by marginalized folks gaining some modicum of agency (Chow 1993). Chow's reading of narcissism is crucial to how we think about the discourse surrounding selfies. In efforts to maintain power, the dominant culture seeks to discredit the intervening image-makers by mobilizing derogatory discourse against them. Across the board, the scholarship that focuses on mischaracterizing and debasing selfies as being part and parcel of personality disorders fails to engage in any visual analysis of selfies. Significantly, however, beyond the facilitation of the visualization of a wider variety of identity constituencies, selfies forward emergent aesthetics, radically pushing for the necessity of new visual studies and art-historical methods to be developed in order to apprehend and articulate precisely what they are doing and how they function.

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[15] For example, one politically engaged use of selfies is discussed in Nichols (2015), as well as in Murray (2015). Of course, how the selfie is used is up to the image-maker and, like all art forms—and especially photographs—it is contingent on the image-maker, their ideology, and their intent.

5. Concluding Thoughts

Visualizing new subjectivities outside of sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting upon a variety of power structures that have historically dehumanized and marginalized certain constituencies, selfies facilitate the production and circulation of self-images of radical intersectional subjectivities. Rather than create an essential and inaccurate binary opposition between selfies and self-portraits (reinforcing hierarchies about who has the power to image and what methods will be accepted as legitimate forms of image production), this project seeks to interrogate the interventions, innovations, and shortcomings of all self-representations through flexible, interdisciplinary discursive methods as co-constituted by the work in question. To that end, self-representation is a better-suited term when it comes to bridging the gap between selfies and self-portraits. By beginning an inquiry into the field of self-representation in the age of social media, this project explores the conceptual, aesthetic, and methodological stakes of self-representation in a broad sense and with acute attention paid to the politics of representation, intersectional identities, aesthetic, and technological innovations, and art history as points of departure.

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