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SELF REPRESENTATION IN AN EXPANDED FIELD

FROM SELF-PORTRAITURE TO SELFIE, CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

EDITED BY ACE LEHNER

Self-Representation in an Expanded Field

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Ace Lehner (Ed.)

Self-Representation in an Expanded Field

From Self-Portraiture to Selfie, Contemporary Art in the Social Media Age

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This book is dedicated to Derek Conrad Murray.

Ace Lehner (Ed.)

About the Editor

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Ace Lehner is an interdisciplinary scholar and artist specializing in critical engagement with identity and representation; history, theory, and criticism of contemporary art; photography theory; queer and trans theory; and critical race studies. Recently, Lehner has presented their research at the College Art Association Conference, Rochester Institute of Technology, and the International Center of Photography, and has been published in *Art Journal, REFRACT*, The Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, and *The Journal on Images and Culture*. Their work has been exhibited internationally and has recently appeared at El Museo del Barrio in New York (in collaboration with artist Libby Paloma), and Lehner's project *Barbershop: The Art of Queer Failure* will be featured in a solo exhibition at Practice Gallery in Philadelphia in 2021. Lehner holds a Ph.D. in Visual Studies from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and MFA in Fine Art from California College of the Arts. Lehner is based in New York and teaches at Parsons School of Design, the Fashion Institute of Technology, and the International Center of Photography. Lehner is also available for consultation and speaking engagements related to Queer and Trans inclusivity.

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His work on HIV/AIDS was included in the traveling exhibition *Art, AIDS, America* organized by the Tacoma Art Museum, Washington. His recent writing on HIV/AIDS was published in the Cambridge Scholars anthology *The Shapes of Epidemics and Global Disease (2020).*

His curatorial work includes a trilogy of projects titled *The Turning, Queerly* and includes the exhibitions *From Self to Selfie* (2017), *A History of Violence* (2018), and *Precarious Lives* (2019).

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Introduction

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

Ace Lehner

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

[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*, 1500, Oil on lime panel, 67.1 x 48.7 cm (Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

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

[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).

object." (Jones 2006, p. 13). Jones observes that our cultural tendency—especially 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 are rendered in ways that reinforce stereotypes about said constituency. For more on the way stereotypic representations have been

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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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).

[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 work by the likes of African American feminist scholars Audre Lord, 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 10.9 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

[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 May 2021.

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 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

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[14] 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).

[15] 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.

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.

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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Issues in Self-Representation

Between Our Selves: Conversations on Race and Representation

Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik

Abstract: The promise of self portraiture is that we can see ourselves and be seen as queer, women, non-binary, and people of color. Racialized and gendered bodies can also be rendered objects and spectacles in their representation. This essay and interview by Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik in conversation with artists Patrick "Pato" Hebert and David Lydell Jones, is a dialogue between artists of color that contends with the problems and possibilities of self representation.

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1. Introduction

If the camera is a way for *them* to see *us*, self-portraiture—for racialized and gendered subjects—can be a way for *us* to see *each other*. As an art student, I became conscious of how my body was read by a larger world through photography. This is where I wrestled with the questions of phenotype, race, gender, and identity. Although my practice of art began with the self, it could not remain there. Critical inquiry is not possible in isolation; it develops in conversations between students and teachers as makers of art. This is how I became an artist—in dialogue. In the interviews that follow, I revisit these conversations with a former teacher, Patrick "Pato" Hebert, and a former student, David Lydell Jones, each of us photographers of color who share a deep love of the camera and a distrust of the ways in which representation and its technologies are used against us. These exchanges between artists are a critical part of the creative process—thinking through, making, and supporting each other in being ourselves in the world.

My twenty years of creative practice spanned a transition from adolescence to adulthood, student to teacher, analog to digital photography, and self-portraits to selfies. The dialogues I have shared with many artists, including Pato and David, have expanded my understanding of what portraiture and self-portraiture can be. In conversations that have unfolded over years, we have asked ourselves and each other, "Why represent the body?" and "What is photographic representation beyond phenotype?" The promise of self-portraiture is that we can see ourselves and be seen. In its more troubling manifestations, we can reproduce ourselves along with the narcissism that inhibits us from seeing beyond ourselves. We can also unintentionally render ourselves objects and spectacles. As artists with an uneasy relationship to self-representation, each of us has used stand-ins for the body. I have appeared as a black and white cutout re-photographed in color in *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet Said*

She (Figures 1–4, 2002), Pato has photographed landscapes, appearing in a suit of reflective silver paillettes in the *Oscillator* series (Figure 10, 2014–ongoing), and David has represented Black people murdered by police through abstract film photography in *Silence and Stillness* (Figure 11, 2015).

As people of color, we understand very clearly, and very personally, the power dynamics of making photographs and being photographed. On the one hand, our bodies can be hyper visible through media and advertising, art, surveillance, police body cams, mug shots, lynching photographs—both historical and contemporary—and simultaneously invisible on the other. It begs this question: In a colonial legacy that codifies and controls bodies, what aspects of self are represented in each of these realms? Where can we be angry and tender? The role of the camera in picturing, measuring, owning, surveying, and controlling land and people cannot be overstated. We describe images without people as empty, as though this implies a lack. This misperception has been a dangerous justification for the colonization of the American West as a space to be filled with white bodies.

Art became exciting to me when I learned that it could engage these very ideas, as a way to not only make sense of the world but to participate in it. In college, I had become obsessed with how my body as a young, mixed race, Asian American woman was seen by others. How did my representation function in the larger world? At Scripps College, Susan Rankaitis, Ken Gonzales-Day, Patrick "Pato" Hebert, Alexis Weidig, and T. Kim-Trang Tran introduced me to these ideas and to writers who gave language to my experience. The works of John Berger (1995), Coco Fusco (1997), Kobena Mercer (1994, 1991), Alan Sekula (1993), and Edward Said (1995) illuminated the ways that my image could become a racialized, gendered object.

I was my most available subject and I appeared often in my photographs. In response to all that I was becoming newly aware of, I created a series of black and white self-portraits as a paper doll with "outfits" that represented something of my different identities. I appeared in a sari, a kimono, a pollera, and jeans and a t-shirt. I packaged the cutouts in cellophane, complete with little paper tabs to attach the clothing. But I soon felt that the costumes reinforced the very stereotypes I was trying to critique. As a multiethnic, multilingual Asian American, I experienced the world at the intersections and this separation into stereotypes was a literal flattening of my body into discrete objects.

The cutouts migrated to different parts of my dorm room. I started playing with them, curious about the secret life of my image. What did she do when I was not looking? Where did she go? Could she get away with things that I could not? What was the difference between my physical body and its representation? I began re-photographing the undressed paper doll in her gray tank top and black underwear on color slide film. I photographed her at school, at my parents' house, at the pool, applying makeup to her black and white body, caught in a doorway, sticking out

her tongue (Figures 1 and 2). The series culminated in my undergraduate thesis show where the slides were viewed through a loupe embedded in a gallery wall (Figures 3 and 4). I titled it *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She,* after a line from my namesake Ramayana. And it became my first body of work as an artist.

Figure 1. *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She,* color slide film, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2002.

Figure 2. *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She,* color slide film, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2002.

As I learned how to use the camera I was learning not only about my image, but who and how I wanted to be as a creative person. Pato, my professor at the time, modeled this for me. I had never encountered anyone like him—an activist, educator, *and* artist. Our conversations in developing *Trials* showed me what it was like to be part of a discourse, to engage in exchanges that brought in the world beyond. As enthralled as I was with art theory, a simple assignment in his photography class brought photography home. After a critique, Pato asked us to take our photographs off the wall. On the reverse of one, he asked us to write a note of gratitude. On the other, an apology. This connection, beyond the walls of the classroom, was the first time I considered how art could change our relationships with one another.

Figure 3. *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She*, Installation View, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2002.

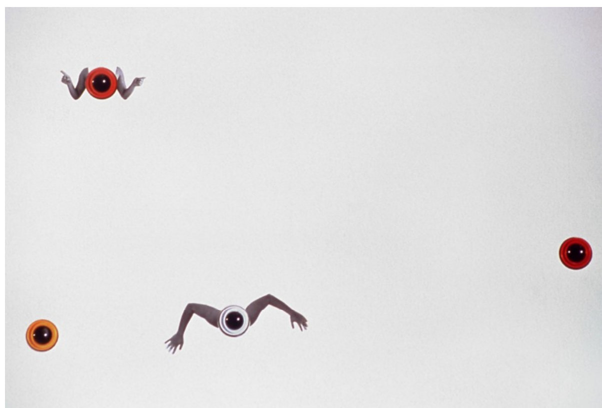

Figure 4. *My Trials Have Not Ended Yet, Said She*, Installation View, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2002.

Looking back on these formative years, I was the last generation of art students to exclusively learn photography through film. Photography was material—something you bathed, dried, and reused. *Trials* became my document of a medium—a black and white photograph in a technicolor world. With the introduction of digital photography and the selfie culture that followed, I, who once made hundreds of self-portraits, stopped. I turned away from self-portraiture in my creative practice, only appearing in front of the camera within the frame of my installation work. The more critical I became of the world around me, the more I applied this to my own work—until it became difficult to continue making photographs.

While I first saw the medium as a way to contest stereotypes, I could not shake the feeling that I was reproducing myself as an object for something to be done *to* me. In Alan Sekula's brilliant essay, "The Body and the Archive", he argues that photography, since its inception, has functioned both repressively and honorifically (1993). He investigates the history of policing, criminalization, and eugenics, to show how our images and their archives have been used by the state to identify and control our bodies. Sekula's writing had such a profound effect on me that I came to see my own image as always already a mug shot. Even though Sekula continued to see promise in contemporary photography, I began to see self-representation as a trap.

Did my authorship matter? In "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes argued that the author's biography and their intentions were unrelated to the work (2010). For Barthes, the death of this singular Author–God gave rise to the birth of the reader, a political promise that redistributed power. But what did this mean for the self-portrait? In reading this, I felt a double bind. In the works of Sekula and others, I was learning that I had little control over how my image might be read or used in the larger world. These theories gave language to my lived experience. However, as an author of my own image, I knew that I had felt a sense of agency and generative power in this process. As David pointed out to me in our conversation, what does it mean for people of color to use cameras that we were not even meant to operate? When Barthes proclaimed the author dead, he ignored what authorship meant for racialized and gendered subjects. This was not merely a lateral replacement of the Author–God with a different body. Self-representation has the potential to disrupt the hierarchy of the gaze between subjects and creators.

Photography and its limits led me to look beyond vision to interrogate the *other* senses of hearing, smell, taste, and touch. I pushed against visual supremacy as part of a sensory hierarchy that was raced, classed, and gendered (Classen 1998). In Visual and Critical Studies at California College of the Arts, Jacqueline Francis, Doug Hall, Tina Takemoto, Tirza True Latimer, Jeanette Roan, Michele Carlson, Julian Carter, Martin A. Berger, and Angela Hennessy were among the many teachers who shared my urgency about the implications of representation. Although I still had an insatiable curiosity to research, my time as a grad student was defined by a fear of representing

myself and a fear of making mistakes. I was afraid of doing what I wanted to do most—make meaning. I had become attuned to identifying the problems. Criticality holds us accountable to the decisions we make as creative people. But what I learned was that the movements of self-critique and making are opposed. They can happen in succession, but not simultaneously. This is where the relationships that support our creative practices can dislodge us from fear. During and after grad school, my references grew to include Roland Barthes (2010), Audre Lorde (2007), Martin Berger (2011), the works of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (Hilliard 2008), The Combahee River Collective (Taylor 2017), and Grace Lee Boggs (2012). I became increasingly involved in community organizing work and my classroom extended to places like Kearny Street Workshop, Hyphen magazine, Marcus Books, and countless conversations with people doing the work.

By the time I began teaching, my students were adept at photographing themselves—frequently and with great skill—through selfies. In arts education, we often start with the self-portrait. In my version of this assignment, I asked each student to create a series of self-portraits without their bodies in the frame. This gave us an opportunity to get to know one another in perhaps surprising ways, through the objects, spaces, and activities that each person chose to represent themselves. The social currency associated with selfies, and the criteria that increased this perceived value, were so instinctive to my students that removing the physical body revealed some of these assumptions. The assignment also eased some anxieties with how our bodies looked. It gave us space to talk about the ways in which our bodies are read by the larger world and to be aware of the decisions that we make in how we choose to self-represent.

Even though I no longer photographed, I still taught photography. I still loved photography. It was not that I did not believe in the power of representation, it was that I was overwhelmed by it. In my first years of teaching, I recognized this struggle between representation in my student David. I was struck by his dedication to film at a school that did not have a darkroom and a leaning towards abstraction that was rare among his social media-obsessed peers. At its best, photography can be an opening into difficult conversations, and that is what the image facilitated between us. In his final body of work during college, *Silence and Stillness*, David represented Black victims of police violence through abstract film photography. That semester, photography lived up to its promise as a medium that could acknowledge, honor, mourn, inquire, and connect.

Just as I saw the classroom as a place for mutual recognition of power between students and teachers, I returned to photography in mutual recognition of the power between author (photographer) and reader (viewer). I recently returned to making photographs in the *The Archive of Dreams/El archivo de los sueños* (Figures 5–7, 2019), a project that traces my lineage as a photographer to my mother, Alicia Kuratomi de

Bhaumik. At the core of *Archive* are the self-portraits my mother made as a newly arrived photography student in the US. What I saw in my mother's self-portraits was a rare opportunity for her to see herself, and for me to see her in her agency. In the process of its making, I called on many of the same voices, including Pato, who had guided me nearly twenty years before. As artists, Pato, David, and I have each woven in and out of self-representation, and even in and out of photography. What has remained constant is our inquiry and support years beyond the classroom, an investment in the process and in each other, and a desire for each of us to be able to live as more of ourselves.

Figure 5. *The Archive of Dreams/El archivo de los sueños,* Installation View, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, 2019.

Figure 6. *The Archive of Dreams/El archivo de los sueños,* Installation Detail, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2019.

Figure 7. *Untitled (Self Portrait).* Courtesy of the artist, Alicia Kuratomi de Bhaumik, a 35-mm color slide in Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik's *The Archive of Dreams/El archivo de los sueños,* 1969.

The following interviews are selections from *We Make Constellations of the Stars*, a book about the relationships that shape our creativity by Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik forthcoming in 2021 from Kaya Press.

2. Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik in conversation with Patrick "Pato" Hebert

August, 2019

Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik (SKB): Can you tell me about the time in which we met?

Pato Hebert (PH): 9/11 happened just a few weeks into the start of the school year. It changed everything, obviously. We were just at the beginning of eight years of Bush. In the HIV world we were only about five years or so into protease inhibitors. The larger political stage was really intense and taking a very conservative turn and you were navigating an institution that was predominantly white, but at the same time feminist, and a women's college.

SKB: You know, I have a very specific association with 9/11. It was my senior year and I was working on my undergrad thesis show, *Trials.*

I had gone to the darkroom on campus either that night or a couple nights after. Things were so uncertain. People were on edge. Because I was so paranoid and unsettled, I had the brilliant idea that I was going to alarm myself into the dark room [laughs].

I thought, this way, at least if someone came in I would know. I locked the front door, activated the alarm with the keypad, and went into the closet to roll film. Of course there's a motion sensor, right? So while I'm fumbling with the film roll in total darkness, the alarm goes off and I panic. I think someone is inside. So now I'm

shaking, trying to put the loose film into an empty canister but also not wanting to leave. The alarm is screaming and I get to the front door of the classroom. Security is standing outside, baffled. I'm staring at him through the little window in the door and he's staring back at me. I finally realized what had happened. You can't alarm yourself in. You can only alarm yourself out.

PH: Not to be too prescriptive, but I think you should work with that story. There's something really powerful, intense and concentrated there. The "alarming myself in" is a beautiful way to say it, and the intensity of the solitude and darkness. Implications of being in the closet and how we're so often illegible to institutions. There's also the political allegiance you might have or aspire to with that security guard who's *just doing their job* as you're just doing your job as both an artist and student.

I don't want to lose the anxiety element when you were talking about connection earlier. The anxiety of that era, as well as that particular moment when you were alarming yourself in.[1]

I wouldn't want you to be depressed or anxious, at least not beyond the usual rhythms that we all have as part of being human. But I'm trying to hold isolation, depression and anxiety in relationship to all that we do to stay organized in relationship to these challenges, for instance staying meaningfully connected to people. Maybe I'm projecting a little bit, but I'm wondering what would happen if we both spent more time inhabiting the much more raw and nasty places.

SKB: I remember you came into the classroom once and you were—frustrated, I would say. You asked us why, in a class of twenty intelligent, capable people, not a single person was addressing what was going on politically in the world. It stuck with me, obviously, but I didn't know what to do with that at the time. I thought, "Is he talking to me, too? Is he disappointed in me and what I'm making?" It almost felt easy for some students to go to those inward "raw and nasty" places, but not make the connections to the world outside of themselves. For me, it was the opposite. I could easily make work about the world around me but not my interiority. In many ways, conceptualism gave me an excuse to not be vulnerable.

PH: We talked a lot about race that year together. I really feel like you were birthing yourself out as an artist into multiple worlds– unshackled by nation, language, expectations of race, etc., while certainly wrestling with these questions and pressures.

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[1] At the time of writing, we are in the midst of a global pandemic and sheltering in place. As we reconsider how we connect and gather when it is not safe to do so in events, museums, and galleries, I hear echoes of the anxiety, fear, and xenophobia that followed 9/11.

Your thesis project was happening right at the nexus of all that. In some ways you presaged selfie culture, right? It's all about presenting and being seen. But it's not because the viewer's body gets implicated in relationship to your mediated body. Your images were goofy. As emotionally heavy as you were back then, as was I, you were also really hilarious and brilliant and I feel like that body of work in college let it out. You were a paper doll putting yourself in a blender. There was a ton of humor and Sita irreverence in that work. She's literally isolated in the images except that she keeps herself company, right?

SKB: [laughing] That's right, I even staged a competition between my photographic cutout and my physical body! You know, I never really thought of the connection between my self-portraits and your *Oscillator*[2] pieces, but they are both about our body in relationship to place – and the physical sizes of our bodies and our visibility and invisibility. And in your case, a reflection of the space that you're in.

PH: Up to that point as a photographer, I had really been an observer, right? I've spent a lot of time photographing place and other people's bodies in place. Those were some of the most important early works that I had done prior to my series in Panama and I think I got really worn down on body.

While working at AIDS Project Los Angeles I was mostly shepherding other people's work. I enjoyed it very much and felt very fortunate to do it. It was important political and community work especially because it was happening in the pre-social media moment. But one of the impacts of all that organizing work with *Corpus*[3] (Figure 8) was that I'd been working with the body and narrative and queer bodies of color a lot and I was just sort of done with what for me at that time were the limits of it.

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[2] *If Not Always Of* Is a series of photographs by Patrick "Pato" Hebert in which a being or presence, called "The Oscillator", appears in various landscapes. The Oscillator reflects its environment, without simply or always being of its context.

[3] *Corpus* was a journal that featured art, cultural criticism, poetry, short stories, essays and humor to reveal the fissures and possibilities of HIV prevention efforts in gay and bisexual communities. From 2003 to 2008, seven editions of *Corpus*, totaling 35,000 copies, were made available for free across the US.

Figure 8. *Corpus: An HIV Prevention Publication*, courtesy of the artist, Jaime Cortez, Patrick "Pato" Hebert, editors, 2003–2008.

And so with *Hay una vieja que está enamorada* (Figure 9), to take my abuelita's rocker out into these military and colonial spaces, from Spanish and US. empire, on the isthmus, was a huge leap for me [laughs]. It's just a small and obvious thing, but for me at the time it was like this massive leap.

Figure 9. *Hay un a vieja que está enamorada*, courtesy of the artist, Patrick "Pato" Hebert, 2003.

Oscillator (Figure 10) came back to me in a whole bunch of ways because I realized that a lot of my work was dealing with place. I've been feeling very much called to ecology and unbuilt spaces after spending twenty years turning myself into an urban creature and enjoying that and making work in urban spaces. In a long way of agreeing with you, Osci is like the rocker. What happens if you presence something

in a space? What does the disruption or incision do to the space in these sorts of strange, quirky ways?

Figure 10. *"The Oscillator in Tualatin Hills Nature Park"*, from the ongoing series, *"In, If Not Always Of"*, courtesy of the artist, Patrick "Pato" Hebert, 2014.

SKB: Yes, absolutely. I feel like that's what I was doing in *Trials.* That series was about imagining my life as a photograph. What did she do? Where did she go? Where did she get stuck? What kind of trouble did she get into and out of? The title was also a line from the Ramayana, the Hindu epic where my name comes from. The complicated story of the goddess Sita is something I'll be wrestling with for my entire life because it is a cultural portrait of this ideal, all-sacrificing woman I was supposed to live into. My grandmother hated that name for that reason [laughs].

PH: When you were making your thesis work, it felt to me like your images were not easily comprehended by a lot of people in your life. Your peers also had that kind of white woman liberal, "Oh, these are so great" response. But how do you have a richer conversation about all the things you doubt about the work? Or the ways that the images excite you or scare the hell out of you?

I do remember that years later, when we found each other in Hong Kong in 2016—that sounds funny and awesome to say by the way—I thought *wow, you seem really strong*. A lot was happening and you had all your Sita fire. Your barely breathing *go* energy. You said you *were* really strong and a lot was happening that was great. You

said, "I think it's because I'm collaborating and because I'm accountable to myself and others".

It was a very succinct, beautiful way to say it. But I have to say now some two plus years later, I'm—I'm struck and moved by you asking what does it mean to bring that home as it were. That's a question I'm profoundly wrestling with, like on steroids.

Sita: What does it mean to be accountable to self?

Pato: Yeah. Buddhism teaches me that the notion of self is false anyway. Yet it also teaches that I have to attend to and mind not only this flesh but the very notion of self, other beings, collectivity, my own quirkiness, this interconnectedness. This web of relations has always been very complicated. Very rich, but very complicated.

I do think that right now I am the most hungry to be able to indulge whatever I want to make and maybe have some other people care about it and also resource it. There's a lot of craving and grasping there. I've also developed a lot of tools for how to propel work with and for others, and against things politically. But I'm a little worn down by group process right now.

I've said this to you before, but what does the work want? One question that I will often ask the work or myself is, *"What else might you be? Talk to me".* I don't know if you are one of those artists who believes work has a kind of life of its own and we're in a very complicated co-dependent [laughs] dance with it as artists. Or do you feel like no, *"I produce the work and it is a thing that I bring into being".*

SKB: I don't know . . . [laughing] I believe in Coltrane.

PH: I'm not sure about full-on autonomy.

SKB: I don't know if I do either. But I do believe that we receive things—messages, stories, that filter through us.

PH: Yes. Beautifully said. What rails does the work want and what jumping of lanes does the work want? That's a hard enough question as it is.

I feel like if you can sit with the ways that you may still feel isolated, even from yourself, but also give yourself and the work all the connective love that you give everybody through your artwork, then there's something really special that might happen. Including things that are really harrowing and scary as fuck.

SKB: Academia was really good at showing me how meaning was constructed—revealed the problems of representation. So everything began to mean too much and I was afraid to make mistakes. If signs and symbols also mean all of these other unintended things then how could I possibly use them? That has scared me into paralysis at times.

PH: For any of us who are perfectionists and/or have things to work on in ourselves, I think the easing up is really important. Yet one of the hardest parts about this political moment we're in right now, is that things are so freighted and so fraught that sometimes there's no room to play. It can feel like the stakes are too high.

That can be the left eating itself alive. That can be the inability to talk to somebody with whom you have very different values and opinions. That can just be exhaustion or fear or anxiety or wanting to alarm ourselves in, as it were. So there's something about your dedication and the freedom and sense of urgency and the need and the play that you gave yourself to go to that closet and roll some film in the aftermath of 9/11.

I was younger when I first worked with you. And at that time most of the teaching I had done had been in community spaces—public middle schools, or HIV organizing, or work with teenagers. I was trying to find ways to connect with people and helping them connect to themselves and one another. Support young Sitas to more fully connect with themselves.

It's so interesting to me that we're talking now so many years later. While I hardly feel like you're still doing the same thing, there is a beautiful echo, right? Not exactly a return, but a kind of echo.

3. Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik in conversation with David Lydell Jones

February, 2020

David Jones (DJ): I don't know if we ever talked about this, but in the middle of that photo project I found myself crying . . . just crying my eyes out trying to get through it.

At that point, I had taken every class that you taught. And it was in that last semester in the independent study that I started the *Silence and Stillness* series (Figure 11). I wanted to connect the photographic medium and the treatment of Black bodies.

Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik (SKB): I've always wanted to talk to you more about that project. It was such an honor to see it develop and to participate in some small way in facilitating its presence in the world.

I remember this distinct moment where we were sitting in my terrible office with shitty lighting.

DJ: Yeah, [laughs].

SKB: There was no critique wall to pin up work and the only option was to put these beautiful memorials that you had made on the floor so we could step back and see them together.

There was something that made it even more devastating to look at these images on the floor of this office in the middle of this institution where it was clear that it was never meant for this work, let alone this line of questioning. It felt like you were making this work despite school, not because of it.

Can you tell me more about how you made them?

DJ: For that series I would rip the film out of the canister. I'd crumble it, tear it, and throw it in a pinhole camera. I never recorded my exposure. I never treated anything "properly". Sometimes the temperature was too high, or it was too cold. But there was this intentional destruction and disregard of the film. I would take that purposefully destroyed film and scan it. Then I'd give each film strip the name and age of a Black person murdered by police. It was really important for me that you weren't sure what you were looking at but that it had a name and an age.

It's empowering that in art there are various ways to talk about an issue or a topic. At that moment, I felt that was how I could best do it.

SKB: It's interesting that there's a simultaneous disregard and an act of care that you're . . .

DJ: . . . bringing to the process. Yeah. I agree. From being unexposed all the way through rendering what could have been in an image—there is a mistreatment that's happening to the film throughout.

SKB: What did it mean for you, as a young Black man, to be the person—the agent—of that process?

DJ: It was so hard . . . It felt like I was in some capacity doing this.

I was a pallbearer.

I was bridging two worlds. Abstract photography and violence against Black people. It was such a time of grief. Who's next? Could this . . . you know . . . something like this happen to me?

It really hit home.

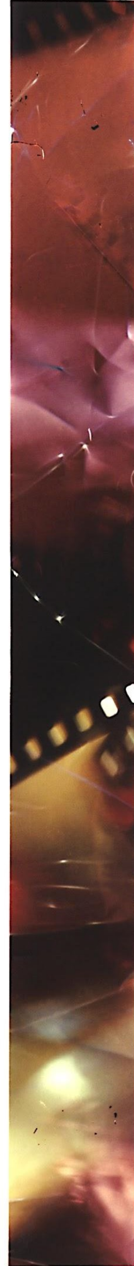
SKB: As much as these are memorials, what is their relationship to your body? could these also be considered self-portraits?

DJ: When I created the images I felt like I was offering the viewer something that felt outside of the notion of a self-portrait. Now that time has passed, I do very much see these in that vein. There are physical traces of myself throughout the images, from the film's exposure to the handling of the film. The presence of my own physicality in the work as a Black man has just as much to offer internally as it does externally, if that makes sense.

Walter Scott, 50

Tamir Rice, 12

John Crawford III, 22



Janisha Fonville, 20

Figure 11. *Silence and Stillnes*s, courtesy of the artist, Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik, selection from a series of eighteen images, David Lydell Jones, 2015.

SKB: Absolutely, it seems like what came together in that project was the unexpected intersection of form and felt experience that was meaningful for you and for other people who experienced it to say, "This is at the service of something deeper. This is bigger than any one person".

I think of Audre Lorde's writing about how our feelings can guide us into knowledge (2007). Do you think your tears had to do with not only a feeling of sadness, grief, anger, fear, but also truth?

DJ: To this day the photo project is, like you just said, bigger. If I'm being honest, I remember the moment where I would just cry. I had the feeling that this wasn't just a photo project about playing with light. This, this ... was bigger than me. This was bigger than trying to turn heads about what the medium is.

It was like a brief connection. A moment ...

... of seeing.

DJ: I remember it was so tough to get through that part there. It was the first time in my life where I found myself at my computer, bawling, trying to scan. Trying to type the names and the ages ... You know, I could have been spelling my own name and putting my own age on these images.

SKB: This connects me back to the question of self-portraiture. How do we picture our bodies and what we do with the visuals of unspeakable things? Violence can be a spectacle. Instead of identifying with the person it can render them objects. Something to be looked at, be afraid of, or feel sorry for, instead of recognizing the subject's agency and power.

In your work, I saw a transformation of the film that you were working with that felt really creative. And I say that word, creative, intentionally. It produced something that wasn't there before.

And this is all made with cameras ...

DJ: ... that weren't built for me to operate.

SKB: Right. After spending years photographing myself, I moved away from picturing bodies in my work for a good fifteen years. I still love seeing people in pictures, but only recently have I started to incorporate my mom's self-portraits in the *The Archive of Dreams*. In what you consider to be your body of work, do you usually picture physical bodies?

DJ: No.

SKB: Neither do I.

DJ: Yeah. [laughing].

SKB: I mean, I guess that's not entirely true. I did as an undergrad and I'm beginning to again.

DJ: I only have one photograph picturing a body that I would show people as my work. It's my little cousin with a muscle shirt. He's been running through dirt. He's got rocks in his hand, and he's so ... I just remember growing up as a young Black boy and playing in dirt with the sun setting. The light is coming across the frame like you've been out all day, and like ... there's just something there.

But other than that, I want people to ask "why aren't there people here?"

SKB: You know, it's funny, 'cause I showed a friend of mine the pictures that I've been taking and he said, "Sita, there's no people in any of these". And he kind of said it as if it was a negative thing. But it's an instinct. I'm always waiting for people to leave the scene. I'm waiting for emptiness.

Sometimes it feels like the body means too much. Not that landscape doesn't mean things ... in fact, it's dangerous to think that landscapes don't mean as much or that space is empty or neutral.

DJ: Right, a landscape's subtlety can be mistaken or overlooked.

SKB: Absolutely. What I tried to show my students in my history of photography class was that it's not just about what is pictured, but also how it is pictured. The violence of the American West is to look out on indigenous land and to say, "There's nothing there".

Everything means something. As I'm returning to photography, I've been fascinated by the presence of light. It feels meditative to notice myself noticing these small moments of wonder. My mentor Pato Hebert, who I interviewed for this project, also has a meditation practice, but you and I have never talked about that before. I wonder what this is pointing to.

DJ: When I think about the connection between our meditation practice and photography, I do think there was something really interesting you mentioned about the magic in the moment. Our practice has allowed us to accept how special one project or one photograph may be, but not hold ourselves to reproducing that, you know? In coming into a practice, we might start with embodiment, but there are people who practice and whose bodies become like ...

SKB: It's like you're erasing the edge, the outline of yourself.

DJ: ... the I, the me, the ego, it's just all sort of dissolved into this experience. It seems to be like a bridge.

I didn't have a meditation practice then. At the time, I was like, a photograph is gonna last longer [laughing]. Here's this moment that I could preserve for generations ahead of me. They could see how I saw something at that time. Maybe they had a similar observation? What other medium could offer a window like that? That's what I fell in love with at first.

SKB: Which is in a way the opposite of what we're talking about as non-attachment.

DJ: Yeah, yeah. That's exactly it. Again, photography, I think, my obsession with it, and seeing thousands of images, and seeing thousands of photographers and different styles of doing it, it's just how versatile the medium is. I think that's honestly what keeps me going.

Before I took your course I had almost let go of photography. I felt like I had to attend to the commandments. Like here's your f-stop, here's your exposure. Put the film in your camera and make sure you don't crease or dent it.

But I think, more recently, that interest is in thinking about how other people interact with the medium and how the generation now and the upcoming generation will interact with it. What does it mean to them? How will it make sense in their lives and their experience? How can they use it to make sense of the world?

SKB: I've thought about the *Black Archives* Instagram project a couple of times in our conversation. [Renata Cherlise] is taking old pictures, old media. Things that hypothetically people don't care about any more, right? And the overwhelming response to it feels like movement making to me. I think it has to do with being seen in the ways that you want to be seen. Many of the photographs are family pictures or snapshots that would certainly have been selfies if the technology existed then. Now, many years later, a Black curator is making those selections by and for a Black audience. I think of bell hooks and Deborah Willis' writing. When you have not seen yourself represented in the world, it is so powerful to see that on a mass scale.

DJ: It's beautiful.

SKB: And in this question of self, *Black Archives* is all about picturing bodies over and over, and over again. But this says, we are here, we exist, we're important. This happened. We are celebrating ourselves.

DJ: With something like *Black Archives*, I feel an immense sense of pride and appreciation because my experience hasn't been shared and celebrated in that light. Especially on a platform like that. When I think of the Buddhist notion of "no self", I think of a middle-aged white man being able to see the significance in *Black Archives*. I think no self in some respect is a way for people who in no way, shape or form are the subject or focus of a platform like that, but they can also, through a moment of no self, come to understand and appreciate that. Almost like a bridge.

SB: That's really interesting. I'm thinking of Martin Berger's *Seeing Through Race*. He's the one who taught me that representation can be an important tool for social change when we recognize each other's power. He argues that, for white viewers in the North, the most famous images of the Civil Rights era reinforced Black victimhood. And we're not going to get anywhere better if the image reinforces the superiority of one group of people over another. Those assumptions happen so quickly, so instinctively, so quietly. How do we navigate that as artists?

Some of us feel this need to grapple with this and to make from it. And if you don't do that in some capacity in your life, you will always have this sense of unease. That you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing.

DJ: Yeah, it feels like you're not talking.

SB: There you go. It feels like you're not talking.

DJ: Sita, is it too simple to say that our art practice is our way of trying to make sense of this experience?

SB: Oh, I think that's very wise, David. [laughing] I think that's very wise.

4. Conclusions

As artists with distinct practices, Pato Hebert, David Jones and I operate from the understanding that the personal is political. Personal relationships—including ours—are at the core of that. It is what supports us in making, which supports us in living. To quote activist James "Jimmy" Boggs, "It is only in relationship to other bodies, and many somebodies, that anybody is somebody" (Ward 2016). This is how I understand the potency of self-portraiture—our images can build power in dialogue.

At the time of writing, in spring 2020, we are in the midst of the global uprisings in defense of Black life and Black power. George Floyd was murdered on May 25th 2020, as this piece was being edited. There is a new groundswell asking questions about art, institution, and empire. For Pato, David, and myself, our relationships as student and teacher were made possible both because of—and sometimes in spite of—the academy. But our commitment to each other reimagines the classroom. In each of us there is a hybrid of lived experience, mentorship, friendship, respect, and a genuine investment to each other's wellbeing. The instinct that makes us pick up the phone to ask for or offer our support, our critique, parts of ourselves—that is what we build on from here. If we return to the idea of creativity as something that builds on what *was and is* to produce something that *is and will be*, artists, based on mutual recognition of power, can imagine the possibilities.

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Feeling Myself: Loving Gestures and Representation in *Mickalene Thomas: Muse*

Natalie Zelt

Abstract: This chapter looks closely at the photographic diptych "Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs", as displayed in the 2016 exhibition "Mickalene Thomas: Muse" at Aperture Gallery in New York. Though previous exhibitions highlighted Thomas's innovative use of materials, the approach to her subjects and virtuosity as a painter, "Mickalene Thomas: Muse" showcased the American artist's engagement with photography—as a medium, a set of ideas, and an institutional history. This chapter excavates some of the ways in which Thomas' photographic work creates space for relational articulations of self-love, self-representation, and divahood that frustrate controlling images of Black women in Western art. After introducing the concepts of divahood and Black feminist love politics, the chapter follows gestural resonances and evocations of self-love in the photographs and the exhibition. By engaging with self-love at the nexus of pleasure, care, and collectivity, the "Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs" and the "Muse" installation at large eschew representational associations of the Black female body with exploitation, favoring feeling, sensual, and relational articulations images of the self in photographs.

1. Introduction

A gilded wall greeted visitors to Aperture Foundation's Chelsea gallery in early spring 2016. The exhibited photographs were identified via three stacked titles and two dense columns of text:

MUSE
MICKALENE THOMAS PHOTOGRAPHS
tête-à-tête

Here, you will see something historic, the didactic tells you. In this exhibition, "Mickalene Thomas, [who is] known for her large-scale, multi-textured paintings of domestic interiors and portraits" exhibits "the photographic image as a defining touchstone for her practice."[1] Aperture framed the photograph as the boundary

[1] *Mickalene Thomas: Muse* at Aperture Foundation Gallery, Introductory Wall Text. The validity of this being the first show of Thomas' photographic approaches is questionable, considering her previous

setting medium for Thomas' work, a necessary space that helped create the visually sumptuous paintings of glamourous Black female subjects. Years earlier, Thomas herself remarked on the significance of the photograph to her conceptual and aesthetic process as a painter: "I think the photograph defines my practice. It provides a connection between all the works. There's something about a photograph that I can never get in a painting" (Thomas in Melandri 2012, p. 37). *Mickalene Thomas: Muse* would provide the opportunity to highlight the photograph as the touchstone and connective tissue of Thomas' practice.[2]

So, it is notable then that the story of Mickalene Thomas and the photograph in *Muse* is set in a space—Aperture Foundation Gallery—with historic significance to the medium. This 3000-square-foot gallery space has been the exhibition home for Aperture Foundation since 2005, but Aperture has been involved in publishing and writing the history of the photograph in the United States for decades. The gallery is one of Aperture Foundations' major initiatives, which also include a book and magazine publishing arm. Since its founding in 1952 by influential photographer Minor White, Aperture has published the premier U.S. magazine devoted to photography, as well as hundreds of catalogues, monographs and edited volumes devoted to the medium. Today, the gallery showcases artists and artworks from forthcoming publications. The artworks and ideas circulated by Aperture's publications have played a significant role in defining the photograph in the United States and in shaping the meaning of the medium internationally. However, the historical boundaries of photography set by Aperture were distinctly white and distinctly male, and *Muse* is neither.[3]

Presenting a solo exhibition of artwork by a queer Black artist identifying as a woman who pictures Black female subjects is itself historic for Aperture. However, it is perhaps more important to note that the show also pushes against the limits of exhibition convention. Though technically a solo show, *Muse* is relentlessly relational. Thomas—who maintained curatorial control over all aspects of *Muse*—made this individual opportunity a space for the inclusion of subjects, resonances and artworks

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exhibition, *Mickalene Thomas: Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman*, which ran from June 20–October 19, 2014, at The George Eastman Museum.

[2] The exhibition will be referred to as *Muse* throughout the rest of the chapter. For images see: https://aperture.org/exhibition/muse-mickalene-thomas-photographs/.

[3] Prior to 2014, the year in which preparations for *Muse* began, Aperture Foundation had published only four books of photographs by African American photographers, three of them by men: Carrie Mae Weems' *The Hampton Project* in 2000, Dawoud Bey's *Class Pictures* in 2007, Hank Willis Thomas' *Pitch Blackness* in 2008 and Stanley Greene's *Black Passport* in 2009. As best as I can discern, less than 40 of the 130 editions of the magazine published between 1986 and 2018 included any work by artists of color based in the United States. This publishing history highlights the lack of space for the photographic work by artists of color from the United States generally.

that are well beyond her.[4] Originally on view from January 28–March 16, 2016 at the Aperture Foundation's gallery, *Muse* was composed of many parts. It featured a selection of 44 photographic artworks by Thomas, including collages, polaroids and large format inkjet prints, dating back to 2001. It also included a selection of 15 photographic artworks by other artists, distinguished as a separate micro-exhibition entitled *tête-à-tête*. For this private conversation made public, Thomas selected work by "several artists that," in her words, "not only inspire and provide insight into my practice, but also contribute to a larger discourse by representing Black bodies and perspectives that are deeply enigmatic or personal or that otherwise fall outside of the mainstream" (Thomas 2016, p. 82). The center of the gallery contained a three-walled living-room installation, fully decorated with wallpaper, wood-paneling, patchwork-patterned furniture and carpet.

Prior to *Muse*, Thomas was already well known for the depth of her citational practice, taking on the masters of the Western art historical canon as well as the iconography of blaxploitation films for example. Art Historian Derek Conrad Murray asserts that Thomas' "inventive dexterity" of aesthetic references and "striking fearlessness" of form manifest a "radical and boldly empowered re-inscription of Black female corporeality within the sphere of visual culture" (Murray 2015, pp. 113, 141, 116). Murray situates Thomas' paintings and mixed media works in relationship to the historical legacy of Black female representation in art and visual culture, specifically noting the ways in which Thomas rejects the policing of Black female sexuality through images.[5] Through her irreverent and playful representations of Black women, Murray argues that Thomas asserts a queer feminist desiring gaze:

> "conceptual relentlessness that extends beyond an interest in punishing the abuses that Western culture has inflicted upon black bodies . . . Thomas advances something perhaps more incendiary, a queer feminist desiring gaze: a powerfully defiant and aggressively sexual representation of black womanhood that bears *the power of the look*". (Murray 2015, p. 116)

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4 The idea for the exhibition was initiated by Lesley Martin, Creative Director for the Aperture Foundation, but Thomas would retain control over both the exhibition and the accompanying book. Martin served as editor and helped narrow the checklist for the exhibition, but did not serve as curator. The ultimate selection and overall layout of the exhibition was determined by Thomas. Lesley A. Martin, Email Correspondence to author, April 15, 2019; Annette Booth, interview with the author, April 5, 2019.

5 For more on the dominate modes of viewing sexuality via race and gendered representations, see Collins, O'Grady, and Hill Collins. Each specifically address sexuality and Black female representation in Western art history, as filtered through discourses of power that render the Black female subject excessive, deviant, or absent in order to reinforce racial hierarchy.

Building on Murray's rich foundation, this chapter argues that *Muse* provides another example of Thomas' conceptual and aesthetic virtuosity that more overtly points to the connection between articulations of a self as both individual and collective.

At the heart of the exhibition was a photographic self-portrait. Installed on the central wall of the living room installation, *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* (2006) depicts Thomas, reclined on a patterned sofa, face relaxed with her soft gaze directed at the camera. One hand supports her head while the other caresses the fabric between her legs. In this chapter, I argue that this gentle touch in *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* is in fact a moment of crescendo for the whole exhibition and represents Thomas' powerful point of critique, because it does not stand alone in *Muse*. Significantly, for the first time, *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* (2006) was paired as a diptych with the photograph *Madame Mama Bush* (2006).[6] In deciding to hang these two individual portraits together, Thomas brings together two photographs—a sensual portrait of her mother, Sandra Bush, in *Madame Mama Bush*, and Thomas' own erotic self-portrait *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*—into one artwork.[7]

Beyond harnessing "the power of the look", as soundly argued in Murray's scholarship, through a photograph installed in the middle of one of the major institutional centers of photography in the world, Thomas enacts divahood and situates loving gesture and connection at the core of the space she makes for sensual articulations of complex and self-loving Black female subjects. Bringing the lens of divahood alongside Thomas' intersections with Black feminist love politics helps to reveal the ways in which she works against tropes of representational history to create space for her innovative portraits.[8]

Through a close reading of context, gesture, and resonance in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, this chapter excavates some of the ways Thomas creates space in *Muse* for relational articulations of self-love, self-representation and diva relations that frustrate controlling images of Black women in Western art. After introducing the concepts of divahood and love politics as they relate to *Muse*, the chapter follows gestural resonances and evocations of diva relations and love politics to point to the representational space created beyond the photographs.

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[6] For images of Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs (2006) See the Studio Museum Permanent collection entry: https://studiomuseum.org/collection-item/afro-goddess-hand-between-legs; For images of Madame Mama Bush (2006) see the Minneapolis Art Institute permanent collection entry: https://collections.artsmia.org/art/136188/madame-mama-bush-mickalene-thomas.

[7] This chapter is a portion of a larger project devoted to analyzing the intersection of the photograph and space making practice throughout all aspects of *Mickalene Thomas: Muse*.

[8] So, rather than a process of "reassessing" history, "reimagining" subjects or "reclaiming" space, this chapter views Thomas' work in the historically exclusionist space of Aperture Gallery as the creation of new space that makes innovative techniques and subjects analyzed in previous scholarship possible. See (Murray 2015).

2. Divahood

Divahood is a liberatory strategy in which space making is central to the practice of virtuosic expressions of selfhood in community. The concept of divahood comes from the work of poet and performance studies scholar Deborah Paredez, who uses it to articulate the relationships between performers such as Lena Horne and Judy Garland or the characters Celie, Sofia and Shug in the 2015 Broadway revival of Alice Walker's 1982 book *The Color Purple*. Paredez undermines the conventional representation of a diva as a woman who stands cut-throat and alone to reveal a diva's success to be the result of a mutually constitutive mode of excellence, especially for women of color. Through diva relations, each subject or performer:

> "gains a deeper understanding of her own power and desires in relation to other divas (rather than in spite of them, as standard diva narratives go) and also acts as a force that generates, restores and reconfigures relations for the other divas within their respective communities. Divas here act as facilitators of female relationships that are otherwise foreclosed by racism and patriarchy. Divaness thus emerges as a radically reconfigured set of relations among women marked by the aspiration to occupy desire and the achievement of self-actualization rather than by the patriarchal constraints of (re) productivity or zero-sum-game competition". (Paredez 2018, p. 44)

While each performer remains as a commander of her craft and singular in her abilities, her articulation of self occurs not at the expense of others, but through their connection to community.

Thomas' virtuosity as a visual artist, including her technical abilities, manipulation of materials and forms, and multidimensional and layered art historical and cultural references, place her squarely in the realm of diva. Concurrently, her success in the art world, via exhibitions and incorporation into major museum collections, as well as her public recognition as a contemporary artist—having her art and name used as a plot device in Fox's series *Empire* and as cover art for Solange Knowles 2013 EP *True*, for example—reinforces her position of artistic excellence.[9] Thomas' artworks then are the performance of craft, much like that of a stage performer. Of her artworks, Thomas notes: "They are this real extension of me, even when I use sitters it is about this desire ... to seek an extension of myself" (Thomas 2019). This extension of self through her art becomes even more tangled in her self-portraits. Limited readings of Thomas' self-portraiture—like the

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[9] In Season 2 Episode 9 of *Empire*, which aired November 24, 2015 on Fox, Lucious Lyon (played by Terrance Howard), pulls away Skye Summers' manager to see his new Mickalene Thomas painting, opening up space for Summers (played by Alicia Keys) and Lyon's son Jamal (played by Jussie Smollett) to get intimate, putting a major twist on the season and series.

conventional interpretation of diva—might claim that her work is "only navel gazing" or pejoratively self-centered, isolated in success. However, viewing the diptych *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* in the context of *Muse* reveals both the power of Thomas' self-focus in a space that is inherently loving and relational. It also reveals that it is a power that extends beyond Thomas' work to popular culture.

3. Love Politics

Like Paredez's dismantling of the conventional portrayal of divas, African American Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies scholar Jennifer Nash broaches the intellectual contributions of Black feminism from beyond the conventional ground of the politics of identity. Black feminism is largely associated with theorizing the concept of intersectionality, or the understanding of identity as the culmination of multiple overlapping social identifications resulting in complex and interlocking experiences of oppression (Crenshaw 1995, pp. 357–83). This revolutionary concept is formed from decades of Black feminist scholarship on the multiplicity of social identity and its shifting impact on experience for Black women. As part of an effort to broaden the understanding of Black feminist contributions beyond this groundbreaking theory, Nash moves to acknowledge the radical use of love as a politics of liberation by Black feminist scholars and activists. Reading the work of Alice Walker, June Jordan and others, Nash highlights "pleas for love as a way of ordering and transcending the self, a strategy for remaking the self and for moving beyond the limitation of self-hood" (Nash 2011, p. 3). The significance of love, particularly self-love, across Black feminism reflects the transformation of a personal journey to a form of social justice. Nash endeavors to extend the reach of Black feminist theory in favor of a formulation of the public sphere that is "rooted in affiliation and a shared sense of feelings", in which a "radical ethic of care, rather than an assertion of shared injury ... can form the basis of a public" (ibid., pp. 14–15). Nash attempts to reconfigure our understanding of Black feminism away from exclusively one of a politics of visibility or recognition towards one that is based on love politics as a transformative labor of the self, rooted in a shared commitment to self-love, self-respect and self-determination (ibid.). *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* broaches both Black feminist representational legacy and the love politics outlined by Nash.

The mode of self-love that Nash identifies is both individual and collective. It echoes across Black feminist literature and provides a guide through the particular articulations of self-love and collectivity in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* and *Muse*. For example, the Combahee River Collective conclude their influential manifesto, noting that their politics "evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle

and work" (Combahee River Collective in Moraga and Anzaldua [1981] 2015, p. 212). In the range of definitions for womanism that Alice Walker poses in the opening of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, she states that a womanist is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually" and concludes with a definition that a womanist "Loves love, and food, and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*" (Walker 1983, pp. xi, xxii). Similarly, bell hooks places relationality and pleasure as central to self-love's importance. She advocates turning the kind of love yearned for from others on oneself: "Do not expect to receive the love from someone else you do not give yourself" (hooks 2000, p. 113). Black feminism's link to pleasure, self-love and community is critical to analyzing the gestural resonances in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*.

Additionally, Thomas' artistic assertions of liberation through collective self-actualization and desire are built on the foundation laid by poet and scholar Audre Lorde. Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," posits the erotic to be used as a life affirming force, "a source of power and information in our lives" (Lorde 1984, p. 53). Lorde wishes to harness the erotic as an inwardly focused creative energy and sees it as a source of empowerment that privileges joy, love, and internal knowledge. Lorde is careful to distinguish that the erotic is to be shared, a radical form of self-knowledge and collective connection. It is a particular orientation to the world that puts the self and feeling at its center. It is "female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (ibid., p. 59). The essay is a call for "more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge without having to look away, without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange" (ibid.). Here, we see the way in which Lorde frames the radicality of erotic power within the frames of the gaze, being brave enough to look without distorting the power or depth of knowledge grounded in the erotic.

Throughout *Muse*, Thomas crafts complex representations of Black womanhood that echo central ideas of Black feminist thought, in terms of approaching the field of representation as a space for critique, of favoring multiplicity and nuance in representation of Black womanhood, and in prioritizing self-representation and love politics. Yet, the duality of the diptych and the status of photographs speaks to Lorraine O'Grady's scholarship regarding a gendered binary perpetuated in Western art. O'Grady argues that the presence of women of color in Western art helps define femininity by acting as the inverse to womanhood generally. Representations of white women and Black women cannot be separated, but work as a Janus figure: "White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be" (O'Grady 2019, n.p.).

According to O'Grady "the not-white female body" in Western art affords "its own brand of erasure", becoming invisible against womanhood (inherently white) that

it helps to define in opposition (ibid.). The gendered and racialized binary O'Grady interrogates is deeply rooted in the history of photography. For example, Sir John Herschel, one of the medium's early figures who is credited with coining the terms "negative" and "positive", also described those conditions in gendered and racialized terms.[10] In his recount of the particular qualities of the photographic negative, Herschel states: "Figures have a strange effect—fair women are transformed into negresses &c" (Herschel in Williams and Willis 2002, p. 1).[11] Through photography, Herschel describes white women and Black women, or "negresses" as in binary opposition, one fair and the other a strange deviation, contrary to nature.[12] This language of deviation woven throughout the medium of photography binds it to the discourse surrounding Black female sexuality and representation, making Thomas' engagement with the medium even more significant.

According to scholars including O'Grady, a combination of historic script, conveyed via images and molded by dominant modes of viewing race, class, gender and sexuality overwhelm Black female subjectivity, occluding it entirely. Instead, she advocates for a mode of rendering and viewing the Black female body that exists beyond historic limitations: "The black female's body needs less to be rescued from the masculine 'gaze' than to be sprung from a historic script surrounding her with signification while at the same time, not paradoxically, it erases her completely" (O'Grady 2019, np.). In addition to *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, *Muse* presents various iterations of self-portraiture that bring together representational politics and love politics to respond to the historic script. Thomas's engagement with photography within an institution with historical significance to the medium is one such tactic. Furthermore, the circuit of relations outlined by the diptych exists in context with historic tropes but offers another representation of Black female subjects beyond those which delimited the Black female body to forms of labor or masculinist desires. Her photographs are all self-centered, but the nature of that self is determinedly relational and grounded in a shared or collective exchange. This reflects Thomas' broad approach to interpreting self-representation

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[10] "To avoid much circumlocution, it may be allowed me to employ the terms positive and negative, to express respectively, pictures in which the lights and shades are as in nature, or as in the original model, and in which they are the opposite, i.e., light representing shade, and shade light. The terms direct and reversed will also be used to express pictures in which objects appear (as regards right and left) as they do in nature, or in the original, and the contrary." (Herschel 1840, p. 3).

[11] Willis and Williams open their investigation of the Black female figure in photography in the pairing of O'Grady against Herschel.

[12] The significance of O'Grady's theorizations of Black female representation for Thomas is evident in the 2018 exhibition catalogue for *Mickalene Thomas: Femmes Noires*. The most recent catalogue devoted to her work, it is composed largely of critical essays and excerpts by Black female authors and begins with Lorraine O'Grady's essay "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity." See (Andersson and Crooks 2018).

and the ways that the self is formed in relation to other people, artists and aspects of art history and photography.

4. Touching Gestures

Designating the photograph as a "touchstone" for her work in *Muse* exhibition text is more than just an act of media attribution. It reflects Thomas' deep critical engagement with the medium of photography, as well as the powerful undercurrent of the exhibition devoted to touch and gestural resonance that *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* reflects. The property of touch—of gesture—is a shot to the heart of the ideology of photography. The photograph's relationship to reality—its enduring identity as a form of evidence—is grounded in the dense theorization of its status as an indexical medium (Trachtenberg in Sandweiss 1991, pp. 16–47; Solomon-Godeau 1991, pp. 103–23; Mitchell 1992). Regardless of technological advancements that have moved the making of a photographic image away from being the residues of the chemical reaction between the light that touched a pictured subject and paper, the evident qualities of photography remain. Late 20th century scholarship and theorization around the photograph have articulated the ways in which the medium's particular relationship to proof worked hand in hand with culturally held norms surrounding race, gender, sexuality, and class to represent those categories as objective fact (Solomon-Godeau 1991, pp. 169–83; Sekula in Bolton 1989, pp. 343–89; Owens 1983; Sontag 1977). So, by situating the photograph as the "defining touchstone" of her practice, Thomas speaks to the ideological center of the medium from within an institution whose historic role helped reinforce the boundaries of that medium as distinctly white and distinctly male. Therefore, the diptych manifests her virtuosic expression of aesthetic and conceptual critiques.

Touch and gesture also provide key modes of connection, or relationship, between Thomas and her mother. She has mentioned encountering certain moments or "gestures" while on a walk or hike that articulated an embodiment of her mother, saying, for example, "that step was my mom." Moreover, though *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* was not conceived of as a diptych originally, its form in *Muse* marks another such gestural resonance or connection. Thomas made *Madame Mama Bush* first, as part of a series of studio portraits the two did in the years following graduate school. For Thomas, Bush, who had worked as a runway model, was how she came to define beauty and glamour. Thomas photographed Bush in her studio and later, working alone with a point-and-shoot, Thomas created her series of Afro Goddess self-portraits, in which she actively tried to mimic her mother's gestures and positioning to explore beauty in herself. Of the two processes of photographing, Thomas states: "in photographing my mother it was about dialogue and discovery. But I was in search of how to look at myself through her gaze. Of how I exist through my mother." The pairing was also a way for Thomas

to get to know herself and to get to know her mother, in Thomas' words, "looking at her want to know who she is as a human being." Her choice to pair the two was to present a relationship as "Madonna and child, a maternalistic relationship", but through photographs that stress the complexity of the sitters and that speak directly to the space they hold in history (Thomas 2019).

Both *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* juxtapose textures; they place smooth skin against planes of pattern. The photographs are tightly cropped and lit in a way that flattens the sense of depth in the space portrayed, breaking the frame up into horizontal thirds. The flattening effect heightens the sense of the artwork as photographic, just as all visual planes amplify the significance of gesture and touch. In *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, the vertical lines of wood paneled wall lead down to the red, white, and blue cross hatched sofa on which Thomas lays. Even the leopard print fabric covering the foreground has seams that point toward the central figural plane. When paired with *Madame Mama Bush* in *Muse*, these lines also point up to her mother. The same striated animal print is on the floor in *Madame Mama Bush*, though configured at a different angle and a bright blue plane replaces wood paneling. Both women luxuriate on a covered sofa, assuming a relaxed and sensual pose. Compositional elements in *Madame Mama Bush*—shiny false leaves and an open plane of blue wall—direct the eye to the apotheosis of the diptych: Bush's gaze. The gold and brown print dominates the sofa under *Madame Mama Bush*, while it only peeks out at the base in *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, connecting both distinct images.

Yet, the two differ from each other in the configuration of their gaze. Arm bent, with head turned, *Madame Mama Bush* denies the viewer her gaze, while Thomas looks directly at the viewer via *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*. Bush's internalized focus in *Madame Mama Bush* is akin to bell hooks' reading of Lorna Simpson's 1986 photograph *The Waterbearer*: the subject of *Madame Mama Bush* is "not undone, not in any way torn apart by those dominating gazes that refuse her recognition." Instead "she creates her own gaze an alternative space where she is both self-defining and self-determining" (hooks 1995, p. 93). Countering the legacy of representation that only recognizes the Black female figure in the context of a realm of labor for others, be it sexual or domestic, *Madame Mama Bush* opens up a representational space that is distinctly personal, about pleasure and self-awareness.[13] The self-oriented

[13] Charting the interlocking oppressions of race and gender on Black women's representations and experiences over time, Patricia Hill Collins largely outlines two general categories of images of Black women: versions in which sexuality is absent and versions where it is deviant. Hill Collins calls attention to the enduring trope of "the mammy," her domestic labor and obedience justifying her exploitation and enslavement. Read as devoted and nurturing, this figure shared as many attributes expressed by the prevailing ideas of true womanhood as were accessible to a raced person. The image sits at the intersection of interpretations of Blackness as inferior other, of women as necessarily

alternative space created in *Madame Mama Bush* is mirrored in Thomas' self-portrait. Though Thomas' gaze is directed outwardly at the viewer, her gestures—relaxed languid legs, one hand supporting her resting head and the other sensually caressing herself—are all for her own benefit, gestures of self-care and self-love. Thomas' gaze and the sensual placement of her hand provides a visual enactment of Lorde's articulation of the erotic as a source of power and hook's intermingling of self-image and experiencing love.

Thomas' hand placement in *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* differs from a later self-portrait, *Origin of the Universe 1*, 2012, which is a take on Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting *Origin of the World*. Composed with a perspective that sweeps up from between a nude woman's legs, her face obscured by a yellow cloth framing her breasts, this portrait presents Thomas' genitals in rhinestones and paint. The cloth obscures the figure's arms and face, rendering her both invisible and hyper-visual, her body isolated for viewing. She is fully covered in the earlier *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*. So, rather than presenting a shockingly intimate disclosure, the cloth draped between Thomas' legs in *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* emphasizes the tenderness of her caress. Touch imbues *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* with a sensual and self-conscious charge not evident in the later painting. It is a self-contained, self-centered, tender eroticism in which the viewer is implicated—via Thomas' gaze—but is not dominating.

Additionally, while Sandra's hand placement is also central to the frame in *Madame Mama Bush*, its significance is amplified by what is cropped out of the frame. The lower left corner of the photograph features a part of Diana Ross's 1978 album *Ross*, bringing the renowned pop diva at least partially into the frame (Figure 1). The cover displays a portrait of Ross drawn and dressed vaguely in the style of 1920s. Though her makeup and nail polish are distinctly feminine, Ross's styling and her hair, pulled to one side, assume a more androgynous or even masculine association. Rather than serve a sexualized titillating function, Ross's raised arm emphasizes her lack of breast line, her flatness of chest, reinforcing the sense of gender ambiguity throughout the portrait. Again, this gesture, in combination with the gaze, harkens to a tension related to Black female sexuality, and in this case gender. In *Madame Mama Bush*, Sandra Bush assumes a gaze that is in dialogue with Ross, but is restricted from the viewer. Her left hand both pulls her red robe taut across her pelvis and loosely fingers the bouquet of flowers that she casts aside. She is at once exposed

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subordinate, and of Black women as inherently suited to low wage domestic labor, and it perpetuated the sense that Black women were all these things. In these controlling images outlined by Patricia Hill Collins, a complex Black female subject, namely in representing sexuality and femininity, is occluded by the various forms of labor that the Black female body represents. (Hill Collins [1990] 2002).

and concealed, but her singular attention is directed inward, towards the self, not the viewer or another figure in the frame.

Finally, gestural resonance in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* echoes the work of artist Carrie Mae Weems. Speaking on behalf of herself, Thomas and the 2012 exhibition *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*, Weems asserted: "no I am not Manet's type, I'm not. And he didn't paint any of this shit for me. It doesn't belong to me and my responsibility to myself, as an artist, is to make it for me, make the space for me and it becomes the most difficult thing to do but the truest thing and the most honest thing that I think you do with artwork" (Weems in Thomas et al. 2013). Weems stresses the importance of the creation of space for complex representations as an act of belonging, but also to resist a typology of beauty limited by Western art standards defined by whiteness. Thomas' formal citation of Manet in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* is also a formal citation of Weems' 1997 photographic polyptych *Not Manet's Type*.[14] As in Thomas' diptych, Weems uses multiple photographs, and self-portraiture that emphasizes the subject's sensuality, all set in domestic interiors. Weems' photographs progress from left to right like a sentence, and each is accompanied by text. In the final frame, Weems is pictured, reflected in a mirror, as lying nude across the bed in a now well-lit room. Unlike the other frames, she is posed at her own leisure, no longer agitated by the exercise of comparing herself with beauty as defined by Western art and photographic typology. In this frame, Weems depicts a reflection of Black femininity as appreciated, as loved.

Figure 1. Album cover Ross, 1978, Motown. Photograph by the author.

[14] For images of *Not Manet's Type* see SFMOMA permanent collection entry https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2019.115.A-E/.

5. Diva Relations and Self-Love

The intersection of representation, Blackness, femininity, and sexuality is a critical framework for beginning to understand the radicality of Thomas' pairing *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* within *Muse*, but gesture leads to evocations of self-love. A love of self through relationship to beauty as known through her mother, is an assertion of self-confidence and self-worth, but also, Thomas' hand leads us to see links to bodily pleasure. Paired together as a diptych, the two individual portraits are as much overtly relational representations as they are sensual. In *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, Thomas' "hand between legs" directs the viewer to the fact that they are viewing a scene of visual and bodily pleasure. This punning also links the pair of images to the work of contemporary pop divas.

With the 2014 release of her album *Pinkprint* featuring the mega hit "Feeling Myself," (Figure 2) while Thomas was preparing for *Muse*, Nicki Minaj, with the help of Beyoncé, exclaims a self-love anthem, with a catchy chantable hook that unabashedly intermingles the erotic and psychological elements of self-love evident in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*:

> I'm feelin' myself, I'm feelin' myself
> I'm feelin' my, feelin' myself
> I'm feelin' myself, I'm feelin' my, feelin' my, feelin' myself
> I'm feelin' myself, I'm feelin' my, feelin' myself
> I'm feelin' myself, I'm feelin' my (Minaj and Knowles-Carter 2014)

The repetition reinforces a message of self-confidence alongside the implication of repeated erotic touch.[15] With this song, Minaj and Knowles-Carter unleashed a declaration of self-love as positive, playful, and relational and enacted divahood for all the world to hear.

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[15] Any doubt about the song's references to masturbation are clarified by Minaj in the first verse when she references using a brand of vibrator "And I'm feelin' myself, jack rabbit/Feeling myself, back off, cause I'm feelin' myself, jack off" (Minaj and Knowles-Carter 2014)."

Figure 2. Still from Nicki Minaj featuring Beyoncé, "Feeling Myself," 2014.

Notably, like *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, while self-centered, "Feeling Myself" never indicates that either singer is acting alone or that she does not need anyone else. The subject's self-proclaimed excellence does not endure in isolation. The accomplishments, self-confidence and self-pleasure announced throughout the song emphasize their diva relations. We see a similar amplification through self-love occurring in the complex relationships and gestural resonances of *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*. Each self-centered, outstanding from their own frames, the subjects are nonetheless paired in relationship. Their confidence in self-expression and self-fulfillment is linked but not dependent upon each other. The diptych puts the sensual articulations of Black female subjects in an enduring relationship. This assertion of self-oriented care(ss) in *Madame Mama Bush* and *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, offers a powerful visual engagement with the legacy of Black feminist love politics. Both the song and the diptych are unabashedly about loving yourself and the sensations of touch. They are about the acts of looking as agentive acts, amplified by touch. They are about self-image as empowerment, and through their pairing create new space for powerful conceptualizations of Black female subjectivity.

Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs, paired with *Madame Mama Bush*, also grapples with feminist art history in a way that, along with diva relations, eschews the patriarchal constraints of reproductivity and zero-sum-game competition. The diptych expands Amelia Jones' concept of feminist narcissism. In her discussion of Hannah Wilke's manipulation of the rhetoric of the pose, Jones argues that Wilke's performance of the tropes of beauty and femininity are done in response to her

understanding that her anatomically female, and therefore culturally feminine, body exists to-be-looked-at or already as a picture. Through reiterative sensual posing and exploitation of tropes of femininity, Wilke turns the masculinist gaze back on itself, unhinging the power it wields in delineating makers and agentive desiring subjects as masculine. Wilke's radical feminist narcissism elides culturally limiting critiques of her work as "only navel gazing", because of its critical engagement and manipulation of the politics of gender and representation. Wilke's femininity might solicit "spectatorial desires through conventionally heterosexual codes of female desirability", but she "excludes the heterosexual male subject altogether from her self-relation" (Jones 1998, p. 181). In other words, Wilke's radical narcissism is an expression of her both as desiring subject and desired object; the art is her and she is the art. The resulting circuit of self-centered expression threatens gendered politics of the gaze and art making: "the female narcissist is dangerous to patriarchy because she obviates the desiring male subject (loving herself, she needs no confirmation of her desirability from him)" (ibid., p. 178). In her reading of female masturbation in *The Color Purple*, Linda Abbandonato finds a similar obviation of the desiring gaze through a racialized and gendered lens. "For Celie," she notes "the discovery of the clitoris (and of the possibility of sexual fulfillment with a woman) is accompanied by a whole range of other discoveries that relegated man to the margins of the world he has always dominated" (Abbandonato 1991, p. 1112). This scene of self-love, Abbandonato argues is a key part of claiming Black female representation in narrative that, like Jones' assessment of Wilke's artwork, unhinges the limits of the patriarchal gaze.

The space in which Thomas' diptych hangs proposes an assertion of Black feminist narcissism. The white heterosexual patriarchal gaze is present, for sure, wound through the densely knotted resonances with Western art and visual culture. However, as an articulation of Black feminist representational politics, *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* further unhinges the power of the white heterosexual gaze.[16] The subjects of both images are defined in relation to white power structures in visual culture, but each alters the terms of those references through diva relations. Both images traffic in Western codes of femininity and sensuality that are formed in relationship to whiteness, but each eschew representations of

[16] My use of the term "unhinge" is a deliberate reference to both Jones and the material structures of the photograph. Jones uses "unhinge" to grapple with the subversive possibilities of grappling with binary thinking in arguing that "Precisely *because* feminist body artists enact themselves in relation to the long-standing Western codes of female objectifications (what Craig Owens has called "the rhetoric of the pose'), they unhinge the gendered oppositions structuring conventional models of art production and interpretation (female/object versus male/acting subject)." Jones, 152. Furthermore, "hinge" is the adhesive that materially binds a photograph to its matte, to its framing. To "unhinge" a photograph is a careful act of material recontextualization, a literal reframing.

Black female subject as for the desiring male subject or consumption, in favor of self-love, expressed by self-orientated pleasure. For Thomas, "The fact that the gaze in question is from one woman to another is more powerful, to me, than the male gaze" (Thomas in Landers 2011). Harkening to the Black feminist theory of Lorde, the diptych references both a physical and internal focus, gesturing towards a disruptive form of self-knowledge and collective connection.

6. Conclusions

The day after *Muse* opened at Aperture, R&B artist Tweet recast the lyrics to her 2002 hit song *Oops (Oh My)* as being about self-love not masturbation. The song, supported by the music video, in which men are present only in service roles and are excluded from spaces of pleasure and in which Tweet, her dancers and Missy Elliot (who is featured on the track) get so hot with arousal they begin to melt the elaborate ice hotel setting, had been publicly interpreted as an anthem for female self-pleasure.[17] The chorus, echoed four times throughout the track, recounts a striptease in which Tweet, seemingly surprised by her own cheekiness and mounting pleasure, ultimately wonders at the source of her desire:

> Oops! There goes my shirt up over my head, oh my
> Oops! There goes my skirt droppin' to my feet, oh my
> Oh! Some kind of touch caressing my legs, oh my
> Oh! I'm turnin' red. Who could this be? (Tweet 2002)

The song articulates heightening sensation and confusion, until a look over to the left and an exchange with Missy Elliot helps clarify that the source of Tweet's arousal is Tweet herself. Seeing herself with photographic clarity in a reflection, Tweet is overcome by her own image. However unlike the mythical experience of Narcissus, Tweet's love of her own image leads to a collective celebration of self-confidence and liberatory pleasure—and in the video the literal dismantling of the structure around her—rather than death from isolation. The song is a collaboration in which Tweet and Missy Elliot collectively express dual sentiments of self-love—both in terms of self-acceptance and bodily sensation.

Yet, in 2016, Tweet was keen to make the distinction that her authorial intent focused on self-love exclusive of physical pleasure: "People can take their definition of what any song means to them, but for me, the song wasn't about masturbation—it was about self-love," she goes on, "It was empowering for me to write the song because I felt like I didn't love myself. I came from a time where my skin—being a dark-skinned woman—it wasn't really 'in.' I would always be teased for my

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[17] For more see (Bologna 2015; Houghes 2015).

skin color. I would always be called different names for my skin color, so I was empowering myself in writing the song" (Tweet in Krantz 2016). For Tweet, in 2016, the song was empowering because of its articulation of love for herself and her body's image within a racialized and gendered context. The image of the Black female body is central to Tweet's 2016 reinterpretation, but separate from eroticism or sensuality. Tweet's revision highlights a central tension in the representation of Blackness, femininity and sexuality broached that same year by the display of the diptych *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with hand between legs* in *Mickalene Thomas: Muse*. To be "feeling myself," per Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé, in the time leading up to *Muse* was positioned as both a radical act that could lead to dismantling structures, but that also existed in constant conversation with controlling images and the politics of representation.

When considered together, and in conversation with the other photographs of women on the walls of the Aperture Gallery, the larger feminine space of the living room, and the broader network of female representation represented by Carrie Mae Weems, Xaviera Simmons and other *tête-à-tête* artists work, *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* builds a womanist world through visual culture. In *Muse*, women gaze at women. The closed circuit, the focus on self-love, and the desiring self, "feeling myself" literally and metaphorically is presented as existing outside of male models of power, especially in the diptych. Moreover, the photographs chip away at the enduring legacy of photography and the policing and exploitation of Black female bodies. Instead, they present eroticism as power, building on the lines of Lorde—"an assertion of life force of women; of that creative energy empowered" (Lorde 1984, p. 55). However, by engaging with a representation of self-love, the diptych and the *Muse* installation at large breaks open representational associations of the Black female body and exploitation, in favor of a representation of a feeling, sensual articulation of the self in photography. The diptych exists in conversation with an exploitative representational legacy, but uses its tropes, to unhinge it, opening a new space for complex self-articulation.

Through *Muse*, Thomas makes space for herself in the history of photography that Aperture actively writes via its programming and publications arms. Moreover, she brings her friends and family with her, transforming the gallery space into a home for living lineages, both familial and artistic, loving, and powerful and relational. Through evocations of diva relations, love politics and gestural resonance in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, Thomas cracks the boundaries formed by representational associations of the Black female body and exploitation, in favor of sensual articulations of a complex and self-loving subject in the world of the photograph and beyond.

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From Self to #Selfie: An Introduction

Rudy Lemcke

Abstract: "*From Self to #Selfie*: An Introduction" reflects upon a 2017 exhibition curated by Rudy Lemcke, featuring nine video projects by LGBTQ artists Kia LaBeija, Awilda Rodriguez Lora, Cassils, M. Lamar, A.L. Steiner, boychild, Tina Takemoto, Evan Ifekoya, and E.G. Crichton. It considers their distinctive ways of presenting queer subjectivity through self-portraiture in new media. The essay examines how the exhibition rethinks the question of subjectivity and provides insights into new methods of expression, production, and distribution made available by new media that opens new ways of understanding its queerness. It focuses specifically on the use of experimental video as a time-based medium that reframes questions of identity as a dynamic unfolding of complex narratives held together by provisional queer, non-binary location, and meaning. The essay explores how the simultaneous projection of works on nine large screens creates a dynamic and immersive field of what the curator calls "selves in temporal flux." This temporal field not only moves beyond the static nature of conventional self-portraiture, but also expands possibilities for creating complex networks of queer self-representations.

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1. Introduction

The exhibition *From Self to #Selfie* includes three interconnected components: the main gallery features eight large-scale video projections by artists Kia LaBeija, Awilda Rodriguez Lora, Cassils, M. Lamar, A.L. Steiner, boychild, Tina Takemoto, and Evan Ifekoya; four video monitors suspended in the corners of the exhibition space loop 100 photo-selfies solicited from Bay Area LGBTQ artists; and in an annex gallery a video installation created by E.G. Crichton includes self-portraits gathered from eight international LGBTQ historical archives.

The exhibition does not attempt to position itself within a linear history of LGBTQ identity represented through the visual art of self-portraiture. Rather, it reframes the idea of looking at identity using the exhibition as a fluid system within which a queer self might be known. The exhibition is not negating the importance of historical narratives of same-sex desire in visual art or the importance of accurately articulating the lives and loves of the artists that are central to a richer understanding of our world. It builds upon work that has greatly advanced the cause of social justice and advanced the field of art history.

It is precisely because of this previous work and focus that we become open to new ways of entering the space of queer subjectivity. Just as the words homosexual,

gay, lesbian/gay, LGB, LGBT, queer, gender queer, non-binary, or non-conforming become more useful or less useful over the years, we continue to find more or less useful ways of articulating ourselves in the visual language of the day.

The exhibition turns to deconstructive curatorial tactics to formulate a strategy for addressing what is the complex and perhaps impossible task of articulating a theory of queer subjectivity in self-portraiture. Curatorial practice, video art, performance, and new media are often confronted with the problem of mediation and the entanglements of fixing a simple tag on a process of dynamic animation. The complication that is always running alongside this process is a constant struggle with the desire for clarity, visibility, and recognition while often becoming opaque, insular, and ambiguous in its form of presentation. The exhibition explores a middle way of addressing this conundrum by reframing the approach to thinking about queer subjects.

2. Ground

The motivation for the exhibition reaches back to a particular lineage of Bay Area LGBTQ self-portraiture that began in 1998 with the San Francisco National Queer Arts Festival's first visual arts exhibition, *FACE: Queerness in Self Portraiture.*

As the introduction to the inaugural exhibition states: "We wanted a place to start; to begin a serious discourse on queer culture; a beginning that was not an absolute ideological position but a place that would be continually open to itself and its re-creation; a place that celebrated difference as its mode of being and justice as its practice. We wanted to present ourselves not as an abstraction (a theoretical category, a political identity group or an economic brand) but as an array of unique individuals who share this 'queerness'. We gathered these artists together in hope of creating this place, this center. We decided to start with introductions ... We decided to call this first gesture, FACE."—(Lemcke 1998, p. 12).

3. Figure

Twenty years after this first exhibition and occupying the same physical gallery space at SOMArts Cultural Center, *From Self to #Selfie* (Figure 1) revisits this theme of self-portraiture to think about queer self-representation in the light of the revolutionary transformation of culture that is taking place through digital technology.

In the phrase from above, "We wanted to present ourselves ... as an array of unique individuals who share this 'queerness'" (Lemcke 1998, p. 12); it is perhaps the word "share" that becomes the operative term in the figure to ground relationship between self-portraiture and self. It signals a bond between self and others that precedes and goes beyond the identity of the self.

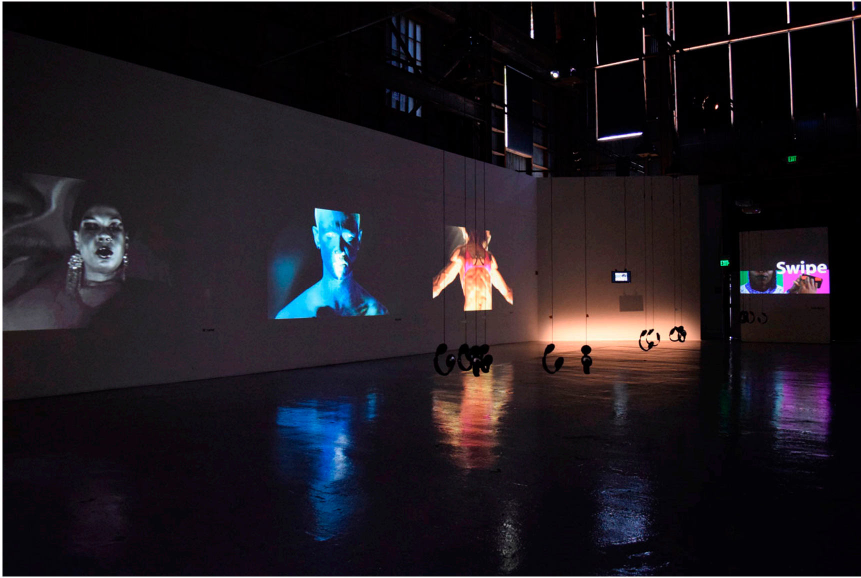

Figure 1. *From Self to #Selfie.* Installation View. Exhibition **at** SOMArts Cultural Center, San Francisco, CA. 3–30 June 2017, curated by Rudy Lemcke Shown left to right: M. Lamar, boychild, Cassils, Evan Ifekoya. Photo by Rudy Lemcke.

For those of us involved with the first *FACE* exhibition, the transformation of queer culture coupled with the availability and accessibility of new technologies has been dramatic. But the new access, speed, and interconnectivity that these new technologies afford the social justice movement also come at a price. An oppressive meta-structure of surveillance and control lies in the background as its authoritarian shadow. Noteworthy amidst this turbulent rupture of political and cultural identity brought about by social change and new technology is a curious obsession with the act of self-expression and self-portraiture encapsulated by the term #Selfie. Perhaps it is an existential question being raised when we ask such questions as: Where am I in the network of information that is instantly made available through a touch of our smart-phone's interface? Where do I belong in the multiplicity of screen instances, recursively generated, broadcast, consumed and disposed of with the careless abandon of a "delete" keystroke? What is this #Selfie? What smiles back at me as I caress my smart phone?

The curatorial project hopes to understand how queerness operates in these questions of *#Selfieness.* The exhibition features nine explorations that are performed using the medium of large-scale digital video projection. As individual videos, the works demonstrate the dynamic materiality that speaks to ongoing conversations about gender as mutable and fluid constructs. Through multiple lenses, they perform identity as a liberation that reaches out beyond the confines of form.

Presented in continuous loop cycles, with only darkness as separation or barriers between them, the intimate acts of performance encoded in these videos with their gestures of attention and affection become unglued and manifest together as an immersive space. A queer public commons is created in which the self becomes re-presented and re-imagined in relation to a referential field of other screen selves. The installation makes it impossible to view one individual screen in isolation and presents these unique, idiosyncratic works within an exhibition as experiential field.

The exhibition offers a queer place that is physically located as a communal self-affirming space of desire and identification marked with queer signification and potentialities. In place of singular expressions of an arguably longed for "authentic" LGBTQ subject, one encounters "queerness" at work in this exhibition through the representations of a dynamic intentional self, embedded in a web of private and public, familiar, and unconventional relationships and systems of meanings through which it is articulated, reproduced, and projected.

It is the hyper-dynamic function of figure to ground and its reversal endlessly unfolding in this space that holds the idea of #Selfie that we are exploring in the exhibition.

Buttressing the corners of the gallery space are four video monitors that continuously loop 100 photographic images of Bay Area LGBTQ artists (Figure 2). The circulation of these photo-selves randomly generates an extended field with each digital portrait acting as a node that expands beyond the horizon of the visible. They are avatars of a new sociality. They are multivalent agents acting as both signified and signifier, message and signal, performance and audience. These #Selfies embody in their singular presence the signification of their networked ontology, and with this, a potent complexity attuned to the show's video work.

The artists in this array of #Selfies represent artistic practices that go beyond their own idiosyncratic work and extend to communities of artist organizations and eccentric circles of support within which they are key participants and organizers. Some examples are Sean Dorsey of Sean Dorsey Dance, Shawna Virago of San Francisco Trans Film Festival, Debra Walker of the San Francisco Arts Commission, Pam Peniston of Queer Cultural Center, Favianna Rodriquez of Culture Strike, and Katie Gilmartin of the Queer Ancestors Project, to name a few. Their presence anchors the "work" of the exhibition within an extended queer community.

Figure 2. Rudy Lemcke, *100 Selfies*, four channel video, loops (detail), 2017. Presented at the *From Self to #Selfie* exhibition, SOMARTS Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 3- 30 June 2017, Curated by Rudy Lemcke. Source: Author photo.

In an adjacent but linked gallery the video installation by E.G. Crichton, *RETRIEVAL: Six Portraits*, projects an international array of queer portraiture, drawn from historical circles of queer affiliations whose archives are now accessible because of the global movement of information and knowledge made available through technology. The scope of the project attests to the range and reach of this queer network.

Each portrait is a montage of photographs, letters, news accounts, and ephemera, thoughtfully assembled by Crichton. The post card from Figure 3 was found in a flea market in Quezon City by the owners/archivists of Adarna Food and Culture, Philippines. Knowledge of its sender is suspended in a field of meaning held by the archive as "object" and simultaneously opened for us as "desiring subject" by Crichton's video within the space and time of the exhibition.

The video portraits of *RETRIEVAL: Six Portraits* create a delicate bridge between analog and digital, private and public, local and global, and reveal a tension between our idea of the temporal past and the ever-presentness of the digital now.

As its generative kernel, *From Self to #Selfie* affords us a vision of the rich potential to explore/refuse/resist/parody existing gender paradigms and to open the possibilities for "queer" identities as they are embodied in these new forms of queer sociality, affinity, and agency as they queerly emerge in a relational field of meaning on the screens of our networked world (Figure 4).

Figure 3. E.G. Crichton, *RETRIEVAL: Six Portraits*, 2017, digital video, 48:12 min. Photograph courtesy the artist, used with permission.

Figure 4. Kia LaBeija, *Dove*, digital video, 4:51 min, directed by Jacob Krupnick, 2016. Photograph courtesy the artist, used with permission.

The exhibition is meant to demonstrate by immersion the performative space of self as agent in a network of provisional queer meanings that are grounded in the past (*RETRIEVAL: Six Portraits*), responsive to the present (*100 #Selfies*),

and contemporaneously fixed and un-tethered to local and global spaces as networked selves co-existing in this new relational order as ecstatic-self, as #Selfie.

4. Eight Screen Selves

It is hard to pinpoint exactly where the chronological process of selecting the artists for the exhibition starts, but Tina Takemoto's film is certainly the best place to begin this narrative because it most succinctly introduces the complex dynamics of representation at work in the exhibition. The work has a particular resonance for me because of an on-going conversation I have enjoyed with the artist over the years about identity, history and memory.

4.1. Tina Takemoto, Semiotics of Sab

Figure 5. Tina Takemoto, *Semiotics of Sab*, digital video, 5:35 minutes, 2016. Photograph courtesy the artist, used with permission.

In *Semiotics of Sab* (Figure 5) we are presented with a portrait of film actor Sab Shimono in three sequence arcs. The first sequence presents a list of every character played by Shimono that quickly flashes on the screen in alphabetical order. The second sequence uses the structure of alphabet to present still and moving images of places, events, and names that resonate with Shimono's life, for example, images of W 27th Street where he studied acting, the Other Side gay bar he frequented, and Amache concentration camp where his family was imprisoned during World War II. As the film introduces this new organizational pattern of images, a voice

over from Shimono's 1993 film *Suture* begins: "How is it that we know who we are? We might wake up in the night and wonder where we are. We may have forgotten where the window or the door or the bathroom is ... But we never wonder who we are." (Shimono 1993)

In *Suture* Shimono plays the role of a psychiatrist trying to help a man, who has been in an accident and suffers from amnesia, regain his memory. We begin to see Takemoto's experimental play of semiotic order emerge in the film's narrative structure that points to the nature of memory and identity. The repetition of the alphabetical sequencing using a different set of trigger images disrupts any attempt to fix an imposed order on a seemingly private and unknowable association of signification. Once again we hear the voice of the psychiatrist as he hypnotically swings a pocket watch, suspending time and consciousness in order to access repressed memories of a trauma that he believes are the key to integrating his patient's lost self. "Let me take you back to a beginning, to a time before identity becomes confused." (Shimono 1993). The final section initiates a countdown from 10 using clips of Shimono's various Asian and Asian American film roles that reach a terminal point in the death of his character in the simple clothes of a Japanese worker lying prostrate amidst rocks and turning waves of an indistinct shoreline.

The film's style and technique looks back to a lineage of experimental filmmakers of the 1970s that sought to establish a new language of film following the example of linguistic structuralism. In breaking with the narrative structure of traditional film and imposing alternative systems of signification, these filmmakers ushered in a new era of radical experimentation that questioned the foundation of film aesthetics and its underlying theory of representation. Building on this experimental lineage, Takemoto introduces an expanded horizon of post-colonial thought that moves the question of identity and subjectivity to a deeper and a more profoundly beautiful experience.

The ostensible subject of the film, Sab Shimono, is held within a hall of mirrors that is the semiotic play of signifiers represented by Shimono's screen personae. But just as the meta-subject of Velázquez's famous painting *Las Meninas* (1656, Museo Del Prado) is held in the mirror reflection of the royal sovereign and holds the painting's order of signification, so Takemoto's film reflects the dynamics of race and identity that also frames the artist herself as subject.[1]

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[1] Diego Velazquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, Oil on Canvas, Museo del Prado. Available online: https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/las-meninas/9fdc7800-9ade-48b0-ab8b-edee94ea877f (accessed on 16 November 2019).

4.2. boychild, DLIHCYOB—directed by Mitch Moore

Figure 6. boychild, *DLIHCYOB*, digital video, 4:33 minutes, directed by Mitch Moore, 2012. Photograph courtesy the artist, used with permission.

The first experience I had with boychild's performance art was in SOMArts Gallery a year before the #Selfie show. It is almost impossible to articulate boychild's art-as-event—performance art that is truly meant to be an experience, and we are often left in silence when struggling for words.

Ironically perhaps, the most seemingly portrait-like of the projections in the exhibition is *DLIHCYOB*, a video of boychild, directed by Mitch Moore. But this portrait-like form belies its complexity. The video shows a close up of the artist's shoulders and head in reverse color mode (Figure 6). An electronic sound track mirrors the slow and subtle *butoh* like movements of the artist. Is this an expression of "bliss"—a word that is tattooed on the artist's neck? Nothing is said in the performance; its queerness seems to flow from the non-narrative nothingness of its time(less) gestures. One thinks of Cage's *4′33″* performance of silence when experiencing boychild's video within the visual field of the #Selfie exhibition[2]. Cage's silent, motionless piano performance was meant to fill the space of the auditorium with the ephemeral "music" of the listeners' presence, shifting our attention away from the performer to our own subjective experience of listening. Similarly, boychild's hypnotic performance in this relational space invites us out of, or by way of, a notion of the "self" and into a space where transformation and

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[2] Cage, John. 1952. *4′33*. Performance by Musical Instrument Museum, curated by Daniel C. Piper, recorded 22 October 2012. See "4'33 by John Cage," YouTube video, 08:16 min, posted by "MIMphx," October 22, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mr9YnBaZBgc (accessed on 16 November 2019).

movement lead to new possibilities of world building often associated with queerness and queer survival. The "self", as boychild illuminated in a recent email conversation, can be used as a tool to reveal the ubiquitous wholeness of being—dissolving difference. This idea shimmers amidst the light of the other screens' selves.

4.3. A.L. Steiner—Swift Path to Glory

Figure 7. A.L. Steiner, *Swift Path To Glory, 2003–2007,* digital video, TRT 9:44, 2003/2007. Photograph courtesy the artist, used with permission.

My first encounter with A.L. Steiner's work was in 2010 at the Roxie Theater in San Francisco at a screening of the video *Community Action Center* by Steiner and A.K. Burns. The film was part of Frameline's International LGBTQ Film Festival and had a lively Q and A after the screening. When putting the #Selfie show together I went to Steiner's website and quickly realized that all of the video work would be perfect for the show, but I chose *Swift Path to Glory*.

The multilayered *Swift Path to Glory* is shot in a storefront window—a space inherently construed as both public and private. It uses untrained actors to recreate the dramatic familial scene of a young James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) as he pleads for acceptance.[3] The unidentified actors in the film emotionally charge

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3 David Weisbart, "You're Tearing Me Apart Scene (2/10)," *Rebel Without a Cause*, directed by Nicholas Ray (1955; Burbank, CA: Warner). See "Rebel Without a Cause (1955)—You're Tearing Me Apart Scene (2/10) | Movieclips," YouTube video, 02:08 min, posted by "Movieclips," January 30, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBOcWFBBB04 (accessed on 16 November 2019).

their portrayal of the youth's crisis through seemingly endless readings and failed attempts to be understood. Its LGBTQ audiences easily understand the scene as a young queer boy's angst and recognition of the gender ambiguity of the filmmaker as James Dean photo in the background of the storefront movie set—a theory queen alert is triggered (Figure 7). To the uninitiated the scene can just as easily be thought of as so much cultural debris littering the congested urban street where it was filmed—its camp value, its queerness, arising and falling in the eye of the beholder.

In a 2012 conversation between Anthea Black and A.L. Steiner, Steiner speaks about identity:

> "Space between the process and the product doesn't end; it is similar to how we've talked about feminist history. There isn't a conclusion, where now it's this and we have to fight for it to be recognized as a certain thing. The idea of queer identity is that you're not fighting to have to be 'something'; you're fighting to not have to be something. Rights and liberties and civil rights really rest on the idea of someone deciding that you're valid enough, and they give you something. Then you're complete. For me, philosophically, that is a fallacy." (Black 2012)

While *Swift Path to Glory* humorously celebrates the complex performative aspect of gender, it is this idea of *liberation as process* that drives the work and is the powerful message of A.L. Steiner.

4.4. Cassils—Hard Times

Figure 8. Cassils, video document of performance *Hard Times*, Photo by Luke Gilford, 2013. Used with permission.

Cassils's *Hard Times* (2010) is a hyper-articulation of the objectified self. It is a critique of gender constructions and our notions of beauty. It takes place in the world of professional bodybuilding where intense training and discipline are required to shape the body into a flawless reflection of the Greek ideal of human form. Cassils's performance is a six-minute series of poses that are meant to glorify the body's perfection. The performance takes place on scaffolding, surrounded by theatrical lights and the regalia of high drama. Wearing a gruesome prosthetic mask (Figure 8) meant to represent the Greek profit Tiresias (Fisher 2018), Cassils gazes out at us from behind the mask's blinded eyes as spectacle and oracle.

Behold Tiresias, who was transfigured from man into woman, and carries the mystical knowledge of transformation and its beauty of becoming trapped in the staged presentation and posed performance of physical appearance that represents neither beauty nor becoming.

4.5. M. Lamar—Negro Antichrist

Figure 9. *From Self to #Selfie*, Installation View. Exhibition at SOMArts Cultural Center, San Francisco, CA, curated by Rudy Lemcke. Left to Right: Kia LaBeija, M. Lamar, boychild, Cassils. Photo by Rudy Lemcke.

I have known of M. Lamar's work since their student days at the San Francisco Art Institute, a lifetime ago for both of us. A more recent solo show, NEGROGOTHIC marked Lamar's return to SFAI in 2015.

M. Lamar's *Negro Antichrist* is the summoning of another self. Its haunting incantation transforms the performer into an otherworldly being. Their *bel canto* voice is the voice of the enraged dead whose dark specter of American racism haunts this portrait of self as afro-queer-punk-diva. "Get down from that tree ... beautiful negro, the beautiful negro," Lamar sings as they rise from a grave under a tree of lynched bodies in *Negro Antichrist* . Lamar's performance infuses the performance with the defiance of Billy Holliday's *Strange Fruit* (1945)[4], of Nina Simone's *Backlash Blues* (1976)[5], with the in-your-face punch of metal punk and the supreme attitude of diva Leontyne Price (2001)[6]. As its part in the visual field of the exhibition (Figure 9), it reminds us that we cannot stray too far from our violent past. It is this history of violence that operates and organizes existentially the referential field within which we know our queer selves.

4.6. Kia LaBeija—Without Love directed by Jacob Krupnick

Figure 10. Kia LaBeija, *Dove*, digital video, 4:51 min, digital video, directed by Jacob Krupnick, 2016. Photo courtesy the artist, used with permission.

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[4] Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit*. Clef Records, 1954. See "Billie Holiday - "Strange Fruit" Live 1959 [Reelin' In The Years Archives]," *YouTube* video, 03:18 min, posted by "ReelinInTheYears66," February 22, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DGY9HvChXk (accessed on 16 November 2019).

[5] See "Nina Simone Live At Montreux 1976—Backlash Blues," *YouTube* video, 06:46 min, posted by "bernardobarcellos," October 11, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxX6pYrvGy4 (accessed on 16 November 2019).

[6] See "LEONTYNE PRICE — 2001 — GOD BLESS AMERICA," *YouTube* video, 03:40 min, posted by "Jor Taga,", June 15, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jJjsQGUU-8&list=RDjovQPbJXTEU&index=9 (accessed on 16 November 2019).

I first became aware of Kia LaBeija's work in the *Art, AIDS America* (2015)[7] exhibition curated by Johnathan Katz and Rock Hushka, an exhibition that also included my own artwork. The show was a deeply moving life event for me as I came to know the lives of the other artists through their work. The powerful self-portraits of LaBeija on view, together with her activism around the inclusion of more people of color in the exhibition, were the elements of her practice that I wanted to include in this exhibition about queer self-representation. A spirit of going beyond her self-portraits with a concern for the *just* representation of others is what I love most about Kia LaBeija's work.

In Pillar Point's music video *Dove*, directed by Jacob Krupnick, Kia LaBeija frames and un-frames herself in an extended *vogue* performance through the streets of Bogota, Colombia.[8] The video begins with dancer Tania Larot holding a caged dove then cuts to Kia LaBeija's vogue performance (Figure 10). The two dancers eventually meet, and the trapped dove is freed in the video's final sequence.

Dove carries with it the lineage of vogue performance brilliantly documented in the 1990 film *Paris Is Burning* (1990) that celebrates the defiance of a community ravaged by racism and later by AIDS.[9] With the creation of *drag houses* such as the House of LaBeija to which Kia once belonged, alternative "families" of ostracized queers, people of color, gender non-conforming and transgender youth formed new bonds and familial relations around the creation of a performance art form most notably recognized by a stylized parody of the predominantly white high fashion runway world.

The unbound joy and attitude of LaBeija's performance speaks as a rallying call to a new generation of queer, trans, POC artists and reads for an older generation as an echo of a wounded past touched by a life-affirming future.

"Strike a pose!"

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7 *Art AIDS America*, October 3, 2015 – January 10, 2016. Organized by Tacoma Art Museum in partnership with The Bronx Museum of the Arts, co-curated by Jonathan David Katz and Rock Hushka. Available online: https://www.tacomaartmuseum.org/exhibit/aaa/ (accessed on 16 November 2019).

8 See "Pillar Point - Dove [OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO]" *YouTube* video, 04:51 min, posted by "Polyvinyl Records", February 10, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BU6dAAfg-qk (accessed on 16 November 2019).

9 "PARIS IS BURNING | Official HD Restoration Trailer (2019) | LGBTQ DOCUMENTARY | Film Threat Trailers,". YouTube video, 01:39 min, posted by "Film Threat," May 17, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o47CwiJLpes (accessed on 16 November 2019).

4.7. Awilda Rodriguez Lora—A visual and sound journey of La Mujer Maravilla (Wonder Woman) 2013–2015

Figure 11. Awilda Rodriguez Lora, *La Mujer Maravilla: INDIA$*, video document, 2013–2015, Miami Performance International Festival 2015. Photograph courtesy the artist, used with permission.

Awilda's video is a travelogue of her journeys between her residencies in Puerto Rico and New York and the emergence of her artistic expression as a *Wonder Woman*. The director of a small but important performance space recommended her work to me. And although the video is a less polished piece of video art than some of the other works in the exhibition, it represents a type of performance documentation as work-in-progress, as process, as work not formatted and formed as a packaged whole but as a continuum. The video is the very stuff of the dynamic aesthetic of the exhibition. Simply put, Rodriguez Lora reproduces the scene of her identity by allowing the audience to dress and undress her (Figure 11). It brings to mind Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964)[10]. But Rodriquez Lora's constructed character moves out of passivity to perform narrative histories of colonialism, of determined normalcy, and ultimately emerges as an agent of transformation.

[10] Yoko Ono Performing (Samuel Becket 2019t. See "Not I," YouTube video, 07:28 min, posted by "Fernando Silva," December 7, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8C4HL2LyWU (accessed on 16 November 2019).

4.8. Evan Ifekoya—My Tender Touch Screen

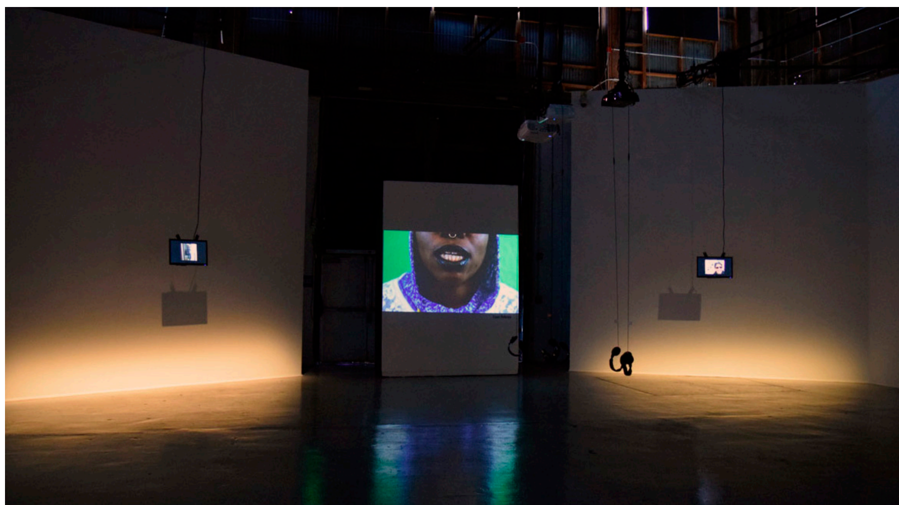

Figure 12. Evan Ifekoya, *My Tender Touch Screen*, digital, 4 min. Installation view, 2014. Photo by Rudy Lemcke.

Evan Ifekoya came to my attention on a blog post somewhere about gender queer artists that were making a big splash on the Internet. I clicked on the link to *My Tender Touch Screen* and after watching it, immediately reached out to Evan to see if we could screen it in the #Selfie show.

Evan Ifekoya's *My Tender Touch Screen* (Figure 12), is a parody of music videos with its green screen, canned transitions and over saturated colors. It takes us quickly into our culture of *nowness*—with an Instagram flash of life moments, sunsets, emojis and #Selfies. But its humorous lampoon of screen culture brings with it the serious question of the exhibition, "Who is smiling back at me from my smart phone?"

Near the beginning of the video a close-up of the artist's mouth repeatedly asks: "Any new followers? Any new likes? Any new requests? Am I trending? Am I Now? My name's a hashtag on my selfie, #wow!" Its repetition is humorous and troubling. It brings to mind the unsettling monologue of Samuel Beckett's 1972 play, *Not I*, in which a single babbling mouth spotlighted on a nearly empty stage cries: " ... out ... into this world ... this world ... tiny little thing ... before its time ... in a godfor ... what?...girl?...yes ... tiny little girl ... into this ... out into this ... before her time ... godforsaken hole called ... no matter ... ".[11]

[11] Samuel Beckett, *Not I*, 1972. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8C4HL2LyWU 00:00:10 (accessed on 17 July 2020).

Are these two monologues similar tales of alienated outcasts, one pre and one post smart phone? One is seemingly trapped in the space of traumatic abjection, the other floating in the space of a million others. Yes and No. The horror of the abject self lies in the inability to be recognized or recognize self as self, existing in a space foreign to the field of signification. Unlike Beckett's *Not I* self, for Ifekoya's there is a fundamental care and intention at work in the seeming frivolity of the voice over. Even in its self-centeredness it points outward in search of affirmation—to a wholeness that is always bound in a relationship to a totality beyond itself. The close-up shot of Ifekoya's mouth soon cuts back into an array of full-body shots. Ifekoya's self is then always reflected and reproduced as #Selfie, a self that is already at work in a network of other selves to which and from which it can be seen and known. Ifekoya's intention, even at a distance on screen, is to be touched. A self of queer liberation in all of its dynamic multiplicity that is open to the world—connected.

"My name's a hashtag on my selfie, #wow!" (Figure 13)

Figure 13. Evan Ifekoya, *My Tender Touch Screen*, digital, 4 min. Graphic courtesy of the artist 2014, used with permission.

5. Conclusion

From Self to #Selfie (2017) is organized as a response to the first visual art exhibition of the Queer Cultural Center (QCC). *FACE: Queerness in Self Portraiture* (1998) was a statement about the LGBTQ community of artists in the Bay Area in the late nineties and the launching of QCC as one of San Francisco's officially recognized and funded community cultural centers. Its arrival on the cultural landscape was a hard fought battle engaged in by a hand full of QCC's founding members. The opening of the

show was a celebration of our presence and visibility. Twenty years later, any singular queer art exhibition of self-portraits seems inadequate in representing the diversity and complexity of self-expression in our community. Rather than focusing on portraiture as such, the idea for *From Self to #Selfie* is to create a sense of queerness as an expression or sensation of the dynamic potential of "self" made available in our current political, technological, and historical moment. The exhibition creates an immersive environment that features nine video artworks, each beautifully complex and idiosyncratic. Supporting these projections in the corners of the gallery are four video loops of 100 #Selfies of Bay Area artists. The intension is to shift our thinking about ourselves as queer subjects. A turning from a righteous claim to presence and visibility that marked the *FACE* exhibition to a more nuanced enigmatic unfolding of self as desiring subjects within a complex system of relations that are bound to one another in a shared existence. The dynamics of the exhibition affords an experience of self as a potentiality—where the self manifests as both figure and background, as both fixed and unstable. The sometimes frivolous, sometimes studied individual #Selfies that circulate at the supporting corners of the space are both signified and signifiers, audience and actors in an extended network of meaning. They are ecstatic selves. They signal an elated, enraptured, entranced, euphoric, exhilarated, giddy, rapturous moment of the imminent presence of their becoming.

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Artists

100 Selfies (Figure 2 in detail)

Top Row: Celeste Chan and Maxine Hong Kingston, Annah Anti Palindrome.

Ann Aptaker, Annie M. Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, Jerome Caja, Evie Leder, Gary Freeman and Nick Macierz, Beth Pickens, Gabrielle Le Roux, Rudy Lemcke.

Row Two: Dr. Jordy Tackitt-Jones, Jamee Crusan, Jason Hanasik, Kim Anno, Lenore Chinn, Lorenzo DeAlmeida, Maureen Burdock, Nicki Green, Raquel Gutiérrez, Rotimi Agbabiaka.
Row Three: Aron Kantor, Alex Hernandez, Cooper Lee Bombardier, Stathis Gerostathopoulos, Sam Cortez, Zeph Fishlyn, Pamela Peniston, E.G. Crichton, Dorian Katz, Debra Walker, Audaciously Speaking.
Row Four: Emily Holmes, Amanda Simons, KB Boyce, Kevin Seaman, Sean Dorsey, Shawna Virago, Emily Park, Dr Eagle Bear, Favianna Rodriguez, Ramekon O'Arwisters.
Bottom Row: Việt Lê, Virgie Tovar, Dorothy Santos, Amy Sueyoshi and Tina Takemoto, Amy Cancelmo, Fallon Young, Indira Allegra, Natalia Vigil, Katie Gilmartin, Amy Wilson.

boychild (Figures 1, 6 and 9)

DLIHCYOB, Dir. 2012. Moore, Mitch. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lI5lfTIyGgw (accessed on 16 November 2019).

Cassils (Figures 1, 8 and 9)

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Crichton, E.G. (Figure 3)

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Ifekoya, Evan. Available online: http://evanifekoya.com/ (accessed on 16 November 2019).
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Lamar, M. (Figures 1 and 9)

Lamar, M. Available online: http://www.mlamar.com/ (accessed on 16 November 2019).
Lamar, M. Negro Antichrist. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqPpvQ6TQkc (accessed on 16 November 2019).

Rodriguez Lora, Awilda (Figure 11)

Lora, Awilda Rodriguez. Available online: http://laperformera.org/ (accessed on 16 November 2019).
Lora, Awilda Rodriguez, and La Mujer Maravilla. (not available for preview).

Steiner, A.L. (Figure 7)

Steiner, A.L. Available online: https://www.hellomynameissteiner.com/ (accessed on 16 November 2019).

Steiner, A.L. Swift Path To Glory (excerpt), 2003/2007. Available online: https://vimeo.com/25616002 (accessed on 16 November 2019).

Takemoto, Tina (Figure 5)

Takemoto, Tina. Available online: http://www.ttakemoto.com/index.html (accessed on 16 November 2019).

Tina Takemoto, Semiotics of Sab (excerpt), 2016. Available online: https://www.cfmdc.org/film/4544 (accessed on 16 November 2019).

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Selfie Shifts

Race for the Prize: The Proto-Selfie as Endurance Performance Art

Marc A. Tasman

Abstract: In the paper "Race for the Prize: The Proto-Selfie as Endurance Performance Art," the author characterizes a small group of artists (including himself) working on time-lapse, self-portrait photographic projects as competitive— in a race with distinct formal, aesthetic, and technical categories. Set on the cusp of the millennial change from 20th to 21st century, these self-portrait works suggested practices and modes of new digital materiality that helped to birth the phenomenon called "the Selfie." In the few decades before this Web 2.0 debut, the self-portrait was already evolving with electronic media. Neo-avant-garde performance artists and post-modern photographers were making identity-fluid works, self-portraits that were highly performative, prefiguring the coming practices of self-representation in digital networks. An important link, a reference to the passage of time, reinforce a familiar theme in art history—memento-mori, which is a reminder to the viewer that our time alive is fleeting. In this way, along with other threads, including first-hand accounts by the quartet of time-lapse self-portrait artists, we can derive the context and continuity that connects antecedents to descendant selfie practices, ubiquitous in contemporary culture.

1. Introduction

I am writing here ten years after the conclusion of the *Ten Year Polaroid Project* (Figure 1), also known as *Ten Years and One Day*, twenty years after the start of my photo series. This is a project in which I photographed myself using a Polaroid camera and instant film for 3654 consecutive days, from 24 July 1999 through 24 July 2009. I aim to contextualize this work within an art and art–historical context, and also and especially within and around that period of time known vernacularly as Y2K, The Year 2000, as there was a small group of artists working on time-lapse, self-portrait photographic projects. Set on the cusp of this millennial change from the 20th to the 21st century, these projects, shared through the burgeoning Web 2.0 and social media, seemed to encapsulate, for critics and the general public, deeper feelings, meanings, and questions in the face of these social transformations, of digital migrancy and digital natives, through every day and everyday works, setting trends and generating memes that helped to birth the phenomenon called "the selfie".

Figure 1. The artist and author in front of his installation of all of the Polaroids from the *Ten Years Polaroid Project*, installed at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA), 2010. Source: Author's work.

2. Materials and Methods

In order to document some of the significance of these four projects, to define them as proto-selfies through art, humanistic, and art–historical methods, I describe them and the resulting time-lapse videos and frame them within a confluence of themes. First, a timeline of the four projects and an analysis as of a competitive race is given. Then, a discussion and application of theories, concepts, and projects are provided that have either influenced the artists themselves or are important for understanding the context of these proto-selfies: *vanitas* and *memento mori*; belonging to a tradition of the Neo-Avant-Garde Performance and conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s; impact on popular culture; remediation and pre-mediation; technical developments which made these projects and subsequent ones possible; as presentation of self and related psycho-social considerations; contemporary manifestations of the selfie; and the selfie's remediation of material culture vis-à-vis Polaroid instant film. Finally, as an additional layer of visual analysis, I have included a variety of mediations and their remediations across platforms and artists. Woven through this article are these images which manifest as: Google Image results side by side with the author's own Polaroid self-portrait project; side-by-side comparisons of the four proto-selfie projects; screenshots of contextual presentations of the projects; and memes related to the projects. A short appendix appears at the end of the paper to break down and analyze some of the images and juxtapositions where the captions for those figures are insufficient, without giving away the punchline for some of the visual humor.

Intrinsic in this paper is the discussion and analysis of my own past work. This may seem obtuse or unusual in some disciplines, but as an artist engaged in a more praxis-oriented process, my intent is to trace the relationships and social dynamics at work in this small group of Y2K artists, situated within and connected to the aforementioned themes. However formalist the ensuing analyses, the juxtaposition of the timelines and the personal, oral-history-like accounts of the four Y2K artists producing durational self-portrait projects are meant to add to our understanding of the history of selfies and their significance. In their ideal forms, these accounts allow the reader to understand what the artist was imagining at the onset and how the projects took shape. We can see what (if any) impact the various encounters the artists had with each other had on their work and projects. Any historical claims made implicitly or explicitly therein should be regarded in the context of laying bare the artists' thinking, feelings, and practices in relation to both the small competitive group and to broader influences of art and other forms of culture and technology.

2.1. Durational Self-Portraits, Pre-Mediation, Proto-Selfie

When these four artists and photographers (Lee, Kalina, Keller, Tasman—I elaborate further down on their identities and stories) began daily self-portrait photo projects within months of each other, none knew about the others. These works, this author asserts, are exemplars of a proto-selfie, which is to say there are particular qualities in each one of these projects that we, the practitioners, were experimenting with that pushed, extruded, and transformed the self-portrait.

These practices and influences encompass a range of art-making, vernacular media, quotidian performances, and digital methods that would inspire countless individuals to attempt similar projects, in successive iterations that would eventually become the recognizable, mimetic, desirable, and easy-to-make (facile) "selfie" for huge swaths of the general public across the globe. I would like to first define the term "selfie", then describe in some detail what was going on with those daily self-portrait projects before uncovering the influences in art and culture that came before and connected them, then returning to what came after—from Durational Self-Portrait Performances, Proto-Selfies, back to Neo Avant-Garde, and then return to selfies.

What I hope to show are some of the traits and characteristics of the projects that resemble the familiar form and current practices of the selfie as a way of contextualizing a historical lineage, much the same way that the Renaissance was "marked by the rise of painting and the other visual arts in Italy with Cimabue [preceding] Giotto" in the 1300s, and Giotto preceding Leonardo, and Michelangelo, etc., peaking in the 16th century (Kristeller 1990, p. 181). Implicit in this marked rise is that there is a period that is a foundational precursor to what is considered the main time period of the Renaissance –*proto*-Renaissance and Renaissance proper. To put it in new media terms, these everyday, durational photographic performances do not

represent a historic break or rupture with the past as they remediate (Bolter and Grusin 1999) with new technologies and media, established forms of art, and photography. They also "pre-mediate" (Grusin 2010) the future of self-portraiture as selfies, through socially networked media, before they emerge into the present or current, through anxious or anticipatory episodes.

2.2. What Is and What Is Not a Selfie

These projects contributed to the making of "the selfie", the self-portraits therein were not conceived of as "selfies" and remain distinctive as self-portraits. Noah Kalina, one of these artists, would never say that what he does is "taking a selfie". Of the original group of daily self-portrait artists, he says, that in "what we do, what we've done, there was initial intent. Perhaps that's what elevates or differentiates a self-portrait from a selfie. When you say 'selfies', it lacks a certain amount of studiousness, which is fine. People are taking selfies, that exists, that's cool".[1]

Without going deep into the history of the coinage of the term selfie (earliest known written usage, 2002, first used as a hashtag, 2011, and added to the Oxford English Dictionaries, 2013), some other distinctions can be made between self-portraits and selfies (Kruszelnicki 2014). Talking about the phenomenon of space selfies (yes, photographs made of one's self, by one's self, if one is an astronaut in space), Jennifer Levasseur, a curator at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C. asserts that "it needs to be digital to be a selfie". The selfie is a phenomenon conceived within internet culture and linked to the human desire to interact on digital social networks. "The thing that makes a selfie a selfie is sharing it," she says (Howard 2019).

On this, all of humanity can agree: If one takes a photograph of one's self with a front-facing camera on one's network-connected smartphone, posts it online with the implicit or explicit desire to gain some kind of reward in the form of comments, hearts, likes, follows, retweets, or friend requests, etc., through an online platform that acts as a broker in the attention economy, then one has most definitely made a selfie.

Other formal rules about what constitutes a selfie seem to be more debatable and ambiguous, such as whether the device must be a smartphone, or could be made on a digital camera that one cannot have a synchronous voice conversation on (Moreau 2019); whether the device is hand-held, the shutter released by the subject's own human touch, or whether the camera is affixed on a free-standing object or tripod, shutter released by a timer, or whether the photo of the subject is framed and

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[1] Telephone conversation with the author, 1 November 2019.

shot by another photographer, with the foreknowledge and at the direction of the subject, or not.

What we should reject is the notion or practice that selfie is a term that is interchangeable with any or all self-portraits, made by painting, drawing, or non-digital (analog or chemical) photographic methods before the 21st century and specifically before digital technology and networks made natively digital self-portraits a possibility (Figures 2 and 3).

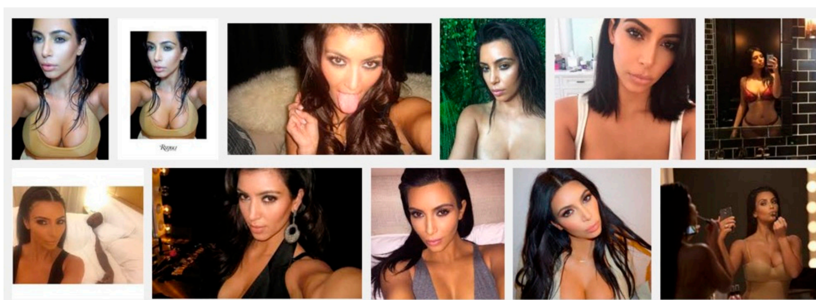


Figure 2. Detail of screen capture of Google image results of "Kim Kardashian, *Selfish*, 2015."

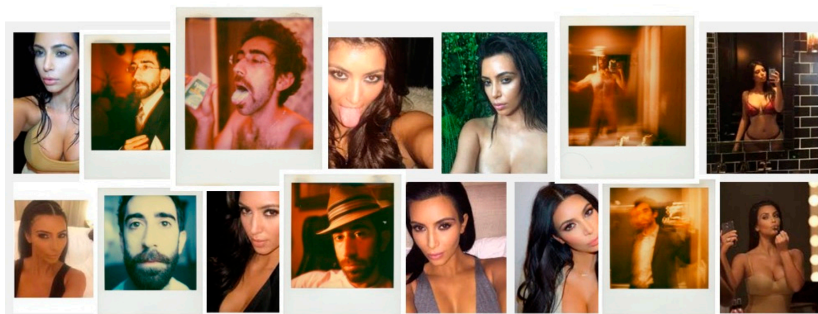


Figure 3. Kardashian's *Selfish* overlaid with images of Tasman's *Ten Years Polaroid Project*, 1999–2009. See Appendix A for more context on this visual analysis.

Still, for some particularly authoritative cultural mavens, the term selfie is just the diminutive expression of the term self-portrait. Kim Kardashian West opens *Selfish* (a coffee table book containing nine years of her life in selfies) with an analog self-portrait. This image that she took of her screaming baby sister and herself in 1984 with a disposable film camera, the former's face smashed against the latter, is tightly framed. The diamond shaped glint in the elder Kardashian's eyes from the on-camera flash reveals the shape of the aperture on those particular plastic lenses. In a handwritten caption, Kardashian elucidates and memorializes the event, "My very first selfie was taken in 1984. I put my mom's clip-on earrings on Khloe and found

a disposable camera and took a picture to capture this memory" (Kardashian West 2015, pp. 6–7). Jillian Mapes reviewing Kardashian's book noted that it "occupies a place somewhere between a Marina Abramović stunt and your Facebook friend who splices together brief video clips every day for a year" (Mapes 2015).

3. Results: A Competition Timeline

Indeed, somewhere between the venerable tradition of *autorretratos* and the circadian, compulsive posting of selfies on social media lies a missing link of sorts. There we may find the primordial ooze from which selfies slithered before 2013 when Oxford English Dictionaries made it the word of the year, prompting technology and culture writer Eric Mack to call it the "paradoxical nexus of narcissism and shared social experience" (Mack 2013). In fact, that pesky human trait, narcissism, has been used as a kind of metric over the years to place a value judgement of the effects of this selfie phenomenon, on its individual participants, and society as a whole. Halpern, Valenzuela, and Katz present findings in their 2016 paper, *"Selfie-ists"or "Narci-selfiers"?: A cross-lagged panel analysis of selfie taking and narcissism*, suggesting a self-reinforcing effect—that one feeds the other. That is, narcissistic individuals increase their rate of selfie taking over time, and the "increase in selfie production raises subsequent levels of narcissism" (Halpern et al. 2016, p. 98). Uh-oh. A person with "subclinical narcissism traits" has a tell, and that is how and to what degree the individual reacts to threats to self-esteem, primarily by maintaining "several attention-seeking and exhibitionist strategies" (Bergman et al. 2011, p. 708).

This is not to suggest that this group of time-lapse self-portrait artists significantly possess any more traits of narcissism than the general public, or at least any other group of artists throughout history. Any product of an art school education from the final two decades of the 1900s, especially any medium, concentration, or discipline in the arts that (at least tolerated, at best fully) embraced interdisciplinarity as a fertile new ground, would be familiar with (and burdened by the grandiose responsibility of) the discourse developed a generation before: *the highest purpose of art in this time is to innovate new genres.* This could either be achieved by experimenting with new media and technologies or by helping Modernism collapse on itself by uprooting the fallacies at its foundation—but ideally both.

3.1. The Artists, Locked in Heated Battle, and Their Projects

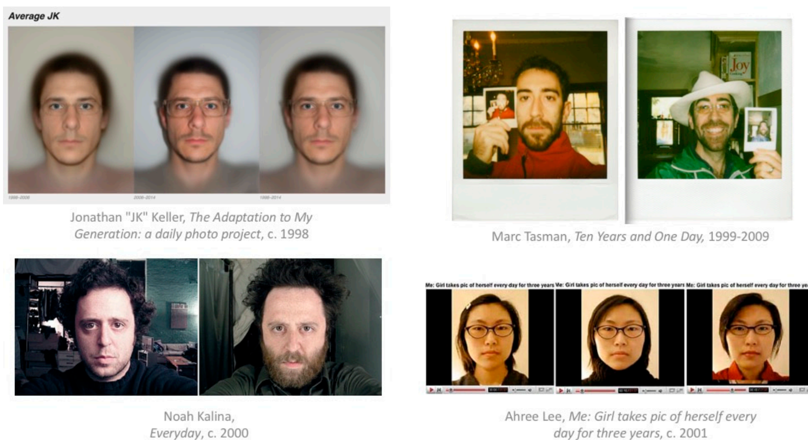
Part of the frame of the title of this paper is Race for the Prize, which is borrowed from the lead track from the 1999 Flaming Lips album The Soft Bulletin, which describes this kind of compulsive, nervous tension: "Two scientists are racing for the good of all mankind, both of them side by side. So determined" (Coyne et al. 1999). The narrative in the song *Race for the Prize* is a familiar, competitive trope, appropriately fitting given its zeitgeist as well, to describe the relationship of this

group of artists working on proto-selfie projects, "locked in heated battle for the cure that is their prize ... under the microscope" (ibid.), in a different sense, once we began to discover the existence of the other. To limit the scope, I have excluded, but acknowledge here, Karl Baden's black and white 35 mm film *Every Day* self-portrait project which he began in 1987 (Marcelo 2017). Ahree Lee, talking in 2007 about the time-lapse self-portrait phenomenon, calls these pioneering artists a "fraternity of the obsessed" (Sarno 2007). Jonathan Keller frames the millennial daily self-portraits as a "funny sort of competition" among a small group: "Who will be the first to die or give up their project?" Keller asked. "Will the person who lives the longest be given the greatest acclaim?" (ibid.)

Here are the durational self-portrait performances (proto-selfies), the four artists, date of birth, project conception dates, and titles of corresponding time-lapse YouTube videos that I would like to discuss: the work of Jonathan "JK" Keller, b. 11 January 1976, start date, 1 October 1998 (and 27 May 2000), *The Adaptation to my Generation: A Daily Photo Project*, *Living My Life Faster*; (Keller 2006, 2016a) Marc Tasman (the author), b. 17 December 1971, start date, 24 July 1999, *Ten Years and One Day (The Ten Year Polaroid Project)* (Tasman 2009a); Noah Kalina, b. 4 July 1980, start date, 11 January 2000, *Everyday: Noah takes a photo of himself every day for 6 Years* (Kalina 2006); Ahree Lee, b. 28 July 1971, start date, 1 November 2001, *Me: Girl takes pic of herself every day for three years* (Lee 2006a, 2006b).

3.2. Who Began First?

If we are to award prizes to the first of these artists to commence with such an endeavor, it should go to Keller, who began first in 1998, ranked in this order: Keller, Tasman, Kalina, Lee (Figure 4).



Jonathan "JK" Keller, *The Adaptation to My Generation: a daily photo project*, c. 1998
Marc Tasman, *Ten Years and One Day*, 1999-2009
Noah Kalina, *Everyday*, c. 2000
Ahree Lee, *Me: Girl takes pic of herself every day for three years*, c. 2001

Figure 4. A ranking of the projects by their time out of the starting gate: Keller, Tasman, Kalina, Lee (left to right, top to bottom).

Keller's self-portraits are digital, composed of his frontal, expressionless gaze, in front of a white, blank, or neutral background; a close cropping of his head and shoulders. His eyes are light in color, blue or grey, pupils wide from use of the front-facing flash, their position in the composition and their expression remain the same. Keller first appears as a young white guy, in his early twenties, full head of light sandy brown hair which alternates at first from shaggy to buzzed then back to scruffy lengths, then clean shaven. His first glasses, which do not always appear, are those fairly non-descript rounded wire rim frames that were so prevalent in the nineties, which then give way to more style-conscious narrow tortoise shell frames, then on to other Clark Kent, nerd chic and safety goggle aviator, hipster styles. As he lets the hair on his face and head grow long, into the wild and long varieties in his late twenties and early thirties, his moustache wanders like a caterpillar in a mirror, away from the corners of his mouth, before abruptly being scraped clean off his face for a blank slate again shortly into his 32nd year. The effect in the time-lapse videos that he created at the eighth and sixteenth year marks, respectively, since the placement of his eyes and expression remain the same, is to focus the viewer's attention on the range of follicular expression. His hair is what seems to be alive—all other changes besides the eyewear are too subtle to notice. The music he used for the first video, *Living My Life Faster*, posted on 26 September 2006, is derived from Jankenpopp, a drum and base triphop composition with an extremely high beats-per-minute rate, frenetic, noisy, and is in contrast to the animation music of Lee's and Kalina's more melancholic melodies (Keller 2006).

3.3. Who Is Consistent on Consecutive Days?

Wait—Keller's *The Adaption to My Generation a Daily Photo Project* started on 1 October 1998 but then stopped just a day shy of a year, in September 1999, for eight months when he went to Antarctica, then restarted on 27 May 2000 (Keller 2016b). So if the prize goes to who started first and then consistently continued on consecutive days, first reaching ten years, then it goes like this: Tasman, Kalina, Keller, Lee (Figure 5), (Schumacher 2009a).

I began this self-portrait series using Polaroid film on 24 July 1999 and continued for 3654 consecutive days—ten years and one day. In the first year, there are many days in which more than one portrait was taken. They are composed within the square frame of the Polaroid, SX-70s at first; many have shifted color either from mixed lighting or from the often expired film. There is no compositional consistency as facial expressions, bodily gestures, lighting, and environments change, except when in the midst of smaller discreet performances of costumed characters and settings with props. I am of Ashkenazi Jewish descent, my face reads as such, and these earlier self-portraits are often experimental entanglements with representations of Jewish identity and ritualized performances. As the years go on, the self-conscious

performances recede as the performance becomes more meta or conceptually oriented, choosing a particular composition, location (such as in front of the place where I slept the night before) or affect (wearing suits with pocket squares) or expression (a wave to the viewer) resolving itself over several days, which might last months or years (such as the smile that appears in January of 2008 and persists for eighteen months, until the end). The music, which I composed for the video, has an indie-rock guitar-based vibrato sound. It has no lyrics, except for the echoing title, which I pronounce at the start, before the first reverberating strum, *Ten Years and One Day*. Where the lyrics of verses would be, the guitar strums rapidly in a minor chord progression, opening up to a bright G-major chorus section before descending through a minor bridge section and returning to the verse (Tasman 2009a).

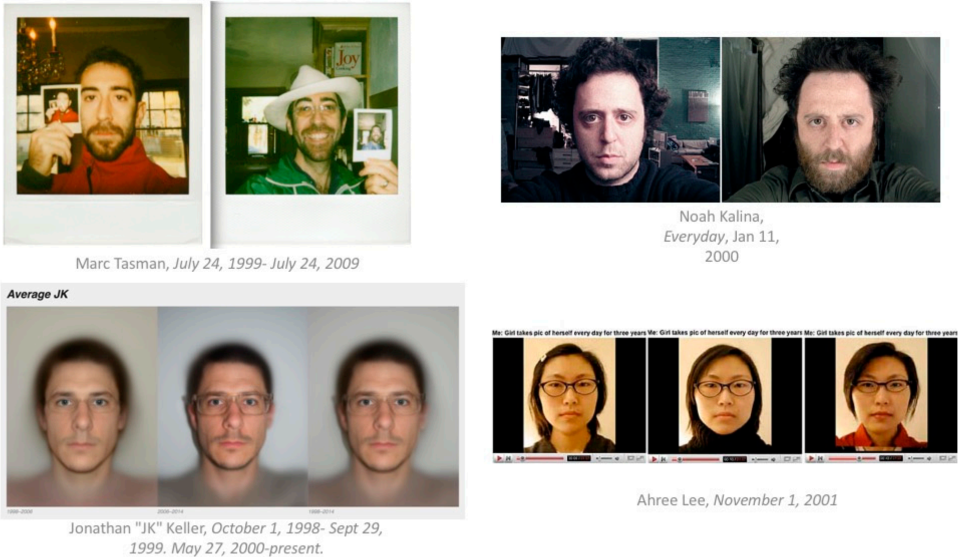
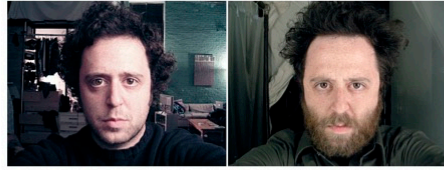


Figure 5. A ranking of projects' progress toward a decade of consecutive days: Tasman, Kalina, Keller, Lee (left to right, top to bottom).

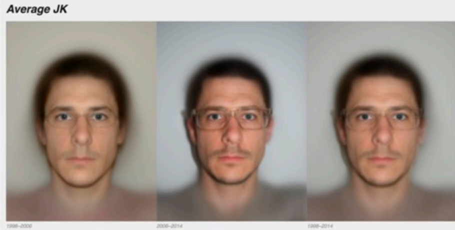
3.4. Who Created the First Time-Lapse of Self-Portraits?

If the prize goes to who first created a time-lapse video of daily self-portraits it goes like this: Lee, Kalina, Keller, Tasman (Figure 6).

Ahree Lee, *Me: Girl takes pic of herself every day for three years*, c. 2001



Noah Kalina, *Everyday*, c. 2000



Jonathan "JK" Keller, *The Adaptation to My Generation: a daily photo project*, c. 1998

Marc Tasman, *Ten Years and One Day*, 1999-2009

Figure 6. A ranking of the projects by order of appearance of a time-lapse video on the web: Lee, Kalina, Keller, Tasman (left to right, top to bottom).

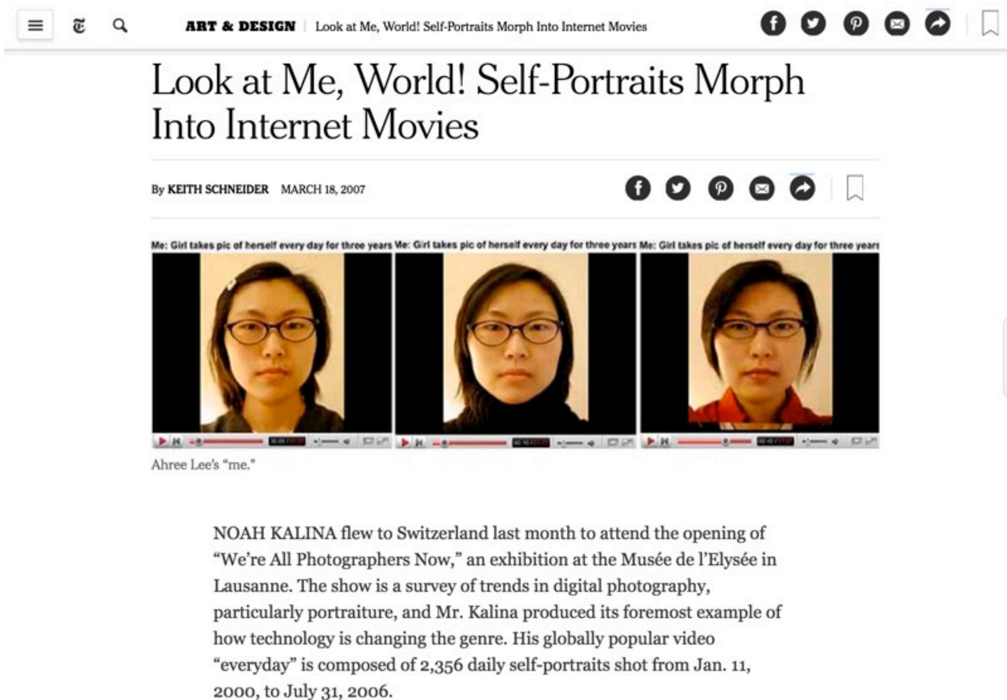
Ahree Lee's work is like that of Keller's: digital, composed of her frontal, expressionless gaze, in front of a white, blank, neutral background, a close cropping of her head and shoulders. Aside from her identity as an Asian American woman, another noticeable difference is that Lee includes an uncropped edge of the frame in her time-lapse video—a marker that tells the viewer that she is digitally rotating the images to achieve the effect of having her eyes snapped to the grid. Lee describes on her website that her first years' images were made using a hand-held camera with a flip out screen; then she used software to align her eyes to sequence the images (Lee 2006c). The other aesthetic photographic decision that Lee has made here is to use natural or ambient light, which creates a kind of effect for the viewer that the earth is moving around the sun and days are peeling by. Her glasses change but generally maintain a cat-eye style, bouncing around a bit on the bridge of her nose. Her clothing is varied, based on what the viewer can see of her shoulders and collar, as is her hair style, going from pinned back to bangs to shorter hair. Lee began the project on 1 November 2001, the latest start date of the quartet, but the first to post a time-lapse video—her first YouTube video of the project was posted on 11 August 2006. Lee's music was composed for the video by Nathan Melsted, her husband (ibid.). A haunting electric vibraphone synthesizer riff that, as it falls and rises, seems to pose a query with the composition's intro. The response to the question resolves as an increase in the rhythmic beats of more electronic drum and base, the quickening pace of life anchored by the soothing initial clarion melody throughout (Lee 2006a).

So the prize for inventing the form of time-lapse video of daily self-portraits goes to Ahree Lee!

A break-out moment for the durational self-portrait phenomenon in the popular press was on 18 March 2007, when New York Times published an article by Keith Schneider, "Look at Me, World! Self-Portraits Morph Into Internet Movies". While the article features still frame grabs from Ahree Lee's work just below the headline, the article is primarily a celebration of Noah Kalina as "the foremost example of how technology is changing the genre" of digital photography (Schneider 2007) (Figure 7).

3.5. Who Had the Greatest Social Impact?

While Ahree Lee's video was the first of its kind on YouTube, or published on the digital network, the prize for the first of these works getting to 1,000,000 views on YouTube, essentially representing the tipping point of the phenomenon, goes to Noah Kalina, published on 27 August 2006. In fact, the video had a million views in less than 24 hours (Stern 2010). Congratulations, Noah.



ART & DESIGN | Look at Me, World! Self-Portraits Morph Into Internet Movies

Look at Me, World! Self-Portraits Morph Into Internet Movies

By KEITH SCHNEIDER MARCH 18, 2007

Me: Girl takes pic of herself every day for three years Me: Girl takes pic of herself every day for three years Me: Girl takes pic of herself every day for three years

Ahree Lee's "me."

NOAH KALINA flew to Switzerland last month to attend the opening of "We're All Photographers Now," an exhibition at the Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne. The show is a survey of trends in digital photography, particularly portraiture, and Mr. Kalina produced its foremost example of how technology is changing the genre. His globally popular video "everyday" is composed of 2,356 daily self-portraits shot from Jan. 11, 2000, to July 31, 2006.

Figure 7. "Me" is the title of Ahree Lee's time-lapse video (Schneider 2007).

Noah Kalina's portraits reveal much more than his face, as his backgrounds are environmental. They show the interior of his homes or studios, and the viewer can see these change over time, also with other people entering the shot. Kalina's face is more or less in the same position relative to the camera, but his eyes are not

aligned precisely. That and the constantly changing and directional light create a kind of whirling, dizzying effect. Kalina has big, brown, sad puppy dog eyes and a wavy, curly, wild mop of hair atop his head (Figure 8). He grows older, more mature—a beard covers his face and his eyes grow heavier with time. His girlfriend at the time, Carly Commando composed the music called, "Everyday", a beautifully melancholic, rolling piano composition, classically styled, dark with redemptive hints (Kalina 2006). Both Kalina and Commando had some success in licensing their individual works, which makes this work remarkable, too, for being the first and only to be parodied by the Simpsons (Sheetz 2007), (Figure 9).

Figure 8. Noah Kalina's time-lapse video with Carly Commando's musical composition, "Everyday" wins the prize for greatest social impact.

3.6. Other Significant Contributions and Heated Competition

Schneider in this NY Times article also hails Jonathan Keller's work, though "his more significant contribution to the new form is his online archive of what he calls "passage of time" and "'obsessive' photo projects" (Schneider 2007). Herein lies an excellent database for any researcher of daily self-portrait projects, and related conceptual works. More of what I would call "ritualized photographic endurance performance" projects helpful for illuminating the conceptual art contexts in which these projects and their milieu based their foundations (Figures 10 and 11).

The prize for best web archive goes to Jonathan Keller, i.e., JK, i.e., Jonathan Keller Keller. Unfortunately, Keller seems to have taken down his archives, going "off-grid",

even removing his videos from Vimeo and YouTube; the works are only to be found by mirror videos and the Internet Archive (Keller 2014, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

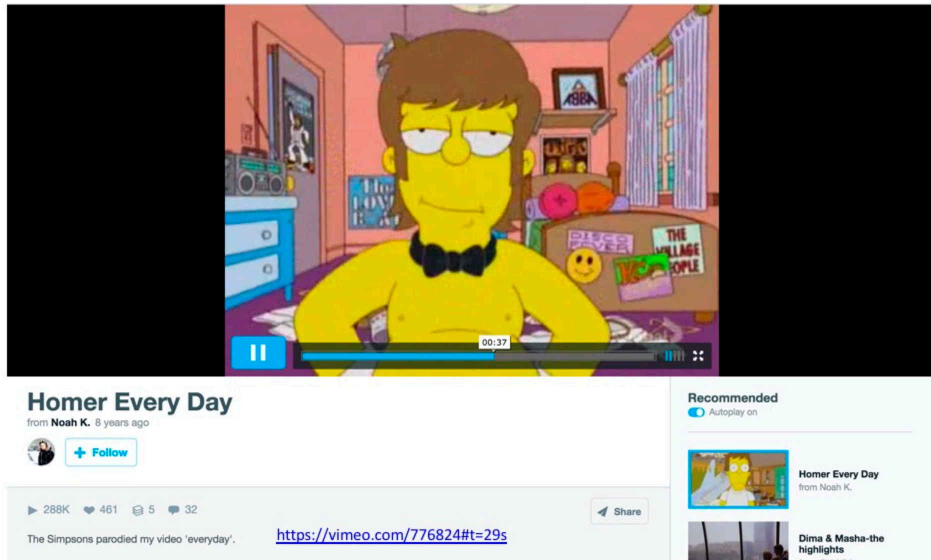


Figure 9. The use of Commando's musical composition and Kalina's video concept adapted by The Simpsons shows the work's impressive viral power and reach into popular culture. Source: a screen capture from Noah Kalina's Vimeo account.

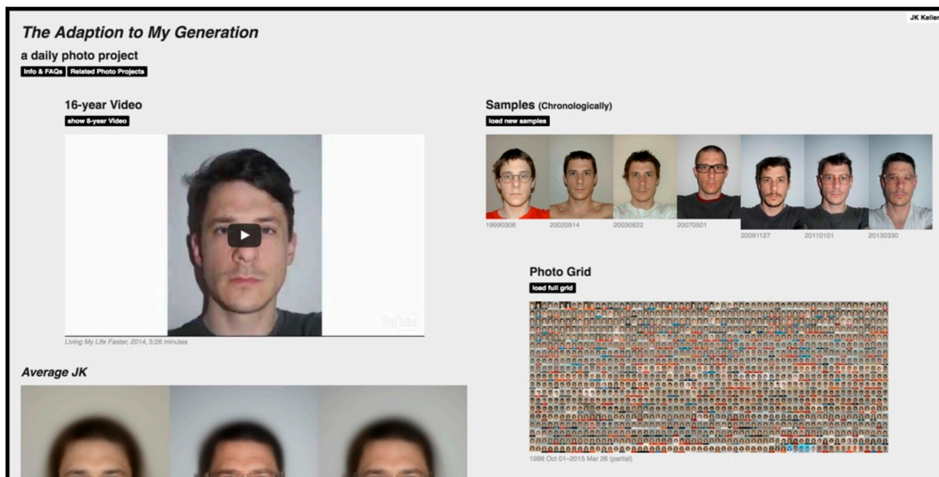


Figure 10. Screen captures of JK Keller's *The Adaptation to My Generation—a Daily Photo Project*.

Imagine, if you will, this zeitgeist of "racing for the prize" with these three, especially, Lee, Kalina, and Keller. Ahree Lee posts her time-lapse first, in the summer of 2006, but then Kalina scoops up her notoriety, posting a few weeks later. Meanwhile, Keller, who started first, more or less, and has the most elegant and refined interface, not just for his project, is an artist who is generously, selflessly advancing the field, is racing to be "Living [his] Life Faster", to play his video at a higher framer rate—posts his about a month after that. When he does post his video to YouTube, Keller throws down the gauntlet in his video description, "Let the battle continue . . . " (Keller 2014). Kalina "was shook" when he found out that he was not alone).[2] Meanwhile, I sat brooding, hatching my plan for digitizing ten years' worth of Polaroids to turn into a time-lapse video to drop upon the rest at the ten year mark, momentarily seizing the prize.

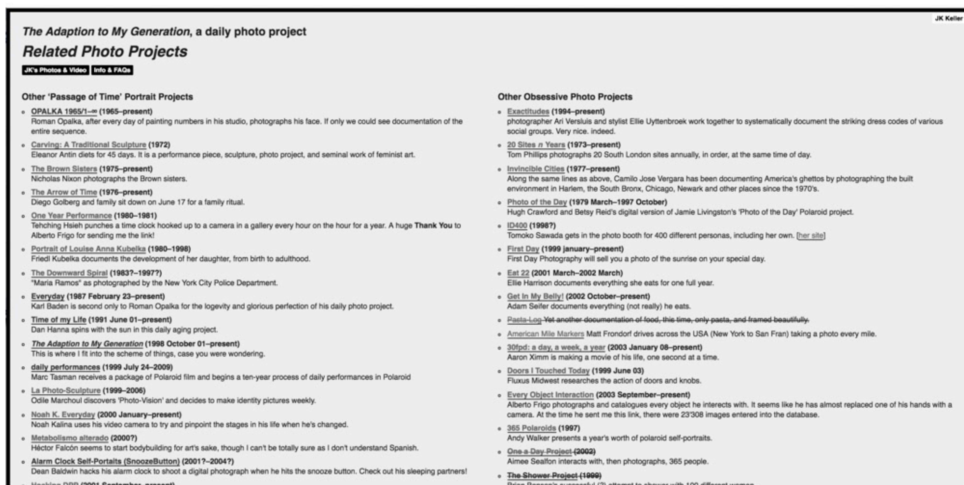


Figure 11. Screen capture of the archive of related photo projects, last visible on JK Keller's website jk-keller.com in April 2016 (Keller 2016a).

Each of these daily self-portrait projects began independently, but once they started to explode on the web through social media, there was a real urgency, not just by the artists, but by other people on social media commenting on the merits of each project, lauding one artist or another as the "original". Olde English, a sketch comedy troupe, produced another kind of parody of the phenomenon late in 2006 after Ahree Lee, Noah Kalina, and Jonathan Keller had posted their video projects online. In Olde English's video *One Picture Every Day* also known as *Ben takes a photo of himself everyday*

[2] Telephone conversation with the author, 1 November 2019.

[sic] (Figure 12), they characterize some of the ups and downs of Ben's life as he sits in front of his computer, using a time-lapse motif before a thief enters, steals the camera, and runs away with the fictional self-portraitist's (Ben's) project. Then Ben has to race to catch the thief and reclaim his ownership of the project, hereby not so subtly suggesting a race of another kind: for an author to catch a thief of original material and reclaim his or her own rightful title (Olde English Comedy 2006).

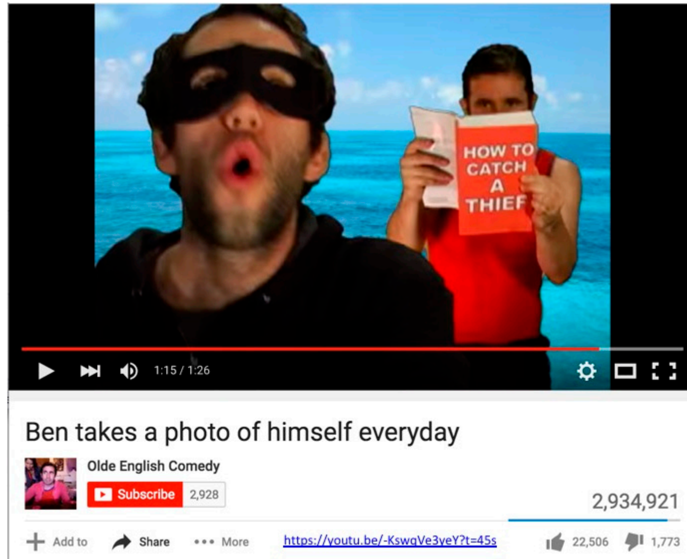


Figure 12. Olde English Comedy troupe assessed the everyday time-lapse self-portrait video phenomenon as a race to catch a thief

Ahree Lee has expressed a similar agitation (which resembles the Olde English parody) from being scooped by Noah. Lee recounts how she first submitted her video to AtomFilms.com, a sort of curated, online short film festival. Lee's work was accepted and when her handler at the website, who also acted as a promoter, posted a link to the video on Digg.com, a social news aggregator with a curated front page, with a headline "Girl takes pic of herself every day for three years", it quickly blew up. Within hours, there was a robust comment thread, but the attention was overwhelming AtomFilms.com's servers, and people were complaining that they could not load the video. Then a Digg.com user, who no doubt thought they were being helpful, went to Ahree Lee's website, found the video, downloaded it, then uploaded the video to his own YouTube account without her consent, where it amassed a million views over the next three days. Lee tells a bizarre story of tracking down the physical address of YouTube in order to remedy this situation, to recover her labor product, her intellectual property, only to arrive at what looked "like an

empty storefront". Indeed, it was the right place and after what sounds like spy games, subterfuge, machinations, and more intrigue, the film was placed under Lee's YouTube account, but the number of accumulated video views was not transferred and her view count began again at zero. Those previous accumulated views that were stripped away, however, were evidence of the value that her work had generated—a currency which was lost and never really restored.[3]

Lee speculates that this loss of documented views gave Noah Kalina an advantage, if only at first a perceived one (Figure 13). As a result of his notoriety, Kalina has been afforded advantages. Lee confesses: "I get frustrated that it's pretty clear that my film was the original and that Noah's was a copy—he freely admits to getting the idea for his film after seeing mine—but that the vast majority of the public still thinks his is the original" (Steffen 2009, p. 17). And when "the media gets it wrong, that becomes the cultural record".[4] Lee thinks that the way that internet culture was set up at the time, "they kind of pitted us against each other", but more so the fact that she was the first to make a time-lapse video of self-portraits, upload it to the internet, and have it go viral, "and then so many people in the media missed that point" is what still stings for her. But since then, scholars and new media historians are already recognizing her significant contribution to the phenomenon, if not the general selfie-history-aware public. And at the top of Noah Kalina's "related videos" playlist is Ahree Lee's *Me* video, an acknowledgement by Kalina. Ahree Lee's video was the template with which Noah Kalina crafted his, complete even down to the soundtrack having been composed by each of their significant-others.

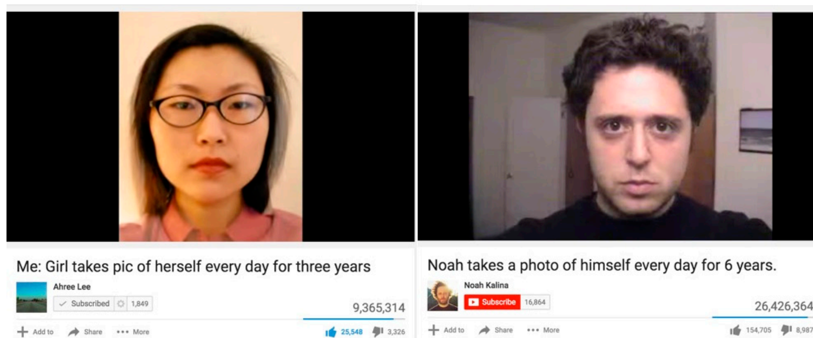


Figure 13. Lee's and Kalina's videos. Lee first shared the concept of a self-portrait time-lapse video but Kalina's enjoyed more attention. Both wear an expression lacking in affect.

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[3] Telephone conversation with the author, 4 December 2019.
[4] Telephone conversation with author. 4 December 2019.

4. Discussion of Influential Forms and Themes

Jill Walker Rettberg eschews the formality of defining or discerning the moment, reason, or rationale to call a self-portrait a *selfie* and matter-of-factly calls the form of what Kalina and Lee do "Serial Selfies" or a "Time-Lapse Selfie". In writing on the subjects, she astutely observes that these projects are "strangely lacking in affect, and expressionless" (Rettberg 2014, p. 38). However, it is not a requirement for a durational self-portrait project to be devoid of smiles and emotion (Gordon 2010; Tasman 2009b), (Figures 14–18).

Figure 14. A meta-*vanitas* meme created by Classical Art Memes, based on Arnold Böcklin's, *Self-Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle*, 1872, Oil on Canvas, 75 × 61 cm (Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin), incorporating symbols under the *memento mori* theme (Classical Art Memes 2016).

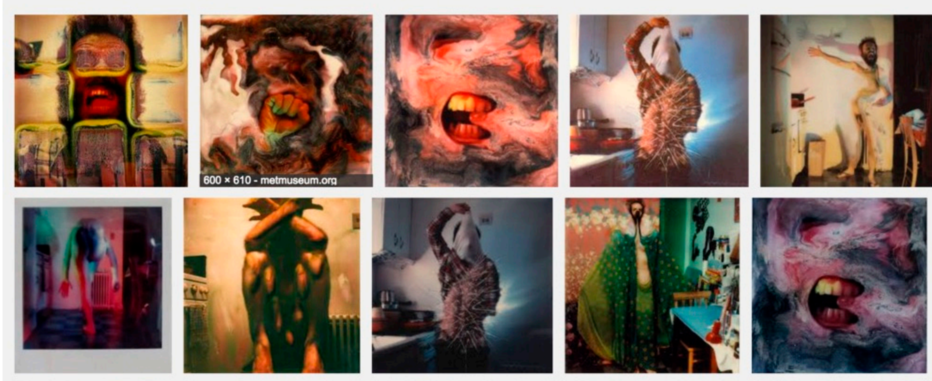

Figure 15. Detail of screen capture of Google image results of Lucas Samaras, *Photo Transformations*, 1973.

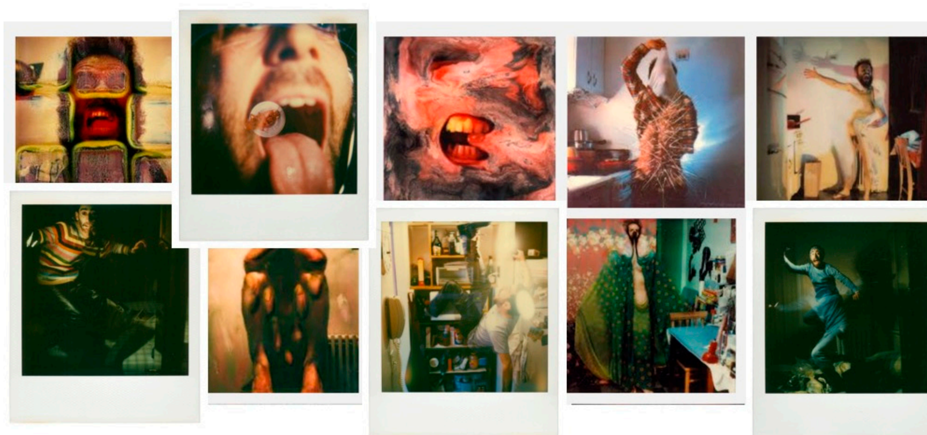

Figure 16. Samaras' *Photo Transformations* overlaid with images of Tasman's *Ten Year Polaroid Project*, 1999. See Appendix A for more context on this visual analysis.

This does mean that for the three natively digital projects, the essential expressive gesture is not made in a single image, like in a contemporary Kardashian selfie or in a Polaroid self-portrait (Figure 3), but a death grimace, a gravity frown, as the years' weight pulls down the corners of our eyes, and time sucks the elasticity from our skin. Stand by, maggots: Hold it—we are not ready for you just yet.

Figure 17. Detail of screen capture of Google image results of Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills*, 1977–1980.

Figure 18. Sherman's *Untitled Fill Stills* overlaid with an image of Tasman's *Ten Year Polaroid Project*, 1999–2009. See Appendix A for more context on this visual analysis.

4.1. Remember You Will Die and Live Forever, Virtually

Ahree Lee refers to standards of beauty, body image, and fleeting youth and describes her whole piece as a kind of *memento mori* (Latin meaning literally, *remember you will die)*, a painting tradition that became popular in the seventeenth century as a reflection of the religiosity that pervaded European society at that time (see Figure 14). The inclusion of a skull is the most common symbol as artists have continued exploring these themes, but references to art and music within compositions can also serve as reminders that culture is a diversion from the inevitable. On her website, Lee contextualizes this work: "in the *vanitas* tradition of still life painting, implicit in *Me* is the ephemerality of physical appearance and the inevitability of aging and mortality" (Lee 2006b).

All three of the natively digital durational self-portrait project artists, Lee, Kalina, and Keller, have said that they will continue until they die. But I rejected and reject those parameters, preferring to distinguish a compulsion or obsession with a distinct and intentional piece of performance art. I told art critic Mary Louise Schumacher and radio host Dick Gordon at the time (of concluding) that "ten years is a substantial amount of time", and I still "wanted to reflect and process the project" (Schumacher 2009b; Gordon 2010). I told people in the comment section on the Vimeo video that I stopped at ten years and one day because I wanted to "'Stick the landing', as in gymnastics, when an athlete is ending his or her routine and must land on his or her feet without stepping forward or back" (Tasman 2009c).

Luis Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez concluded that since these (Keller, Kalina, and Lee) pieces will not be complete until the death of the authors, they have more to say about the potential for immortality in a digital, virtual after-life on the web. In his articles published in their original Spanish, "La muerte dejará de ser absoluta" or "'Death will cease to be absolute': Post-photography, cinematic time and prosthetic culture 2.0 in the era of digital image" (Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez, Luis 2014), and "A life in images: the daily photo projects and the rhetoric of the moment" (Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez 2009, p. 10), he suggests that the artists involved in time-lapse portraiture projects are making "allegories of life that show the process of aging as a mirror", a novel approach to the traditions of *vanitas* and self-portraits.

Taking the series of still images (e-images) and turning them into a video, Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez contends, creates this new form, "moving *vanitas*" since the sped up progression of time is what shows the aging process. He notes that "Marc Tasman's case is different because it is an already completed project that occupied ten years of his life" (Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez, Luis 2014). For Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez, this work (by Tasman, this author) places it more in the category akin to a religious pilgrimage, since the images and the daily performances, at least in the beginning months and years, dealt with an examination of religious rituals in a literal sense, framing the larger project as an investigation and "experiential of the ritualistic", since making a daily self-portrait is "still a ritual act" (Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez, Luis 2014).

The thread that we might recognize in the contemporary, vernacular selfies is the *vanitas*, the vanity, an unconscious repetition of the vainglorious pose (Figure 2), but also the vanity in the sense of the futility of these kinds of human activities—without the more reflective stance of understanding that youth, the flesh, and life itself are fleeting.

Noah Kalina was initially inspired conceptually by a *vanitas* story line of the 1995 film Smoke, starring Harvey Keitel, in which Keitel's character photographs the same street corner every day. It was, "Absolutely one of the biggest influences in starting this project," Kalina remembers, "being profoundly impacted by that as one of the saddest things I've seen in my life—the profound dedication. Things change

but nothing changes. This particular man has dedicated his life to this one thing, and as a result he really can't do anything else".[5]

In fact, in releasing a video in January of 2020, Kalina encapsulates twenty years of daily self-portraits (ibid.). The logistics of releasing a final video capturing all of the self-portraits on the day of one's death will present a novel challenge for the photographers who plan to continue until death.

4.2. Influence of the Neo-Avant-Garde

The *vanitas* theme, evident and familiar in this kind of thinking, seems to be a part of all four of these durational self-portraitists. But so is the influence of conceptual artists and works preceding the post-modern, digital, proto-selfie, and social media era, regardless of whether self-portraiture or even imaging is used. The influence of the Neo-Avant-Garde on these works, whether direct, or indirectly through other cultural forms, can be detected in the performative, durational, and endurance-oriented qualities, as well as the dissolution of the barriers between art and life, and the personal, secure, and private body with more vulnerable public presentations and identity revelations. Below is a brief catalog of Neo-Avant-Garde artists as a way of recognizing the forbearance of some of the inherent qualities that we may take for granted in durational self-portrait works.

The conceptual artist On Kawara's works focused on longevity and time, where long series of consecutive dates and times are depicted in paintings, readings, and printed materials such as *Today*, the *I Got Up*, *I Met*, and *I Went* Postcards, *I Am Still Alive*, and *One Million Years.* "The temporal content" of his work and the "self-observation", specifically the graphic representation of the "passage of time", can be seen as a significant piece of this "life is fleeting" motif (Weiss and Wheeler 2014).

The more visceral works of Chris Burden, Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann, and Alan Kaprow weigh heavily on this *vanitas–memento mori* durational-endurance thread too. They used time as a medium and the body as material to push beyond basic categorizations of art as objects, creating works that were durational performances. As forebearers of the Neo-Avant-Garde of the 1960s, this group of artists challenged the form of contemporary art including its content related to the body, "flesh as material", the traditions of representation itself, and the intersections of art and life (Martin 2017). Chris Burden, in a particularly plainspoken way, with his playful, outlandish nature, sometimes violent, sometimes whimsical, requiring endurance (of pain or time), strength, or a foolish disregard for comfort or safety, through a simple epiphany, "figured out that the act of doing something in itself could be art, and that's how I got to do performances and call them art" (Dewey and Marrinan 2016).

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[5] Telephone conversation with the author, 1 November 2019.

Kaprow recognized that "developments within modernism itself led to art's dissolution into its life sources". When one recognizes the potential mindfulness required to both make art and perform daily rituals, in his case, brushing one's teeth, it becomes easier to imagine the shift in art away from "the specialized object in the gallery to the real urban environment; to the real body and mind; to communications technology; and to remote natural regions of the ocean, sky, and desert". In asserting a tenant of the avant-garde ideology of the time, he uncovered a paradox for artists content, or too comfortable with status quo forms of art medium: "an artist concerned with lifelike art is an artist who does and does not make art" (Kaprow and Kelley 2003, p. 222).

More focused on the photographic medium but still very much grounded in performance, Lucas Samaras, who participated in Kaprow's Happenings (Stiles and Selz 2012), was helping to dissolve more of these lines between the gallery or high art and the real or everyday. His *AutoPolaroid* (1969–1971) and *Photo Transformations* (1973–1976) series highlight the plasticity (and banality) of the Polaroid medium and invite, through influence, another generation of photographers to perform in front of the camera (Figure 15). Because of the way that he punched, gouged, or smeared the wet dye prints of the instant film's emulsions while the images were latent and developing, the action or performance of making the image did not end once the shutter was released. Imagine the nude male figure leaping up from the in-frame composition to grab the film as the camera spits it out, then furiously working in the time and space of not more than a couple of minutes in that 3.1 inch square film surface (Kino 2006).

An homage to this kind of raw body work is certainly owed in part to Schneemann and Abramović, who blazed more precarious trails considering the heightened risk for female artists at the time to both their reputations and their personal security. The 1974 Abramović performance *Rhythm 0* invited audience members to participate by doing anything they wanted to the artist while she stood totally passive for six hours. It ended abruptly when a man took a gun from one of the seventy two objects (including a Polaroid camera, among other things like chains, a feather boa, razor blades, a bullet, olive oil, and roses) from a nearby table and held it to the artist's neck (Westcott 2010; Brockes 2014).

As an act mindful of the desire to eradicate gender bias from the art world, Schneemann would begin to use the term "art istorical" [sic] in her writings, rather than "historical". In a 1974 essay titled "Woman in the Year 2000", she wrote, "By the year 2000 no young woman artist will meet the determined resistance and constant undermining which I endured as a student" (Tripp 1974, p. 127). Schneemann attended Bard College and eventually graduated in 1959 but was expelled earlier for "moral turpitude" which she gathers was related to the nude self-portraits that she had been making (Martin 2017).

4.3. Post-Modern Performative Shift

The identity-fluid works that Samaras was making in the mid-seventies, followed soon thereafter by Cindy Sherman, were a highly performative shift from the *autorretratos* produced since the Renaissance (but reminiscent of biblical narratives), in the plastic arts (painting, sculpture, photography). These performances were not so much durational and interactive in their conceit, but more tightly focused on the photographic and film medium, processes, and materiality.

A marker of post-modernity (whose central project in the last quarter of the 20th century, along with what Kaprow articulated, was to critique modernity and all of its presupposed norms) (Kaprow and Kelley 2003), as seen in Cindy Sherman's series of photographs entitled *Untitled Film Stills*, is the mutable self or unfixed identity (Figure 17). Sherman is the sole figure appearing in each of the more than seventy photographs though they are not, by her own account, self-portraits. Henry M. Sayre describes the work: "Each of these pieces individually evokes a larger narrative ... [However] in the series they posit the self as a compendium of poses derived from film, fashion and advertising ... " (Sayre 1989, p. 62). Sherman's innovation of this kind of post-modern performance of the self is, and is made possible through "(the indefinite multiplication) of representation, from the representation of representation" (Derrida and Spivak 1976, p. 163), which develops a "series of possible selves that we can choose among, act out, discard" (Sayre 1989, p. 65). Jacque Derrida's "indefinite multiplication of representation", taken to a new level by Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, goes to a new extreme, first by thousands of Polaroids or digital daily self-portraits, then time-lapse videos, then to an exponential factor when thousands, then millions, acquire technology to facilitate this practice.

These are the kinds of performances that are familiar on social media today: our best selves or our most outraged; our happiest, most beautiful, likable, sharable selves or our most #mood self.

4.4. Technical Developments for a Social Medium

Some of the forces that made these time-lapse projects possible, in particular the natively digital projects of Kalina, Keller, and Lee, were the "lower-cost digital cameras and picture-taking cellphones [which] have helped boost the number of pictures snapped each year into the billions" (Sarno 2007). Kalina remembered that one of the things that inspired and made his project possible was his first digital camera in 1999 with "the screen that flipped around. 'Oh, I can just put my nose right in the middle of the frame and take the same photo every day.'"[6] Paired with

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[6] Telephone conversation with the author, 1 November 2019.

the proliferation of image and video distribution sites around the middle of the first decade of the 2000s like YouTube and Flickr, the time-lapse video phenomenon became a juggernaut, pioneered by these artists, but copied countless times by all manner of amateur and aspiring producers.

Tagg (1988) and Batchen (1997, 2004) have argued on the subject of the invention and uses of photography, that the interaction between market forces and major social changes, like the Industrial Revolution and the spread of democracy as a political system, result in the desire for new kinds of technology and accompanying changes in society.

Writing about the history of photography and the "democratization of the image", Tagg and Batchen separately present instrumentalist arguments for the invention and spread of photography in the mid-nineteenth century. Batchen pursues the narrative that people wanted to have images of themselves, as a way of elevating and asserting their social status, and the only way they could do that before 1839, when commercial photographic processes became available, was to have painted portraits made (Batchen 1997).

The invention of photography and the commercialization of the Daguerreotype process allowed people that descended from the peasant farmer class to imagine, through the new technology of portraiture, that they could ascend the caste system (Tasman 2017). "By this means, photography allowed the middle classes to adopt a cheaper version of the accoutrements of the rich" (Batchen 2004, p. 34). Albeit in a different milieu, selfies and social media afford "the average citizen" opportunities to ascend in social and economic class, to become a social media influencer, and to mingle with another kind of upper class group, the celebrity.

A McLuhan-esque contextualization may run counter to this premise and rationale for how the selfie came into being. As technological determinists, we would view and understand that possible outcomes of innovation, invention, technological advances, or new media are the unforeseen consequences in society, including the "change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (McLuhan 1994, p. 170). The selfie may be seen as one such unforeseen consequence of the invention of photography, but part of a much larger and largely unrecognizable confluence and comingling of industries. McLuhan did go on to write about the camera's potential to objectify—how photography multiplies and spreads images of people to the point that they become merchandise (ibid.). He was referring to celebrities made famous by the motion picture industry, but we no longer have to imagine how the selfie phenomenon multiplies and spreads people's portraits, even more so with all manner of social and economic consequences, seen or unseen. One could simply become famous for no apparent reason, other than developing an enormous Instagram following for one's provocative selfies (Figure 2).

The smartphone app Instagram, which capitalized on the nostalgia for the older design aesthetic of Polaroids, helped phone manufacturers to realize the need and potential market for phones with front-facing cameras. As mobile communication continues to become an increasingly visual medium, smartphone designers and manufacturers are investing in more advanced camera hardware and imaging technologies (Bajarin 2017).

Without a venue to exhibit, a serial self-portraitist working in pre-social media times was akin to a light bulb inventor without the infrastructure of an electric grid to bring power to the streets and homes where (audiences, users, etc.) people lived.

4.5. Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

In the year 2000, as I was writing a thesis to accompany the MFA exhibition of the first nine months of what would eventually become a ten-year project, I used Erving Goffman's work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* as an organizing theme for the *Ten Year Polaroid Project* (Figures 19 and 20). I was drawn to the way in which he defined the term of performance as "all the activity of an individual during a period [of] continuous presence before a particular set of observers" (Goffman 1959, p. 32). I would go on to contextualize the daily self-portraiture act as a ritualized performance and anticipate an audience that would meet up with the work in a yet to be determined time, place, and media platform. "The camera becomes an implied observer, and the Polaroid serves as documentation of the performance that will eventually meet with live viewers" (Tasman 2000, p. 5). At the start, in particular, I was interested in the idea of ritualizing the performance of making self-portraits, and then interested in making self-portraits of rituals, performing characters from folklore and family narratives. Arthur Frank, in 1995, in *The Wounded Storyteller* wrote that the "postmodern memoirist" creates to "discover what other selves were operating" (Frank 1995, p. 70), and this idea, like Sherman's, Derrida's, and Sayre's ideas of other possible selves, intrigued and motivated me to commit for a substantial period of time—a decade.

At the conclusion of that decade, I exhibited the nearly 5000 Polaroid photographs as part of the 2010 Wisconsin Triennial at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (Figure 1). The resulting installation covered a 36 by 12 foot area of a wall in the museum, the top of the installation reaching 16 feet high. This inspired the factoid: *If laid down in linear space, setting the Polaroids side by side, they would stretch over a quarter of a mile.* I recorded a brief statement as part of an audio tour in the museum for the work. This following statement about the *Ten Year Polaroid Project* also became the soundtrack for a video work, the visual piece being a time-lapse of all of the Polaroid self-portraits condensed into 90 seconds, which appeared as an online multimedia artifact accompanying the book *Reframing Photography: Theory and Practice* (Modrak and Anthes 2010), called "About Polaroids:"

> I began the 10-year Polaroid project really out of necessity because I moved from a place where I had a spacious art studio into a small apartment where there was no place to make big art. I wanted to continue a daily art practice and I was serious about making art every single day. I saw these Polaroids self-portraits as a kind of sketch book for investigating ideas that I was interested in. Ideas that had to do with identity, narratives, and storytelling. Especially family stories. My mother never knew her grandparents. She never even saw photographs of them. They were killed in World War II and there weren't any surviving photographs of them. So, I became interested in this idea of seeing other possible selves, finding lost relatives, or imagining alternate possibilities for surviving by performing for the camera. I see this work very much as a performance art piece that has to do with endurance, perseverance, and survival. That is, the act of making a photograph every single day for ten years— 3654 consecutive days—that's ten years and one day. And these images, this is the physical evidence. These images are the fruits of the project that you see before you. (Tasman cited in Modrak 2010)

Made with a film camera and produced with instant film makes it like most artifacts that existed before the Internet, meaning that for the Polaroids to be viewed and shared on the Internet, they had to be made digital—digitized. *Digital pics or it didn't happen.*

Figure 19. All daily Polaroid self-portraits from the *Ten Year Polaroid Project*, digitized and arranged chronologically in a 100 × 50 grid, 24 July 1999–24 July 2009. Source: Author's work.

Figure 20. "Every New Year's Day" (1 January) 2000–2009 from the *Ten Year Polaroid Project*. 1 January 2009 appears larger on the left. 2000–2008 appear in the 3 × 3 grid, left to right, top to bottom. Source: Author's work.

4.6. Digital Artifacts and Tangible Media

In their 2012 report, *Digital_Humanities*, Burdick, Drucker, Lunenfeld, Pressnerm and Schapp name the essential activities that are the building blocks that Digital Humanities depend upon: "digitization, classification, description and metadata, organization, and navigation" (Burdick et al. 2012, p. 17). In 2009, as the image acquisition phase of the *Ten Year Polaroid Project* was coming to a close, my research assistants and I did just that: digitize the entire body of Polaroid photos; tag them with meta data, like the color of my shirt, etc.; sort them into groupings; create different versions, create different kinds of videos (Figures 19 and 20).

Burdick et al. in *Digital_Humanities* emphasize that one of the "strongest attributes of the field is that the iterative versioning of digital projects fosters experimentation, risk-taking, redefinition, and sometimes failure. It is important that we do not short-circuit this experimental process in the rush to normalize practices, standardize methodologies, and define evaluative metrics" (ibid., p. 21).

Keller and I wrote back and forth a few times, last corresponding around the time of the show at MMoCA in 2010. He wished me congratulations about a year before and shared with me his view on the "unique aspect to the work, which is every image has a physical component that a digital archive doesn't. There is something tangibly powerful about seeing the Polaroids in person that a large print of 3500+

images lacks. I wouldn't want to lose that quality".[7] If for Keller, Kalina, and Lee, the essential gesture and *memento mori* symbol is the skull, their own skull under the flesh, for me, my "foolish" *vanitas* metaphor is the Polaroid itself. The physical container of that instant photo that degrades over time is the corporeal reminder that bodies, whether they are human animals or tangible media, do not last forever. We all have a shelf life and expiration dates: *memento mori*.

4.7. Instagram in the New Polaroid

In tracing a closer contour of the origins of the forms and practices of the selfie, the medium that is most familiar in its vernacular use is the Polaroid camera and instant film (Figure 21). Again in 2000, I wrote about The Polaroid object:

> "The (nearly) instantaneous nature of the film/photographic object creates a [finite] period, in which the image is anticipated, realized, analyzed, considered, then re-performed. It is a curious alternative to looking at oneself in the mirror. In everyday uses, the Polaroid records banality: Birthday cakes, used cars, found dogs, homemade pornography. It is a nice little package. One can handle it without getting finger-prints on its shiny surface. It is a beautiful object … It was once an act of defiance against Modernism, but now a Polaroid looks like the medium of the post-modern, slacker artist". (Tasman 2000, p. 40)

Let some of those word-images resonate in the context of a touch screen smart-phone: "It is a beautiful object. Finger-prints on its shiny surface. It is a beautiful object." (Tasman 2000, p. 40).

Styled after the future–retro hip aesthetic of Polaroid, with its rainbow colors, faux-leather-covered camera icon, and default square image format, Instagram remediated the Polaroid. The Polaroid, a direct and venerable ancestor of Instagram, bears an important and significant role as a medium which a selfie remediates: the analog instant self-portrait, to the digital instant self-portrait. With its primary *modus operandi* seemingly to propagate selfies, it is also the foremost repository of selfies. Instagram, with over 403 million posts tagged #selfie (as of writing this paper), is the most prominent digital platform for selfies, where "we portray the self we want to share (and perhaps want to be) through the images we take" (Deeb-Swihart et al. 2017, p. 1). In addition to this popular prominence, Instagram has become the fertile selfie studying ground for scholars for "its widespread, cross-cultural usage" and "unlike many other photo-sharing sites, Instagram has a publicly available, documented API" (ibid.).

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[7] Email by Jonathan JK. Keller to Marc Tasman on 16 April 2009.

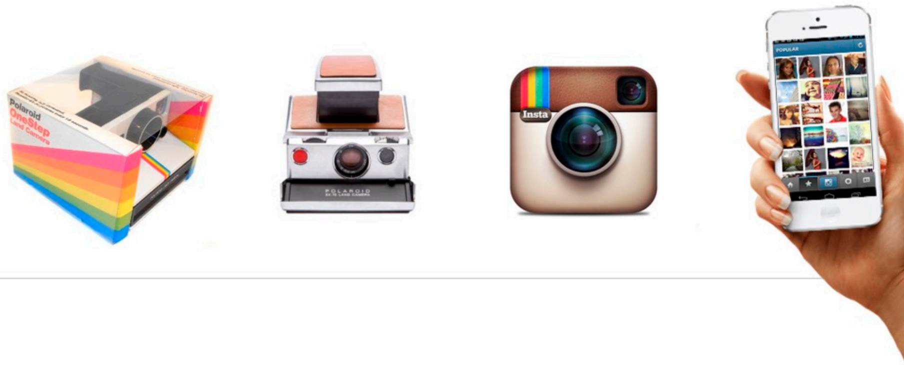

Figure 21. Polaroid's branding and design aesthetics were mimicked in Instagram's icon and interface. Source: Screen capture compilation by author.

Two decades ago, I also gravitated then to Frank's categorization of a "chaos narrative" and see it now as what social media asks of its most addicted, compulsive performers. "In telling the events of one's life, events are mediated by the telling. But in the lived chaos there is no mediation, only immediacy" (Frank 1995, p. 70).

On social media, however much "lived chaos" is shared, it is still mediated, if only barely, and maybe simply for the sake of performing the anticipation and anxiety of Grusin's "pre-mediation". The audiences for any shared, self-portrait, self-confession, or selfie can begin interacting nearly instantaneously, and the author of the post then becomes audience, too, watching for likes, comments, and other forms of measured digital engagement and attention—the stuff of which social media capitalization is made. The "instant" quality of Polaroid film and any other media publishing *before* the kinds of digital networks that gave rise to Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter is laughable when compared to more contemporary, *after* Web 2.0 norms of "instant gratification", and "attention span". As a product of the quickening pace, "the self" began to inhabit a larger share of the content that online audiences or our social media communities were drawn to.

5. Conclusions

These time-lapse durational self-portraits helped to spread and normalize that practice of making and sharing self-portraits. They viralized and popularized what had been the material of esoteric performance art of interest only to the elite, a narrow slice of the general population, or students and scholars in art schools and institutions. The elevation of the banal, everyday performances by the conceptual and performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s pushed forward, scaffolded, and encouraged a new generation of artists to experiment both with the concepts and with the new digital media. More powerfully, the artists' experiments with digital networks would

explode these notions and practices of performativity into a fine mist that floated over the subsequent generation like a hovering fog, eventually settling on every surface of every person's social media accounts and mobile devices.

Noah Kalina noticed this marked change in attitude with respect to self-portraits. "There was clearly a shift where it becomes socially acceptable to take a photo of yourself obsessively, where for a long time I think it was considered really weird." Before he made and shared a time-lapse video of the self-portraits, he had a website that contained still images of these self-portraits. As various technology, art, and culture blogs would share his project, and it gained in popularity, he would periodically be subject to spates of unsolicited "hate e-mail" in which people would call him "a narcissistic asshole". "It [the self-portrait project] was almost universally despised." It was not until he "put out a time-lapse [video] with music in 2006 that it completely flipped, that it became almost universally praised".[8]

This group of four proto-selfie-ists or durational self-portrait performance artists, through their competitiveness, were racing toward something—each with their own goals and motivations, but none of them with the explicit goal of "inventing the selfie". Rather, each contributed something engaging, for one another to react to and reflect upon, something tangible and something ephemeral, in each artist and as a part of each project, something ethereal and something directly traceable to the selfie phenomenon.

Kalina also reveled in the technical process and gadgetry of the time. He used a small number of cameras over the first twenty years, but aside from the inspiration from the motion picture Smoke, he says that "one of the things that made me do this in the first place was the [camera] screen that flipped around." It was an obsession with the burgeoning digital imaging technology. "When I saw it I was completely blown away—I had to have it, there was nothing else in my mind. Somehow I recognized that that was the future".[9]

Ahree Lee sees the connection between her durational self-portrait project (which is still going on) and her current work through archival methodologies and data bodies. In her recent work, using a loom to make weavings, she recollects and re-examines the undervalued and underrepresented roles of women and their contributions in the histories of computing and related technologies. Using her personal data like a steampunk activity tracker, she has quantified her time spent engaged in activities from six in the morning until midnight, filling in categories like "sleep, personal care, housework, childcare, anything food related, art practice,

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8 Telephone conversation with the author, 1 November 2019.
9 Telephone conversation with the author, 1 November 2019.

other work that's not art practice or domestic labor, and leisure".[10] These activities, color-coded and blocked out on spreadsheets, become the template for her weavings, using different color threads for each activity category. This labor, most often uncompensated and disproportionately executed by women, "supports all the other industrialized capitalist labor, because people can't go to work if they don't have clean clothes, you know, breakfast in their stomachs—all those other things that we take for granted which has to happen in order for the 'time-clock' kind of labor to done" (ibid.).

Her aspiration for the work is to show that traditional labor, or activity not seen as part of the industrialized capitalist system, which has been devalued, has potential to be reclaimed, re-captured, and revalued by these kinds of mindful-making-creative practices overlaid or interwoven into daily routines. "It's a next step in the daily self-portrait. By doing this one small act per day, doing it consistently over a period of year, it adds up".[11]

The selfie, in all of its manifestations, can be seen as part of a larger ecosystem of the digitized network, of new labor economies, and technophile culture, and in it are more social issues with which we will have to wrestle. Even our grandmothers, even our newborn children have to negotiate the new rules for creating and expressing affinities and identities in these new milieus, not to mention the very real problem of storing, preserving, and archiving aging media and keeping them alive. It is in and a part of these negotiations that, regardless of whether we are trying to speak directly to the human condition, of alienation or connection, or the passage of time, we find reconciliation of the fact that we—our lives—have a beginning and an ending. Even when faced with the stark futility conjured by *momento mori*, as an individual participant in civilization and historical epochs, one can still try to do something with and within in our lives: something real, for the sake of searching, presenting a gift, showing some kindness, generating some kind of new knowledge, or creating some structure of support that others could build upon. Even a selfie has hope for containing this kind of potential.

Appendix A

The similarities of the author's Polaroid self-portraits and other selfies or self-portraits from Kim Kardashian-West, Lucas Samaras, and Cindy Sherman are described below.

In the case of Kardashian-West, whose work was made after the author's, one can see not necessarily the influence, because the work would be unlikely to be known

[10] Telephone conversation with the author. 4 December 2019.
[11] Telephone conversation with the author. 4 December 2019.

to Kardashian-West, but how certain subject matter, content, position of the body, composition and lighting, are universal, rather than particular. Here (Figure 3), we can see similarities in bare shoulders, stuck-out tongues, more exposed flesh, mirror selfies, and a *je ne sais quois* expression with a particular tilt of the head and an upward gaze through long lashes back at the viewer.

In the case of this author's work compared with the Samaras Polaroids (Figure 16), the influence is evident and intentional in some instances, coincidental in others, this time, highlighting the use of the (bearded) male body, extreme positions, mouth wide open, with distortions or manipulations to the photographic material or by using multiple exposures to create supernatural situations such as flying or climbing the walls.

In the case of comparing this author's work with that of Sherman (Figure 18), again, the influence is evident and intentional, using costumes, similar angles of view, and the setting of skyscrapered cityscapes to pay homage to and directly reference Sherman's landmark work.

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Reflecting on Life on the Internet: Artistic Webcam Performances from 1997 to 2017

Tina Sauerlaender

Abstract: This essay introduces webcam-based artworks by Ana Voog, Isaac Leung, Petra Cortright, Ann Hirsch, Kate Durbin and Molly Soda. It discusses common features of webcam art, artistic motives, the performance of online identities, interaction with the audience, oversharing and censorship, as well as the major shifts caused by the Web 2.0 and its effects on webcam art. Since the commercial launch of the webcam in 1994, users have been able to connect their real-life visual appearance to their online identity. Ana Voog broadcasted twenty-four hours a day live from home. Isaac Leung explored cyber sex, Ann Hirsch reflects on female online self-representation, and Kate Durbin performs as a cam girl on the video sex chat platform Cam4. Molly Soda engages with the expression of emotions. Petra Cortright checks out the default effects of her webcam and uploads the video to YouTube with misleading tags. Whereas early webcam artists explored the self-broadcasting of daily life activities, including nakedness and sex as a part of daily life, the next generation of webcam artists had a different approach. They used the webcam and the new possibilities of the Web 2.0 to explore different online platforms, their audiences, their social norms, and forms of self-presentation in the digital age.

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1. Introduction

This essay introduces webcam-based artworks by the artists Ana Voog, Isaac Leung, Ann Hirsch, Kate Durbin, Petra Cortright, and Molly Soda. Based on their examples, this article aims to give an overview of the different artistic uses of the webcam—from when artists first used the webcam artistically to the rise of art on social media. The artists were selected to reveal a variety of artistic uses of the webcam and to focus on artistic practices that thematize personal and private situations. Ana Voog broadcasts herself 24/7; Isaac Leung artistically researches sexual online interaction. Petra Cortright scrutinizes the user structures of YouTube; Ann Hirsch performs *Caroline* and broadcasts from her bedroom. Kate Durbin performs in a live sex chatroom; Molly Soda focuses on showcasing emotions that are often excluded from public online communication. Ana Voog and Isaac Leung are representatives of the early days of the internet during the 1990s, whereas the works

introduced by Petra Cortight and Ann Hirsch belong to the early days of Web 2.0.[1] The artworks by Kate Durbin and Molly Soda belong to a later Web 2.0 generation after 2010. After introducing the artworks, this essay discusses common features, artistic motives, the understandings of online identities, notions of online interaction, the principle of oversharing, and the parameters of censorship. The concluding section "From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0" argues the differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 by summarizing the results and comparing Theresa M. Senft's 1990s definition of the "webcam gaze" with the parameters and developments of the Web 2.0 artists. It will further give an outlook on the use of the webcam after 2017.

2. The Beginnings

During the early 1990s, social communication on the internet mainly happened in chat rooms. People met in so-called multi-user dungeons (MUDs) or domains to communicate online. MUDs provided an anonymous space where users communicated by exchanging texts. The users chose online monikers that allowed them to construct and perform any role or identity. No user could verify the identity of others, i.e., matching it to a particular person that existed in real life (IRL). Users could explore lifestyles or parts of their identities they were not able to explore IRL due to societal constraints. They could find like-minded people or escape real-life (RL) disabilities or discrimination. MUD users describe their online appearances with sentences like "you are who you pretend to be" (Anonymous in Turkle 1995, p. 12) or you "can be whoever you want to be" (Anonymous in Turkle 1995, p. 184). MUDs were later superseded by more widely-used services like ICQ (homophonic abbreviation for "I seek you", since 1996) or AIM (AOL Instant Messenger, 1997–2017).[2] In these early chat rooms, communication remained mainly text-based, although it was possible to exchange photos on messenger platforms. Usernames and online appearances were mostly anonymous and detached from IRL identities. The webcam, commercially launched in 1994, was connected to a computer and enabled its users to broadcast images to a predefined website in real

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1 Web 2.0 describes the structure and applicability of the Internet after major change processes that took place during the early 2000s. These include, above all, the general emergence of a large number of broadband Internet connections, which enabled a higher data transmission rate. In addition, the Asynchronous JavaScript and XML (Ajax) enables the automated loading of new page content without having to reload the entire page. Both enable faster and more flexible handling of the Internet by its users and a wider distribution of images, which require much more data volume than text. For this reason, the Internet has evolved from a pure information dissemination tool and private, anonymous, chat rooms towards a platform for public exchange. For further information on the Web 2.0, please see, for example: oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html.

2 Unlike MUDs, messenger services were also extensively used to communicate within one's RL social circle of friends. Users shared their messenger identities semi-publicly, for example, with friends at school.

time. In the early years, such streams were not smooth high-definition video, but instead static and pixelated images that refreshed every few seconds. However, broadcasting oneself with the webcam to the internet allowed users to connect their real-life appearance (yet not necessarily their RL identity) with their online identity. Most broadcasters streamed their private affairs from the intimacy of their own homes. As self-broadcasters, they were in control of their own stream and their own online self-image. The online audience, which usually remained anonymous, was able to communicate with the broadcaster via a comment section. At that time, the webcam embodied a window into the personal life that promised "authentic" visual content (Zapp 2006). In my opinion, the term "authentic" does not signify the lack of staged actions, but instead indicates that the content was understood as the self-broadcaster's lived experience and published live and unedited. This marks the first step of the private spilling-over into the public domain.

3. Ana Voog

Ana Voog, musician, performer and visual artist, began her project *anacam* on 22 August 1997. She was the first to call her practice webcamming art, using the webcam as an artistic tool (Senft 2008, p. 16). *Anacam* broadcasted live from Ana Voog's home twenty-four hours a day.[3] She streamed her daily activities such as cooking dinner, vacuuming, having sex, chatting with cam-watchers, and hosting visitors. Livecasts in this manner appeared in stark contrast to conventional TV programming at the time, which was perceived as comparatively stiff, scripted, and restrained. Besides sharing her personal daily life, Ana Voog also incorporated performance art and visual experimentation. Performance researcher Theresa Senft describes her first impressions of *anacam*: "Ana striking arty poses; Ana licking the window; Ana's eyeball; ... Ana with a pair of scissors across her pubis sic; Ana's hands, folded in prayer" (Senft 2008, p. 39). While sex and nudity (including masturbation and intercourse) appeared only occasionally on her live webcam, Ana Voog specifically did not omit them, because she considers these activities part of life. Voog stated, the "site isn't about sex, but sexuality and SENSUALITY sic" (Voog 2007). She was very successful, with up to 7 million people a day watching *anacam*. In total, *anacam* was live online 24/7 for 12 years, until August 2009.

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[3] By 1996, Jennifer Ringley had already started her webcam, but she did not consider herself an artist. Jennifer Ringley's aim was to show a glimpse beyond the staged and polished lives on TV. She wanted to show reality as it simply could not be conveyed from within a studio. (Senft 2008, p. 16).

4. Isaac Leung

Isaac Leung used the webcam as a core tool for his artistic research of interpersonal sexual interaction on a chat platform. *The Impossibility of Having Sex With 500 Men in a Month—I'm an Oriental Whore* (2003) is a cyber-sexual exploration which documents a month-long marathon of online sexual encounters. Isaac Leung was interested in exploring questions like "is Internet sex real? And is Internet space private?" (Issacs 2002). Leung conducted his research project on gay internet sex for his participation in the thesis exhibition of the School of the Art Institute Chicago (SAIC), causing significant controversy at the school (ibid.). In contrast to Jennifer Ringley or Ana Voog, Leung did not webcam his everyday life to an anonymous online audience. He conducted one-on-one chats. There, Leung took on the persona of an 18-year-old Japanese male (he is Chinese and was 23 at the time), and chatted with 161 men (he did not achieve his goal of 500), an average of 5.4 men per day (DeGenevieve 2010). Leung had created a questionnaire beforehand to ask his partners during their chats about their age, weight, height, ethnicity, location, and preferred sexual position. Leung painstakingly logged the answers in a chart and kept hundreds of explicit screen shots of their chats. He also created transcripts of the chat sessions and a personal journal. He planned to exhibit these materials in his BFA exhibition but was banned from doing so, although the work was already installed. Instead of "de-installing the piece, he covered the entrance to his installation space with paper so that all that was visible was a large lighted sign with the full title" (ibid.).

5. Petra Cortright

Petra Cortright did not use the webcam for interpersonal exchange like Isaac Leung, or for live broadcasting like Ana Voog. Instead, in *VVEBCAM* (2007) Petra Cortright records herself staring at her computer screen and testing the various default visual effects of her 20 USD consumer webcam; overlays of animated pizza slices, flowers, cats or snowflakes ghostly float on her own image (Figure 1). Ceephax and Ceephax's song *Summer Frosby* plays in the background and create a rhythmic interaction between the changing animations and the music. These animations and Petra Cortright's eye movements are the only dynamic elements in this otherwise static scene. Cortright wears almost no makeup and casual, decidedly unsexy clothes. At that time, she experimented with short videos of herself in a bedroom or a private surrounding, which she left primarily unedited when uploading onto YouTube. While uploading the *VVEBCAM* video to YouTube, Cortright adds metadata tags like "tits vagina sex nude boobs britney spears paris hilton" (Soulellis 2019, p. 428)—tags that usually pull a higher ranking in search engines for spam or porn. In this way, she not only addresses the general non-art audience on YouTube, but also explicitly caters to users searching for naked women, celebrities, or both, only to lead them to a video that does not fulfill their expectations. This phenomenon has since been

widely commercially appropriated and become common practice far beyond video platforms; today, it is known and abhorred by internet users as clickbait.

Figure 1. Petra Cortright, VVEBCAM, 2007. Source: Petra Cortright, image used with permission.

6. Ann Hirsch

Video and performance artist Ann Hirsch started her webcam performances after several archetypes of cam girls emerged during the first decade of the webcam: the young girl, the sexy girl or the smart girl. In particular, camming from the bedroom became a significant feature that Ann Hirsch addressed. In her 18-month YouTube project *Scandalishious* (2008–2009), she performed the persona of Caroline, a self-described 18-year-old college freshman "who danced for the camera, vlogged, and interacted with her followers" (NET ART ANTHOLOGY n.d.) (Figure 2). Hirsch's persona Caroline uploaded one video every week of herself dancing sexily, humorously and crazily in ever-changing outfits: often in underwear, short pajamas, bras or bikinis. At its completion, the performance included over one hundred videos, and the YouTube channel had over one million views. Caroline had garnered a wide following. Many of them were other young women, but a large number of them were men and teenage boys" (ibid.). Like Petra Cortright, Ann Hirsch pre-recorded and later uploaded the videos mostly unedited to YouTube, where the platform users could then comment on them.

Figure 2. Ann Hirsch, Scandalishious, 2008-2009. Source: Ann Hirsch, image used with permission.

7. Kate Durbin

Unlike Ann Hirsch and Petra Cortright, Kate Durbin chose to perform live on a sex cam platform. In *Cloud Nine* (2015), Kate Durbin performed as a cam girl on *Cam 4*, an online sex cam platform, and simultaneously streamed the performance to the art platform New Hive (which had commissioned the work) (Figure 3). While the New Hive audience was not able to directly interact with the artist during the performance, the *Cam4* users could, though they were left unaware of the synchronous stream that underpinned the artistic dimension of the performance. For almost two hours, the artist engaged with her viewers via live cam and chat. She asked her audience to play a game and to tell her the craziest thing they had ever done for money. Durbin tried to engage viewers in a conversation about the often-precarious living conditions of female artists, forcing them to compromise their beliefs and bodies to generate money to live. In exchange for each audience confession, she promised to remove more clothing.[4] While at first she retold stories of her friends, she later delved into a 20-minute monologue, confessing her own struggle for making money as a female artist, and stressing the importance of sharing these stories. The *Cam4* audience exchanged thoughts about Kate's situation as a female artist on the

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[4] Kate Durbin wore a color-coordinated wig and make-up in green and turquoise, rendering her a hybrid of a money goddess and a mermaid. Her first layer of clothing was an oversized white shirt with a pair of glittery green lips on it, that eventually gave way to a dollar-note-print tank top. In the end, she wore a bikini top the color of her skin adorned with printed-on nipples and a pair of panties with colored condoms.

chat. They speculated on what kind of artist she was and—quite unexpectedly for a sex-cam audience—thanked her for sharing her story.

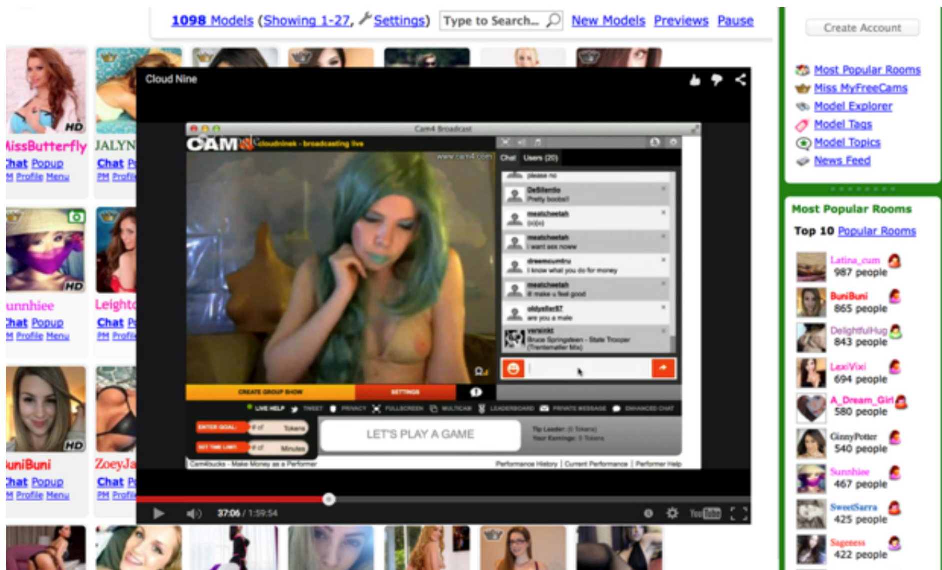

Figure 3. Kate Durbin, Cloud Nine, 2015. Source: Kate Durbin, image used with permission.

8. Molly Soda

Molly Soda started her webcam performances around 2010. Although she posted and still posts across platforms, her vast YouTube and Vimeo archives remain a comprehensive source of her artistic practice since 2010. *Cum N Get It* (2014), *Exile in Camville*, *That's Me In The Corner*, or *Who's Sorry Now* (all 2017) engage with female online self-representation, the theme of cam girls at large, as well as the examination of online interaction and visibility. *That's Me In The Corner* is recorded in landscape format as a live story on Instagram that was later uploaded to Vimeo. Molly Soda wears a carnival-style cowboy hat and a strapless top. She performs several mostly semi-sad pop songs as karaoke versions, singing into a microphone she holds in her hand for almost half an hour straight. One of the songs is *Losing my Religion* by R.E.M., that contains the line that inspired the title "that's me in the corner." Her audience comments and sends hearts in the comment section. *Who's Sorry Now* is a video performance uploaded to Vimeo (Figure 4). The video shows the artist from the webcam perspective of her laptop sitting alone on a bed in a room and crying in the dark, her face only illuminated by the dim glow of the screen. Simultaneously, she uses her smartphone to take selfies. The viewer can hear a film or music playing in the background from her laptop. Talking about her work *Who's*

Sorry Now, she refers to the work as a "webcam performance video piece" (National Portrait Gallery 2019, 00:01) and as a "self-portrait" (National Portrait Gallery 2019, 00:11). Similar to Ana Voog, Molly Soda's work is perceived as very open, personal and authentic. "Instead of creating and mastering different selves, she has committed to publicly extending her IRL self" (Blume 2016, p. 29), which she performs and exposes on different platforms.

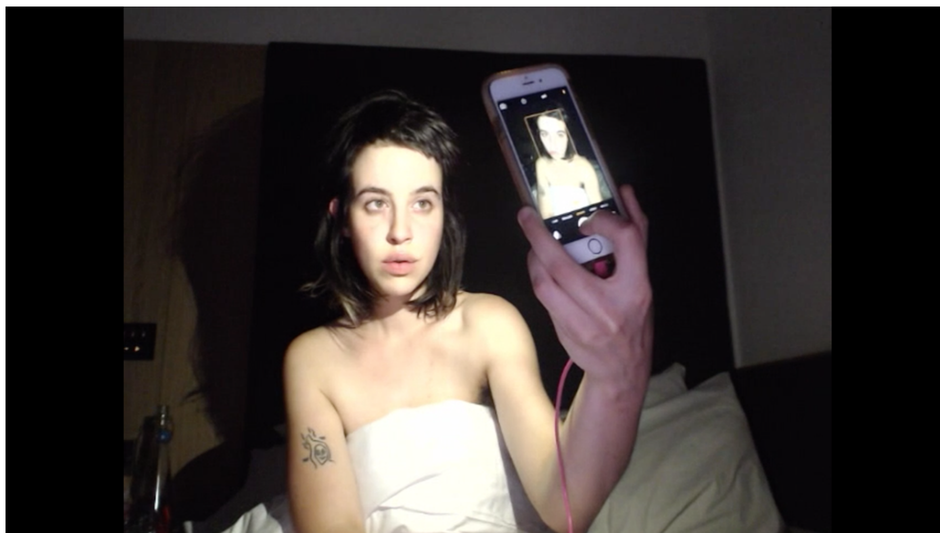

Figure 4. Molly Soda, Who's Sorry Now, 2017. Source: Molly Soda, image used with permission.

9. Common Features

The webcam artists introduced, Ana Voog, Isaac Leung, Petra Cortright, Ann Hirsch, Kate Durbin and Molly Soda, all use a webcam to create their artworks.[5] They all cam from home or another private undisclosed space. All video works appear mostly unedited, and are either live-broadcasted (Voog, Durbin, Soda), prerecorded and then uploaded (Cortright, Hirsch, Soda), or documented as screenshots (Leung).[6] All artists use the perspective of the webcam from the desktop computer, which is either externally connected to a PC, or later installed internally. The protagonists move in front of a steady camera and no cuts upset the uninterrupted flow of action. Only Molly Soda's *That's Me in The Corner* was recorded with a phone camera, as she

[5] The following analysis will refer to the previously introduced artworks only.
[6] Isaac Leung did not publicly live-broadcast, but planned to showcase a documentation of his research in online chatrooms in the context of a subsequent exhibition.

performed on Instagram. Here, the transition from the installed camera on the home computer to a use of the mobile phone camera becomes evident. In comparison to YouTube, Tumblr or other early Web 2.0 platforms, Instagram is designed as an app for use on mobile devices. All artists are in full control of their own image and have a preconceived motif for presenting themselves online, a certain idea of how and why they present themselves. They expose themselves to a public and anonymously opaque online audience in a non-art context like LifeJournal (Voog), a gay sex-chat platform (Leung), YouTube (Cortright, Hirsch, Soda), Cam4 (Durbin), or Instagram Live channel (Soda). The artists interact with an audience or a counterpart in such a way that it forms a crucial part of each piece. They share personal or private information by streaming from their home, showcasing sexual activities (Voog, Leung), checking webcam features (Cortright), dancing scantily clad on the bed (Hirsch), talking about financial issues (Durbin), or singing or crying in front of the camera (Soda).

10. Artistic Motives

The artists describe their motives very differently. Ana Voog replied to the accusation of generating pornographic content by stating that instead, of merely exposing herself, she worked to debunk the preconceptions and prejudice she had encountered, "I wasn't an exhibitionist. I was an anarchist. I wanted to crush all the archetypes people held about me—like thinking I was a dumb blonde, for example—by slowly disintegrating them from within. *If you think I'm dumb, I'll show you that I'm smart*" (Voog 2018). Isaac Leung pursued ontological questions surrounding the intimacy of Internet sex. Petra Cortright described a kind of counter-approach towards the conventional use of YouTube, "I have that attitude that I just can't be bothered . . . YouTube is filled with people making webcam videos of themselves, talking about whatever, journaling their lives, performing for some audience. It was interesting to have my videos on there, which were related to other videos people were doing but they had a lot of very big differences and were very much in their own realm" (Cortright, Petra n.d.). Caroline, Ann Hirsch's online persona, speaks candidly about her intentions in her last video, "No, I am not like, an elitist art bitch, I am just like you, involving myself in the world" (Hirsch 2016, 7:27). Hirsch adds a reflective layer to her purpose by admitting that she also wanted to find out more about the personalities of "cam whores" and their audience, as well as how her own image is being represented online and how it is seen and understood by the online community (Hirsch 2016). Similar to Leung, she considers her channel a research experiment about online culture in which she situates herself. Kate Durbin, who performed under the synonym *cloudninek*, explained her intention towards the end of the performance, "I was interested in bringing together two communities, the web cam community and the audience there, as well as the audience in the art

world" (Durbin 2015, 1:59:55). Furthermore, Durbin spoke about raising awareness for the precarious working conditions she and fellow female artists are subjected to, which share a lot of similarities with precarious situations cam girls often find themselves in. Molly Soda explained her artistic motives as follows, "There's kind of this need to show my ugliness or this side I normally wouldn't want people to see" (National Portrait Gallery 2019, 00:24). She describes the situation she showcases in *Who's Sorry Now* as real or linked to her IRL self, "I think that piece existed in that time in that moment because that was a very real moment where I was really experiencing those feelings" (ibid., 00:40). Both Molly Soda and Ana Voog openly communicate human behavior that usually would not be carried out publicly, e.g., crying in front of the camera. Kate Durbin made personal confessions in *Cloud Nine* and embedded her statement in a broader context of her staged performance, where she also read the personal stories of friends. Isaac Leung engaged very personally, masturbating in front of his webcam. Regardless of how personal and authentic they may or may not appear, they all pursued a certain purpose with their performance. This purpose determined their behavior in front of the camera. Ana Voog aimed to protest against stereotypes, Leung researched male sexual online interaction, Durbin was concerned with the precarious situation of women, Cortright examined undermining YouTube, Hirsch and Soda explored female roles and self-representation online.

11. Online Identities

All artists had an intention, an agenda of why, what and how to perform beforehand. Although they used different ways of linking their IRL identities to their online self,[7] the displayed identity was always a performed one, taking place according to the preconceived notion, and with the awareness of being filmed to be seen by others. As Molly Soda says, "I think we all present a character online and turning ourselves into these avatars and creating these 2D personas for people to see" (National Portrait Gallery 2019, 00:50). The audience should therefore deduce that they cannot verify if the performed persona aligns or not with the artist's inner self. Or, as Molly Soda puts it, "how am I supposed to know what anyone's intentions are? Sometimes I don't recognize my own intentions until years later" (Soda 2018a). However, since the beginning of the internet, the discrepancy between the IRL and online persona has caused confusion, anxiety and led to the fraud and exploitation of others. In text-based MUDs, many users often assume that the person they have been chatting with may not really be who he or she appears to

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[7] In the discussed works, Petra Cortright uploaded her video to a YouTube account under her IRL name; Molly Soda and Ana Voog used pseudonyms, but link their IRL self to the performed online identity. Isaac Leung, Ann Hirsch and Kate Durbin used fake identities detached from their IRL selves.

be (Turkle 1995). However, the handling of online identities changed when users began to share content under their real names, starting with the launch of Facebook in 2004. Online self-representation of individuals became more ubiquitous and mainstream, even reaching different generations of users. Therefore, the "general perception of online self-construction has shifted towards being 'more real', in the sense that most users' social media identities are largely curated reflections of their IRL selves" (Blume 2016, p. 11). In 2006, LonelyGirl15 performed a 15-year-old girl with strict parents who broadcast from her bedroom at home. In fact, she was an actress, and LonelyGirl15 was written and directed by two film makers. This lead Virginia Heffernan in her *New York Times* article to ask her readers, "Does the revelation of Lonelygirl15's true identity as an actress change the way you will interpret amateur videos online?" (Heffernan 2006). Not only amateur videos, but also artistic works, are generally deemed to be truthful in a similar way. In her 6-month-long Instagram performance *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), Artist Amalia Ulman played the role of a young girl who moves to the big city, undergoes several lifestyle phases like partying, having breast surgery, and nervous breakdowns. In the end, she revealed that the whole narrative she posted about on her Instagram account for half a year was fiction. The BBC referred to her as the "Instagram artist who fooled thousands" (Kinsey 2016). This kind of reaction is symptomatic of how the audience's belief in a story highly depends on the connection between the IRL and online persona. This presumed congruence lets the visual content appear authentic and true. This phenomenon correlates or happens, because photography as a medium is still understood as authentic medium, a direct imprint of reality. Even in the digital age filled with image editing tools, people still fall for the notion that photographic images objectively communicate a truthful reality.[8] Furthermore, the social media platforms of Web 2.0 demand a connection between the IRL and online self and reinforce this notion. Amalia Ulman uses these "conventions of performing self on Instagram to expose how conforming to normative posting patterns makes fiction register as real" (Blume 2016, p. 49). The audience should be aware of the discrepancy between the IRL person and their represented online persona. Artistic online self-presentation is not meant to be a direct expression of the artist's inner self. Instead, it is a tool consciously employed to reflect on social roles and behavior on the internet, as well as to examine the structures, codes and conditions of the internet.

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[8] A photograph has always been a subjective 2D cutout through the lens of the photographer that distorts reality, as objects closer to the camera lens appear bigger.

12. Online Interaction

Webcam artists expose themselves to dialogue with internet users via chat, public comments or direct messaging. Interaction forms a crucial part of their works, because the audience's reactions reveal social settings and patterns of how individuals interact with each other online—conditions that artists aim to explore. In the early days of the internet, webcam artists streamed to their own sites. Ana Voog's broadcast consisted of sequences of low-res photos taken every few seconds. With her performance conveying her IRL identity, she opposed anonymous online communication taking place in online chatrooms like MUDs at the time. With her seemingly open and transparent lifestyle in front of the webcam, Ana Voog gained her audience's trust. She learned about their "secrets, desires, longings, dreams, and struggles of everyone from housewives to diplomats to truck drivers to FBI agents" (Voog 2018). For Isaac Leung, the interpersonal online interaction is at the heart of his research-based installation. In her performance, Petra Cortright reflects the behavior of consumers of online content, by staring at her screen, and watching herself while playing with the digital props of her webcam. She misleads the audience by using tags unrelated to the video's content, causing disappointed, adversarial and outright mean reactions. Those tags directly referred to a certain online audience who consumes objectifying depictions of women as apathetically as Petra Cortright consumes the filters of her webcam. The comments under her videos show just how many users she lured in through explicit tagging, and the enormous audience ready to commodify female celebrities and the naked female body as readily as a consumable product. Ann Hirsch's alter ego Caroline also elicited intense feedback. *Rhizome*'s documentation gives insight into the reactions and response videos to *Scandalishious* (NET ART ANTHOLOGY n.d.). They go beyond the usual text messaging and are reminiscent of fan behavior. Teenagers re-enacted Caroline's dancing; male twenty-somethings showed off their ripped bodies in tight underwear and performed provocative moves close to the camera so their heads would be out of the frame. "Some responses were admiring; some were silly; some were cruel. A lot of the responses were highly personal; her followers would open up about their own inner lives, or share dick pics" (NET ART ANTHOLOGY n.d.). In her video *HATE BOYS*, Caroline addresses how much she hates that men send her dick pics, and are only interested in her body, but not in who she is as a person. Kate Durbin, who performed on a platform that mostly features free amateur nude and sexual performances, received similar reactions. Some of the first comments were "iwant youmgreen lips on m ydick" or "show tits plz" (User comments in Durbin 2015, 00:07:47). Given the platform and the anonymity of the users, these reactions do not surprise, yet still shock. They reveal how cam girls are degraded to consumable objects and are treated without respect. The commenters did not even bother to read the question Kate Durbin posed in the beginning. The kinds of reactions Durbin faced—and that Jennifer Ringley, Ana Voog

or Ann Hirsch as Caroline had also faced before—are the ones every cam girl has to endure, whether or not she expresses her sexuality. In the case of Durbin, at least some users answered her question about what things they have done for money. For example they replied, "I once collected several ounces of my bf's cum and sold it," "I sold drugs at age 14," or "I sucked a dick, so I could eat" (User comments in Durbin 2015, 0:19:10 and 1:17:00). In comparison, Molly Soda's Instagram live video *That's Me In The Corner* provoked instant reactions that were mainly positive, polite and supportive ("BABE," "je t'aime," "adore you," "karaoke queen," or hearts or heart-eyed emojis). Soda streamed on her own Instagram account and therefore to an audience that did not consist of anonymous or unknown users, but of friends or fans who have their Instagram account linked to their RL identity. It becomes clear that the reactions of viewers highly depend on the platform where the artistic performances take place, and whether the artist fulfills the associated expectations. Furthermore, the comments reveal a much higher degree of respect and friendliness towards the artist when the audience is not anonymous.

13. Oversharing

Oversharing refers to sharing "too much information" about one's private life or personal details, and is often used negatively about the performances of cam girls (Sykes 2015). Oversharing is often deemed inappropriate when it features sexual or pornographic content or is overly emotional, e.g., crying, nervous breakdowns, or interchangeable and trivial content including romantically idealized photos of couples, food pictures, or cat videos. Whether a post is perceived as oversharing depends on the expectations of the audience on a specific social platform. Oversharing became a buzzword in contemporary culture around 2015,[9] but was around much earlier. Katie Glass, a columnist at the *Sunday Times*, says that oversharing does not exist and we have "an obligation to share the rubbish stuff otherwise it looks like we're all just having a good time watching sunsets and sipping champagne" (Glass, Kate). The expression "rubbish stuff" here describes the counterpart of solely positive, high-life imagery on social media. To keep the balance, or to maintain a more "authentic" impression closer to real life, Glass argues that users of social media platforms should post both sides of the story. Again, online appearances are considered something that should be close to the real life of the respective person. Yet, this is a paradox, as an IRL photo album also usually only contains positive images. Everyone has to "smile" for the family picture. Even Ana Voog's artistic practice

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[9] (Sykes 2015) "In 2008, Webster's New World Dictionary made oversharing their 'New Word of the Year'; Chambers Dictionary did the same in 2014. Both dictionaries describe oversharing as the act of divulging inappropriate amounts of personal information."

could be considered oversharing, as she streamed her life 24/7. In 2001, author Eric Durchholz ironically called himself, lecturer Theresa M. Senft, author of the book *Camgirls*, and cam girl Stacey Pershall the "Queens of the over-share." They were all part of the panel "Everything you ever wanted to know about webcamming but were afraid to ask" at SXSW. They made fun of this title because there "seemed to be nothing our viewers were afraid to ask us and nothing we were afraid to tell" (Senft 2008, p. 33). This attitude seems characteristic of cam girls of the 1990s, such as Ringley and Voog. Getting naked and having sex in front of the camera was once taboo-breaking for at least a part of the audience and the journalists who wrote about it. Moreover, Molly Soda's artistic practice has been described as oversharing (Blume 2016, p. 9). A quote by the artist sheds light on her artistic motives and why she confronts her audience with seemingly highly personal content others would feel embarrassed to share (like karaoke singing or crying in front of the camera), "I'm really interested in why you feel embarrassed about something, why something is shameful to you. How to pull that out of yourself, how to deal with it ... 'If I embarrass myself, it's different than if someone embarrasses me. I'm willingly exposing myself so I can't get hurt.' I'm also thinking about the psychology of why something's embarrassing and what makes something a guilty pleasure, or what makes you want to hide something" (Soda 2018b).

Artworks characterized by oversharing and taboo-breaking art practice involving highly personal content have existed since before the internet. Paula Modersohn-Becker's full-body *Self-Portrait at 6th Wedding Anniversary* (1906) depicts the artist nude and pregnant; Egon Schiele's *Self-Portrait* (1911) shows the artist seemingly masturbating. In the video performance *Fuses* (1965), Carolee Schneemann and her partner have sex. Many works, such as Bas Jan Ader's mixed media artwork *I am too sad to tell you* (1970–71), Nan Goldin's photographic self-portrait *Nan one month after being battered* (1984); Jeff Koons and Cicciolina's kitsch pornographic photo series *Made in Heaven* (1990–91); or Tracey Emin's *Everyone I have ever slept with* (1963–1995), have become part of the art historical canon and have been shown in museums and galleries. Nudity, as well as oversharing, have long been part of artistic practice, yet they did not forfeit any of their provocative power. But all these works appear in the art or museum context. Today, in the age of the internet, art is shared on websites or social platforms detached from any art context and institutional vetting process. It is a process that already started with Ana Voog's broadcast to her own website. Art historians or critics have a hard time distinguishing between the pop cultural use of selfies and artworks by visual artists that use this visual language as a tool for artistic reflection. The discussion of taboos has shifted from what level of transgression is permissible in the art and exhibition circuit, towards the censorship policies on social media platforms, which enforce more conservative standards of

taboo. However, oversharing can be traced as an artistic tool in both the Web 1.0 and the Web 2.0.

14. Censorship

In April 2001, Ana Voog posted three provocative images to her LiveJournal, an early social online platform that Voog used to accompany her webcam performance site. Voog posted photos of a vulva with a bloody tampon hanging from it, a used bloody tampon and a close-up of clipped pubic hair. The LiveJournal Abuse Team claimed to have made an effort to consider the photos artworks when they requested (!) deletion of these images. "Note that artistic nudity is given broad consideration," the email advised, "but this is by no means artistic in any way" (LiveJournal Abuse Team in Senft 2008, p. 88). Ana Voog publicly protested on LiveJournal against silencing female bodies, and the photos were allowed to stay in her journal (Senft 2008, p. 87). Every Instagram artist or user today could only dream of such a success or of being "requested" to delete a photo. Instagram enforces their own community guidelines by deleting pictures or whole accounts unannounced. In their book *Pics or It Didn't Happen. Images Banned from Instagram* (2016), artists Arvida Byström and Molly Soda compiled pictures of their own and their friends and followers that were deleted from Instagram. Instagram's policy in itself, as well as the users who report "inappropriate" content, severely restrict diversity on the platform. Borderline-pornographic content that follows the male gaze, is given leniency. Yet, as the book reveals, unshaven bikini lines, female nipples, gender fluid imagery or period blood are not. Censorship has been and still is a relevant issue for artists to reflect on and protest. However, whereas early platforms like LiveJournal were open to discussion, all of today's social media platforms fully block such a possibility.

15. Conclusions: From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0

In her book *Camgirls*, Theresa M. Senft defines the "webcam gaze" of the 1990s on the basis of four characteristics: (1) cam girls are their own directors and producers of their self-images, (2) viewers can interact with them via chat, (3) cam girls can simultaneously engage in other activities, like cooking, taking calls or having sex, and (4) cams are broadcast live and unedited (Senft 2008, p. 45). Whereas all four aspects apply to *Jennicam* or *anacam*, the applicability deviates from the Web 2.0 artists. Senft's characteristic (1) fully applies, as they are still their own directors and producers of their self-image. Ana Voog streamed 24/7 for years.[10] Art and

[10] The idea of streaming permanently to the internet is one of the basic ideas of the webcam use since its inception. There is the famous first webcam, the Trojan Room Coffee Pot Camera at Cambridge University, streaming the coffee level in the machine in the coffee kitchen to the employees, or countless

daily life exist closely together. In comparison, the Web 2.0 artists do not livecast continuously. They adhere to an artistic dramaturgy within a limited timeframe that does not include the pursuit of daily activities, unless staged as part of the performance. The online performances of Web 2.0 artists are more condensed and tied into a certain framework. Neither Kate Durbin, Petra Cortright, Caroline (aka Ann Hirsch) nor Molly Soda would engage in side actions, as Ana Voog, according to Senft's characteristic (3). All artists explored and reflected on life on the internet and established a discourse on social norms. Ana Voog explored daily life activities online, including nudity, sex, and masturbation. With full physical engagement, Isaac Leung artistically researched the user structure and behavior of online sex portals. Both strongly challenged societal sexual taboos. The next generation of webcam artists (Petra Cortright, Ann Hirsch, Kate Durbin, or Molly Soda) are instead interested in exploring different forms of online identities, online platforms, their audiences, and the validity of social norms on the internet. Sex and nudity do not appear predominantly in the works.[11] However, oversharing has been a part of artistic practice in Web 1.0 (Voog) and Web 2.0 (Soda).

Due to technological developments, the Web 2.0 naturally offers many more streaming, video recording or social media uploading possibilities.[12] Web 2.0 artists usually stream or post to a variety of social platforms (i.e., YouTube, Tumblr or Instagram), instead of streaming to their own website. The user interaction possibilities, as mentioned in Senft's characteristic (2), also exceeded those of Web 1.0. Kate Durbin's *Cloud Nine* was performed on *Cam4*, where the users of the platform could comment live and Durbin could directly react, similar to Voog's interaction. However, Petra Cortright, Ann Hirsch or Molly Soda prerecorded and uploaded the videos to YouTube where users could comment on the final videos. A webcam performance on Instagram like *That's Me In The Corner* by Molly Soda allowed users to comment or send stickers or hearts. However, like Ana Voog's live stream, later webcam artists also leave their videos unedited. This concept confirms

cams streaming city sites from bird's eye view, or the famous San Francisco Fogcam, which has streamed live since 1994 and is still active (fogcam.org).

11 There are artists who do, in fact, explore more sexually oriented notions in the context of the usage of the webcam in connection with social platforms. See Leah Schrager or Georges Jacotey.

12 The webcam of the Web 1.0 was a static camera attached to home computers, sending single static images to the web every few seconds. Over time, the webcam became integrated in laptops. During Web 2.0, it became a mobile tool, as a part of a smartphone. Nowadays, the webcam is a flexible tool that is also integrated in smart phones (or laptops), ready to be used for taking photos, recording HD videos, or streaming live to the internet. Photo and video editing tools on smart phones further enhance the quality of amateur and artistic imagery.

Senft's characteristic (4), regardless of whether they perform live or prerecord and upload.[13]

The artists of the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 both link their online persona to their IRL appearance (Voog, Soda, Cortright), or use alternate identities (Leung, Durbin, Hirsch) depending on their project. There is no fundamental difference between the webcam artists of different generations. An important common feature is that all artists performed in or uploaded to a non-art related space online. Interaction with the online audience was a crucial part of artistic webcam performance in both Web 1.0 and 2.0, and a special feature of this art form. Despite other similarities, the notion of censorship has changed fundamentally with the Web 2.0 and its social platforms. Ana Voog streamed to her own website censorship-free. Even on the social platform LiveJournal, she successfully negotiated keeping her images online. Interestingly, Isaac Leung conducted his research online, but could not physically exhibit his work, due to university censorship. With the emergence of social platforms, similar restrictions were also introduced online. If works do not conform with community guidelines, the content, or even the user profiles, are arbitrarily deleted without prior notice.

With the beginning of social platforms, webcamming as a distinct art form has disappeared. Cam girls who stream 24/7 have been replaced by cam girls who only stream at a certain time for a certain purpose on a certain social platform. Additionally, the artistic use of the webcam has changed. Webcam artists of the Web 2.0 use their webcam for a preplanned live performances or videos. With social platforms and the technological improvements offering a variety of usages, artists like Petra Cortright, Kate Durbin or Ann Hirsch consider themselves new media, digital or internet artists, or social media or Instagram artists, whose artistic practice involves the usage of a webcam. Molly Soda, who extensively distributed videos of herself performing daily life actions across platforms, is most reminiscent of Ana Voog's Web 1.0 practice as a webcam artist.

Although Ana Voog was very successful and reached an immense community, personal artists' websites have generally not been capable of building networks or communities to render their own artworks more visible. Today, artists active online on social media disseminate their art on the internet and interact more directly with their audience. They are also able to bypass the conventional art economy system consisting of galleries and museums, by selling their work directly to collectors. "Considering that more people follow artists' online practice than would have access to their IRL practice, the former becomes an important tool for visibility and integral

[13] Unedited refers only to the fact that no cuts were made. The work of Isaac Leung is an exception, as he used the webcam as a research tool and planned to exhibit selected screenshots only.

part of what constitutes a practice as a whole" (Blume 2016, p. 12). Therefore, today, a wide variety of artists using webcams for their work engage with social media. On his Instagram channel, Andy Kassier presents himself as the cliché of the rich, successful white male; Leah Schrager created the online persona ONA to critically explore the possibilities of getting famous on Instagram. Arvida Byström and Petra Collins engage with female aesthetics in the digital realm, support body positivity and criticize the limiting, discriminatory norms of Instagram's community guidelines. Petra Collins replied that she exists because of the internet, after artist Marylin Minter told her, "your generation 'sees' you. My generation couldn't 'see' me, because there were still hierarchies of culture" (Minter and Collins 2017, p. 88 in Weidinger and Meier 2018, p. 11). Ana Voog's *anacam* is one of the early examples of how to successfully break, discuss and protest against these hierarchies of culture. Today's social media platforms enabled artists—especially young artists, female artists and artists who are marginalized in the offline art economy—to be seen in online communities and create a successful online appearance. The webcam, now used for many different ways of self-representation, helps artists to interact with like-minded people, to create an audience for their art practice, and to gain recognition and relevance. Thanks to the webcam and the Internet, artists are in control of their own public image and can shape their own narratives. They can reach an audience without the need to bend and buckle to fulfill the norms of the offline art world to be seen and appreciated.

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Selfie-Wars on Social Media

Ramón Reichert

Abstract: The image-related self-thematization using digital communication technologies is a central cultural pattern of postmodern society. Considering these assumptions, this paper raises the question of whether, and in what way, practices of identity construction are changing, as part of the development of new digital and interactive media. The continuous change in media, society and technology in present visual cultures has led to the perception that images should be seen as an essential contribution to the formation of society and subjectivity. Along these lines, this submission analyses selfies as formats of communication and clarifies media-specific aspects of online communication. In this context, the paper focuses on the recurring features of selfies on the level of conventions of visual aesthetics, semantic encodings, media dispositives and stereotypical structures of interaction. With this perspective, it is possible to acquire a more detailed understanding of this relationship once it becomes clear in which way the visual practice and the aesthetics of photographic self-representation collaborate with the networking culture of social media.

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1. Introduction

The image related to self-thematization using digital communication technologies is a central aspect of postmodern culture. While, according to Goffman, the presentation of self from face-to-face interaction is a universal human activity (Goffman 1959), contemporary shifts occurring in the area of self-presentation and the self-thematization, mark a distinct cultural feature of today's increasingly digitally networked communication society. The term self-thematization refers to individuals creating a virtual version of themselves via their communication process. Via social media self-reorientations, users link the socially shared content with modes of self-representation (Peraica 2017; Depkat 2019, p. 20). In contemporary society, self-presentation has become the hegemonic form of self-thematization (Hong et al. 2020, pp. 106–59).

In the tradition of actor-oriented sociology, I first understand self-thematization simply as the reflexive and communicative relationship of the subject to itself. Individuals can relate to and perceive themselves as another by being at a distance from themselves and, in this sense, when self-imaging occurs, the subject is able to have self-awareness (Hahn 1987). However, in this process, what else transpires? What are the social conditions for self-reference? How do the practice, function

and aesthetics of biographical self-reflection impact one's personal relationships? My interest here is not only to determine the varieties of self-thematization in the social media system, but also to examine economic agents and cultural techniques of surveillance and transparency.

Selfies are interconnected with digital surveillance cultures and by means of clicks, likes, tags and comments they are continuously interwoven with cultural techniques of naming, collecting, evaluating and counting (Flasche 2020, pp. 157–70). In this chapter, I am concerned with the question if practices of identity construction are changing due to the expansion of new digital and interactive media? Can the individual escape social pressure, and technological regulation of their life? Why are pictorial anonymization practices on online platforms increasingly widespread? In addition, how do self-image makers confront the social constraints and obsessions of self-imaging one's likeness? Via the deprivation, absence or disappearance of the face, strategies of desubjectivization can act as interventions into established expectations and procedures of visibility on online platforms.

Considering these assumptions, my chapter raises the question whether and in what way practices of identity construction are changing, as part of the development of new digital and interactive media (Doy 2004; Snickars and Vonderau 2012).

The continuous change in media, society and technology in present visual cultures has (first in the cultural and media studies and later in the Social Sciences) led to the perception, that images should be seen as an essential contribution to the formation of society and subjectivity (Darley 2000; van Dijck 2008, pp. 57–76). New forms of social network as well as new interactive media publics emerged with the deployment of technical images and the increased generalization of visual skills, which led to the arrival of a wide autodidactic activity in digital image culture (Hjorth 2007, pp. 227–38; Hjorth et al. 2012) (Figure 1).

The main purposes of this chapter consist of the following priorities: Analysis of the reciprocal relations between the infrastructural possibilities of digital media (Clark 2020, pp. 87–93), the digital methods of image research and the aesthetic practices of self-thematization (Tiggemann et al. 2020, pp. 175–82). This chapter is dealing will with visual practices of self-thematization in the context of *different strategies of performativity*:

(1) When dealing with selfies generated by users, the key questions are: What is the performative role of initiators of visual uploads (cf. (Grace 2013, pp. 135–62))? What is the status of collective and collaborative framing processes in connection with selfies' production of meaning, negotiation and distribution in online portals and social media formats?
(2) The tendency to resignify and reiterate existing content (mashup, remix) points to a performative aspect that is an expression of collaborative framing processes that elude subsumtion under any intersubjectively controllable field of discourse

(Literat 2019, pp. 1168–84). Keeping that in mind, the productive force of the performative does not just lie in creating something, but in handling something we have not created ourselves. In this sense, performative implementation can be understood as an excess of meaning that not just realizes a new performative frame, but also retroactively modifies existing content.

(3) Performative processes on the internet are the result of technological enablement. Specifically, it is the computer-assisted information and communication technologies that regulate the modes, validity and distribution of user-generated content (Reichert 2013, pp. 223–57). Web media are significantly involved in the production of meaning and relevance and thus have to be included in the examination of performative processes.

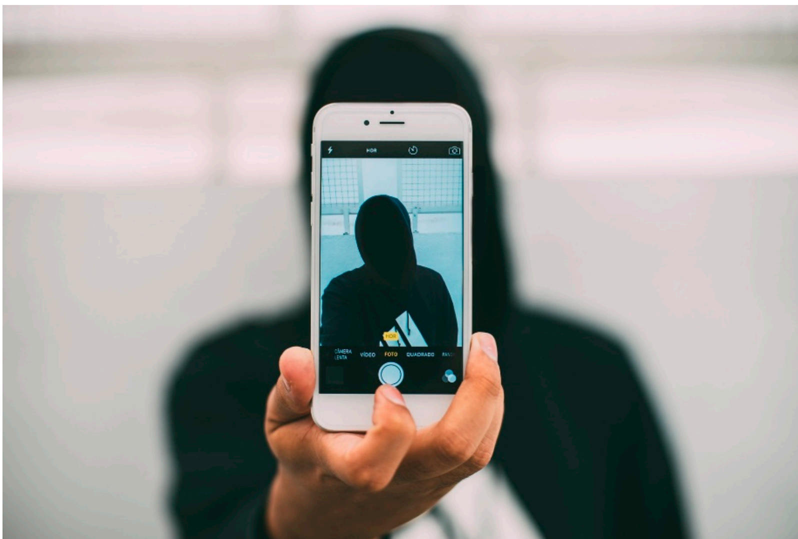

Figure 1. The non-showing of the face is demonstrated. Source: Pixabay.

2. Visual Communication Analysis

This chapter is based on the fundamental hypothesis that image practices should be regarded as practices linked from a communicative and media-technological perspective. It shall thus develop a distinct visual communication analysis focusing on the following priorities:

Analysis of visual communication in technical-medial environments: Modern research on the historical and cultural significance of images follows an extended image concept, including the technical and media conditions of visual perception. One of the explanatory concepts for the function and meaning of media, its user and the society is the media dispositive, which, compared to the concepts of public and

culture, relates most closely to the media itself. The productivity of this approach of relating the dispositive and the medium to one another lies in the fact that the various areas of a medium—such as technology or apparatus, institutional context, economic dimension, production practices, aesthetic processes and styles, use and reception modes—can be seen as a network that is shaping visual perception.

In this respect, my approach is oriented in terms of practice theory as I am assessing the complex interference of iconic, text-based and informatics-related entanglements of meaning that arise with the recording, editing, publishing and distribution of selfies on online platforms, social network sites and sharing apps. The chapter explores the interrelations between visual data objects, image-related and discursive processes of the construction of meaning and meta-data, which "facilitate classification and archiving, displaying origin (authorship, ownership and conditions for use)" (see (Rubinstein and Sluis 2008, p. 151)).

As venues hosting diverging ways of looking and cultures of seeing, I am evaluating not only image practice in a narrow sense but also the methods of categorization, encoding and commenting (hashtags, emojis, threads, GIFs, hyperlinks) as well as cross-medial/multi-modal strategies of distribution and analysis closely linked therewith (Social Insight, SocialRank, Hootsuite, Iconosquare, Social Media Radar), which the users of online platforms and messenger services create due to their social visibility and being-seen. Constituting *bildbasierte Handlung*, image-based selfies are embedded in the situation of subjects of technization into an empowering action. We shall situate the performative aspects of acting with images on a multi-modal level, which is supposed to cover the entire range of selfie communication and selfie storytelling in mobile/multimedia communication networks (writing-based texts, hashtags, emojis, GIFs, hyperlinks, threads) (Senft and Baym 2015).

Image repertoires and image memory: Image practices are always at the same time visual practices, and selfies always relate to models, i.e., pre-figurations. They are involved in reference contexts and webs of meaning in the sense of being "an endless sequence of representations" (Rheinberger 2002, p. 112). Alongside this perspective, this investigation houses an interpretation analysis evaluating digital self-images in the contexts of both their production and their reception as communicative image action of "deterritorialised communities" (Abidin 2016) and regarding selfies as temporalized, chosen patterns of action, communication and identification, which allow new forms of media subjectivity within the broad range of objectivizing self-measurement and individualized self-inspection. With online platforms, messenger services and social network sites being differentiated into closed spaces of communication ("all-in-one-media", (Helmond 2015). I can explore visual communication scripts designed to build digital identity (Senft 2013) which have brought about specific image repertoires (Silverman 1997) and memory cultures

(Marwick 2015) in different online spaces of communication, such as theatrical self-stagings on Instagram and Facebook and reciprocal forms of communication on WhatsApp, Twitter and Snapchat.

Style communication analysis: At the centre of our *style communication analysis* stands the comparative analysis of the image-based expression in the context of *styles of designing* visual compositions (Papacharissi 2010). Using open-method approaches of quality-oriented image research (Mitchell 1995), it can be possible to decipher the visual pulse of the selfie generation. Before this background, the style communication analysis is focused on the formal aesthetics of highlighting, emphasis, hiding and omission in framing, image genres, plot episodes, constellations of interaction and the level of image–text and image–image relationships to distinctions in terms of gender, age and social layer (Tifentale 2014). The study explores fluid and trans-local relationship networks in order to document changes in the image stock and associated patterns of use, appropriation and interaction. This approach allows for a formation of categories and a potential probing of visual relationships, which may be exploited both synchronically (as compared to other digital self-portraits on online platforms) and diachronically (as compared to cultural image repertoires and historical reference images). From this point of view, I may query the image evidence of selfies regarding their cultural and historical contingencies.

Visual communication and platform-based communities: How can I methodically prove the influence of technical-medial environments of social media apps on the venues of interaction and negotiation in subject-centred visual communication? (Helmond 2015). In what way do platform-based conditions such as the subscriber principle or the feature of hashtagging create globalized spaces of communication for the increased significance of communicative acting with images, new iconic styles of staging or conventional image repertoires and gender stereotypes (Reichert 2014a, 87 et seq.)? Can I regard the selfie phenomenon to be a paradigm shift in the development of a global public, as selfies, like emoticons, have become a "global language" and "establishing a universally applicable form of communication for the first time in the history of mankind"? (Ullrich 2019, p. 14).

3. Generation Selfie

In the context of the research question outlined above, my approach to selfie culture distances itself from the idea of hypostatized self-reference, in which media are viewed as mere tools for the depiction of a subject that already exists in real life. In following this research perspective approach to autobiographical mediality, I grant the medium a constituting meaning in the process of subject constitution and am therefore able to look for a self-reference that constitutes itself through media, i.e., upon recording, storage and distribution. Identity- and subject-related research that considers the medium's influence on the process of subjectification a distinct research

question and an independent field of scholarship directs our attention to what is referred to using the analytical terms "dispositive" and "media-related reflectivity" in media-related analyses of subjectivity. It also turns our focus to the mediality of the medium and examines how historic places of remembrance and social image cultures are helped into existence by means of media arrangements, processes and formats (Galloway 2004). The aesthetic practices of identity construction in online media (Vitak 2012) not only medialize individual subject concepts, but also resemanticize collective places of remembrance which are presented as 'personalizable' by means of selfies. Against this background, I can address, for example, the aesthetic forms of self-staging that push the self into the center and the media-related proximity to the recording medium of smartphone photography ("arm-length away") that this self-documentation provokes. The digital media of self-documentation using smartphone technologies of permanent connectivity and their spatial annotations (Snapchat and the like) also open up novel spaces of agency for self-modelling, as these self-images are always also involved in digital usage contexts, such as tracking (Papacharissi 2010), gamification (Fuchs et al. 2014), and surveillance (Lyon 2001; Fuchs 2011, pp. 31–70; Andrejevic 2011, pp. 278–87). However, the commercially motivated addressing of users as producers of their own self-image (DIY aesthetic) should not obscure the fact that selfies are always located in digital media cultures and linked with the cultural techniques of naming, collecting, rating and counting within the economies of digital cross-linking by means of clicks, likes, tags and comments (cf. the aspect of medialization as a ritual and the standardization of self-representation associated with it, e.g., #tbt, #aftersex, #museumselfie).

Facilitated multi-media self-publication on the internet also enables new forms of infrastructural appropriation and collective interlinking. DIY culture is characteristic of the low-level, time-sparing production of self-images. This culture of "doing it yourself" not only opens up a new interrelation between practices of self-reference and media-related technologies; it also influences the representations of the self as an aesthetic means. These self-representations can be taken as an additional object of examination as image-cultural elements, shapes and formats regarding their historical, cultural and media-related subject construction: "As an emblematic part of the social media's increased "visual turn," selfies provide opportunities for scholars to develop best practices for interpreting images online in rigorous ways" (Senft 2013). Against this background, selfies can be examined for their *genre-specific* cultivation aspects and their relationships to *media-specific* formats. As a result, this research approach creates portfolios of genre-, format-, and media-specific image cultures and asks the related question which network-specific status selfies can have within the circulation sphere of social media platforms. This chapter is thus understood to be an extension to the works of Turkle (1995, 2011), Mirzoeff (2013), and Knoblauch et al. (2008) in terms of media and subject theory, image culture and

communication sociology. It regards selfies as facilitations of visual communication by which specific orientations for action, image-aesthetic subject models and social integration are provided for the purpose of medialized self-thematization.

Based on the above, I will examine relationships of individuals to the media-based means of acting and expression that they use to model their own subjectivity in the context of social requirements. A debate concerning the epistemological and sociological status of the image has been incessantly going on since the early 1990s, though under different names, such as the "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 1995), the "visual turn" (Cartwright and Sturken 2001) or "visual methods" (Rose 2001; Knoblauch et al. 2008; Hughes 2012). This debate will result in the question to what extent images and visual media help represent, influence, and thereby reshape persons or subjects.

I will try to observe the recurring features of *selfies* on the level of conventions of visual aesthetics, semantic encodings, media dispositives and stereotypical structures of interaction. What makes the format of selfies particularly attractive for analysis is the fact that analyzing the communicative forms of selfies (1) allows the demonstration of how the medialization of the self has changed through media techniques and (2) facilitates discussion of the individual liquefactions of technological dispositives and social framings. In this sense, the history of human subjectivity is closely linked to all different kinds of mediation through media and can be divided into self-thematization in writing, through mass media, and through individual media. A new form of self-thematization ensues as the mass media undergo pluralization in particular based on their privatization. Being private increasingly becomes a resource (of attention), blurring the lines between what is private and what is public. Privacy, personal confessions, staged self-representation, etc. become issues of more or less new kinds of mass-media formats (Turkle 1995) that also extend to interactive online media. From this perspective, digital networks can always be taken as media arrangements exerting institutional and normative pressure on the agents involved to participate in the process of self-thematization. Against this background, the life story, which is perceived as feasible and predictable, becomes the object of narrative strategies used in a media context to ground one's own life by means of "narrative styles of identity" (Thomä 1998, p. 62), "multi-media media formats" (Doy 2004; Reichert 2008, p. 47) and forms of "gender staging" (Davidov 1998). Alois Hahn refers to the communicative institutions of self-thematization as biography generators and points out their meaning for the practical self-relations of individuals. Both the individualized types of reflective self-representation and those accounts of self-thematization that are structured by institutional specifications are used for real-world orientation in one's everyday behavior, but also act as a social mechanism for normalization, integration and social control.

4. Performing the Self

Auto-documentation processes in media, e.g., selfies, are therefore part of collectively shared general principles of contemporary society that can be grounded in the reference frame of a long-term historical establishment of communicative institutions and norms of self-thematization. As a consequence, not only do individuals make themselves the subject of communication and, thus, the object of knowledge, but also socially habitualized forms of communication place the individual in a certain relationship to others and thereby themselves. The subject can only become a model for action and an object of knowledge when society boasts appropriate institutional framework conditions addressing the subject in general as the causal agent of self-thematization. The stylistic features of visual self-representation thus point not as much to an individuality of subjects, but rather to historical, socially conditioned ways of subjectification that can be discerned very well from the way selfies are employed. Initial approaches to theoretically and terminologically capture visual self-representation on the social web have been presented by Richard (2010), who has analyzed the cultural image-related behavior on social network sites (dating sites, micro-blogging portals, and young-adult websites) for the generation of social relationships.

In contrast, I want to examine visual self-thematization in social media of web 2.0 intends to make its own distinct contribution to digital usage research. This contribution will include (1) developing programs for data collection, data modeling and data visualization (Manovich 2012); (2) data critically reflecting standard technologies, resources and analysis tools of native-digital web analysis (Rogers 2013) and social media analysis (Boyd and Ellison 2007; van Dijck 2013); (3) laying the methodological groundwork for analyzing visual objects on the internet to be used to systematically develop, for the first time, source-critical standards for visual self-thematization. Our contribution will be (4) derived from the time-diagnostic claim to elaborate on the status of digital image and communication media in generating subjectivity mediated by media.

I therefore intend to extend the issue of the nature of images as bringing about reality and subjectivity to individual visual media that manifests itself in the visual medium is particularly apt in producing an effect of reality. The effect of reality is an attempt to explain the phenomenon that interweaving image/text generates particularly efficacious visible effects. In this context, I consider technological and media-related infrastructures (Kittler 1998, pp. 119–32), and I also consider the increasing penetration of image, text and materiality by information and distribution and the respective multi-modal forms of communication (Bateman 2008) as well as user-specific cultures of usage (Reichert 2008; Boyd 2008). According to Turkle (1995), mediatized communication invites individuals to self-thematize, while by doing so, they have to fit the creation of socially accepted self-images into the margins of media

infrastructures. Individuals model themselves as subjects using these participatory, marketized cultural techniques, proving themselves in the arenas of the social web. This thesis is also supported by Birgit Richard (2010), who has delved into visual self-representation particularly within youth cultures. As a consequence, the visual, i.e., physical shapes of expression bring about new communication structures. As important as these participatory communication structures are, one should not neglect their economic and political interdependencies, but instead consider them a practice of self-thematization that determines the format. In this respect, not only the selfies as content, but the technological infrastructures of networking cultures (forums, platforms) are embedded in economic and political structures, which results in the formation of ways of self-governing and in the enforcement of self-representation standards. Accordingly, the analysis of an economically and politically embedded communication structure also involves considering storage, thesaurization, and feedback structures that find use in various areas of everyday and popular culture. Feedback systems, performance comparisons, quality rankings, monitoring, matching, benchmarking, statistical evaluation, flexible process control, self-awareness catalysts, satisfaction measurements—all such systemically cybernetic control functions and observational contexts of mutual evaluation and assessment are functional elements of web 2.0 media technology. (Sawyer et al. 2020, pp. 94–100) In this context, it should also be considered—and the first research papers on this subject have already been published (Boyd 2008)—that various platforms for the distribution of videos exhibit a dimension of an unbalanced social structure. There are agents who distribute their self-representations via different social networking sites depending on class and education status. Clearly showing a new sensitivity for this both technological and social change, which also calls for new aesthetic efforts, my essay attempts to reconcile visually aesthetic and media-dispositive research perspectives and accordingly regards selfies as *performative media*. Based on Erika Fischer-Lichte's (2002, 2004) theory of performative action the concept of the performative is used to demonstrate the procedural staging, implementing, and transforming practices of visual self-thematization. Interactive media systems and associated collective and collaborative media practices have formed in the interconnected communication spaces of the digital world, comprising all areas of production, distribution, exploitation and evaluation of media content (Deuze 2007, pp. 243–63). A dynamic and ostensibly transient production of meaning in the social media of web 2.0 can thus be revealed from a performative perspective, which pushes the productive and procedural character of collaborative practices into the focus of analysis (Cartwright and Sturken 2001).

When dealing with selfies generated by users, the key questions are: What is the performative role of initiators of visual uploads (cf. (Grace 2013, pp. 135–62))? What is the status of collective and collaborative framing processes in connection with selfies'

production of meaning, negotiation and distribution in online portals and social media formats? The tendency to resignify and reiterate existing content (mashup, remix) points to a performative aspect that is an expression of collaborative framing processes that elude subsumtion under any intersubjectively controllable field of discourse. Performative processes on the internet are the result of technological enablement. Specifically, it is the computer-assisted information and communication technologies that regulate the modes, validity and distribution of user-generated content. Based on the finding that performances, staging and rituals gain importance in a performative contemporary culture, it can further be assumed that images in staging and perceiving the subject play an increasingly important role. In this staged procedural field between physical configurations of media—protruding into everyday media practices through smartphones and tablets—and subject designs, individual images mix with collective images, pointing to a cultural dimension of imagery, performativity, and sociality (Gye 2007, pp. 279–88). I will include both intracultural and intercultural visual patterns of staged arrangements of gestures and attitudes in the image that are charged with meaning and shared in collective image spaces. In this respect, I will scrutinize both the performativity within the image and the image itself as a *performative medium*. Still, it has to be taken into account that imagery in computer-based media during this age of digital networking media is to be understood less as something originating from representation than something that can be derived from *pragmatism* and *performativity*. In this respect, my research follows the assumption that the appearance of the new media as such leads to a change in the communicative forms of self-thematization. Against the background of this state of research on digital image culture, I use the pictorial nature of social interactions as a methodological opportunity to combine the genre and discourse analysis of visual cultural techniques with a technologically pragmatic approach. I will ask how the advancement of mobile technology due to wirelessly connected media (smartphones, tablets) and digital distribution media (the internet) influences the aesthetic and practice of visual self-thematization (Vitak 2012, pp. 451–70). After all, cheaper acquisition, simpler handling of visual techniques and facilitated distribution of photographic artifacts on social network sites during the past decade have induced a diagnosis termed as the "pervasive" (Coyne 2010) turn of visual self-thematization. At the same time, I observe how many formats that emerged with the participatory opportunities of the mobile networking community (Castells 1996–1998) have created technological, economic, and socially structural conditions for thematizing subjects in even more distinctly identifiable genres, which could be referred to as a visual culture of self-thematization. I can, however, only acquire a more detailed understanding of this relationship once it becomes clear in what way the visual practice and the aesthetics of photographic self-representation collaborate with the networking culture of the social media. The media-related structures of self-thematization forms

are not only results of technological advancement and individualized forms of communication, but they historically result from technologically based instructions of organizational and governmental forms of sociality (Reichert 2014b), which are currently carried through web-based institutions as well, as will be examined using the methods outlined below.

5. Allegories of Femininity

For centuries, women that correspond to contemporary beauty ideals have been imaged in front of mirrors, perpetuating a visual motif of vanitas allegories. In its moral use, the mirror was always seen negatively in the allegories of sins and connoted "impertinence", "vanity" and "pride", which were linked to the "beauty", "youthfulness" and "self-love" of women. The "complacent self-reflection" outweighed the contemplative function of "reflecting yourself". By linking the vanitas allegory with the mirror motif, a picture of women was designed in which a "vain" self-reference was to reveal itself as a beautiful illusion. Mirror scenes always communicated a normative vanitas idea: the woman looking into the mirror realizes that she cannot save any of her pictures as a medium. This experimental arrangement derives the motif of impermanence from failure to create an enduring image of the woman.

The stereotypes of a typically female connoted media practice used in the media coverage of the so-called "generation selfie" are centered around the figure of the naïve, playing on the iconography of vanitas and the ambiguous symbol of the mirror. This has been done by the fine arts since antiquity and so these stereotypes have been passed on: Not only sciences and arts, ideals of state and virtue, but also ideas of place, space or time have been represented and propagated for centuries in body images—and thus necessarily gender-specific. The "iconologies" of the 16th century have been systematically regulated and the allegorical riddles made available lexically. They archived an arsenal of common personifications. Others have been created. (Schade et al. 1994, p. 3).

Allegory as a literary and visual process has been known since ancient Greece and Rome. The term "allegory" literally means "saying differently" (Latin "alia oratio"; Greek "allos", "different" and "agoreúein", "to say in public") and means an "other" layer of meaning that exists parallel to the literal meaning. In general terms, the allegory can be seen as a sensual or intellectual illustration of an abstract concept. Allegorical visualizations aim at clarity, clarity and plausibility of cultural ideology. Even for Hegel, who regarded allegory as an inadequate form of artistic representation in his theory of aesthetics, allegory therefore consists in general abstract states or properties from the human as well as the natural world—religion, love, justice, discord, fame, war, peace, spring, summer, autumn, winter, death, fama—to be personified and thus to be understood as a subject. (Hegel 1986, p. 388).

A motif-historical image analysis of the symbolically and allegorically arguing self-negotiation reveals mechanisms of the transfer and superimposition of self-images and body images. Popular or popularizing discourses on self-portrayals in the social network seek communication with common image repertoire, recognized body images and typical role models. In *Monuments and Maidens*, Marina Warner writes about the representation of imaginary communality through feminine allegories: The female figure tends to be perceived as general and universal, with symbolic ulterior motives, while the male figure is individual, even if it is used, a generalizing one to express the idea. (Warner 1989, p. 35).

The media discourse on "Generation Selfie" uses stereotypical feminine allegories to manifest the idea of a homogeneous and universal community of young people. The young women not only represent this generation, but also embody it. In this context, it is often pointed out that it is mainly young girls who like to take photos of themselves and then spread these self-images in social networks. In this way, the visibility of young women on the internet is turned into a matter of their self-driven self-expression and ultimately naturalized by transferring their own drive to be exhibitionistic to the phenomenon of selfies. With this negative, derogatory rhetoric, young girls are assumed to have a genuinely feminine enjoyment of their self-portrayal and, as a result, social constraints, norms and expectations of self-publication on the internet are hidden. Both the life-world authorization of individual self-images and the allegorical condemnation of youth cultural image practice misses the face as a privileged place of gender signatures and interpretations. As a competitive location for social and cultural enrollments, however, the face has challenged a variety of de-mediatization practices, which I would like to discuss in the following chapter.

6. Defacement as Media Criticism?

Face images have become omnipresent in the image communication of the digital networking culture. They (Figure 2) can be understood as a contemporary view of the rhetorical figure of *prosopopeia*, with which pictures are given the property of reviving the character of a person and speaking for the individual depicted (Riffaterre 1985, pp. 107–23). In the figure of *prosopopeia* or *fictio personae*, images are staged as speaking or capable of other human behavior. Paul de Man points out that the rhetorical process of *prosopopeia* has a fundamental relationship with the critical reflection of facial representation. Etymologically speaking, the word *prosopopeia* is composed of the Greek *prospon poien* and addresses the performative aspect of masking: giving yourself a mask or putting on a certain face (prosopon).

In the context of biographical self-presentation, the *prosopopeia* procedure revolves around the aspect of the face when it comes to giving a face or losing face. In this tension between showing the face and its impending loss, *prosopopeia*

opens up an aesthetic game "with the giving and the taking away of faces, with face and deface, figure, figuration and disfiguration." (De Man 1984, p. 76) In this sense, the documentary forms of selfies can be described as a technique by means of which something not alive, the picture is given an individual expression of the personal. They therefore designate a visual practice with which individuality is to be conveyed in a fundamental way. The conveyance of individuality takes place in two stages and includes both the content level of the representation and the performative level of the actors who relate to the represented in a relationship of the true, the evident and the legitimate. Their central role in self-thematization in the social media of Web 2.0 has not only established a facial regime of facial recognition, but also started practices of the monitored, i.e., processes of de-mediatization and image-critical facial resolution, with which aesthetic strategies and dominance relationships of visual identity constructions can be addressed.

Figure 2. Anti selfies become part of the criticism of society and capitalism. Source: Pixabay.

The face, this privileged place of significations and interpretations, has provoked countless practices of defacement, and not only since the dawn of the selfie age. The term defacement describes a practice that deals critically and reflexively with the visual dominance of face representations (cf. (Grabher 2019)). In this context, the medialization of the face is also criticized (Butkowski et al. 2019, pp. 385–97). By this I mean that the face does not focus the ontological nature of self-identity. The face is interpreted as a cultural and social construction and in this sense, alternative content of self-portrayal is asked for and alternative options of the facial regime are

sought. Against this background, the term de-medialization has also been used. The concept of de-mediatization claims a perspective on the connection between media, cultural and social change. De-mediatization points to an opposition to social and cultural consequences of this progress, as it is in everyday life, in public discourse and in the form of social movements.

The face cult as such has always evoked figures of facial dissolution, which were regarded as negations of anything figurative, personal and individual. During the 20th century in particular, visual art, photography and film have fostered the aesthetic deconstruction of self-staging as a means of criticizing the face as a social inscription and projection surface: The concept of dissolution, read distinctly with regard to its capacity to eliminate, terminate or revoke the facial regime, may be interpreted as a means of criticising the face and of the generation of meaning that made it an ID card for being human, a stage of emotions in anthropology and the theory of affects, then nothing less than a crime scene in 19th century criminal biology and a piece of evidence in forensics (Körte and Weiss 2013, p. 6). Yet, all of the countless attempts to dissolve the face and make it disappear have always conceded that it has a pivotal role when it comes to negotiating aspects of individuality, personality and character.

Against this background, I would like to pose a question: Are certain counter-images of the selfie culture associated with the genre-specific portrait and the traditional culture of human representation, and if yes, how? I would like to discuss the problem of facial self-thematization using the example of the so-called "sellotape selfies". The much-discussed genre of "sellotape selfies" has fueled a counter-cultural visual practice of over-acting in the field of digital self-representation. The aesthetic basic materials for "sellotape selfies" include a piece of adhesive tape and an obliging volunteer who allows his face to be wrapped in said adhesive tape. In their distribution as Internet memes (such as via Facebook nominations), they are accredited effective reflection of the facial society in terms of visual culture. Media faces are neither neutral nor innocent, because they can be used to stabilize and legitimize power—ranging from the facial staging of personal rule up to the authentication of certain products in the maxim of advertising aesthetics.

The "sellotape selfies" remind us of the historical discomfort of art regarding the depiction of "truth" and "singularity" in a portrait. In 1948, Francis Bacon painted the first and rather monstrous anti-portrait of his "Heads" series ("Head I-VI, 1948"). By blurring the head and the face as well as the head and the space surrounding it, he wanted to dissolve identifiable checkpoints to create a deconstruction of the face as a surface of the subject. Later, in 1966, Gerhard Richter ("Selbstporträt") mutilated himself with adhesive tape over his face, thus anticipating all subsequent sellotape interventions. The figure of dismantling may signify in this context that the adhesive tape means not so much an additional way of masking but rather a process of unmasking used to interpret the natural face not as something originally naked

but as a mask itself. Accordingly, the face can be regarded as an icon proper to the signifying regime, which has to be disfigured and turned monstrous by the artist to point out the fabricated character of the seemingly "natural" facial expression.

The adhesive tape can be used to "dismantle" the face as a medium, as an enablement of self-expression in order to signify a de-mediatization of the face as a conventional bearer of signs. This kind of practice of de-mediatization wants to provoke a discussion on the unreflecting use of the medium "face" as a social sculpture. The key momentum of this artistic practice is not so much the moral outrage over the ugliness of what is shown. Instead, "sellotape selfies" experiment with elements of deprivation such as self-assurance, self-identification and narcissism. Al Hansen ("Sharing Piece", 1970) and Douglas Gordon ("Monster", 1997) are other artists who have subsequently attempted to disfigure their faces using adhesive tape and use their portrait-based artistic interventions to protest against beauty standards, police records logics and political exploitation.

The act of dissolution of the face's image on social media introduces ambiguities and uncertainties into the everyday practice of the selfie and the facial regime. The everyday communication using the face is liberated from its taken-for-grantedness and the practices of defacement initiate thinking about the face's status in today's media society. The main focus, in this context, should therefore lie on processes and embodiments based on which dimensions of "faces in dissolution" in terms of perceptive aesthetics and media disposition can be differentiated. In this context, "dissolution", as a factor relating to aesthetics, *aisthesis* and mediality alike, implies a whole bundle of techniques, touching, as a relational expression, on media boundary objects such as the staging of hard focus versus soft focus, proximity versus depth, visibility versus invisibility. Dissolution has thus not only to do with the disappearance of the face but also with alternative techniques of making it visible. The de-mediatization of the face has numerous degrees of separation and must by no means be generally equated with the refusal, deletion or revocation of the face. Instead, the strategies of defacement operate with a plurality of shifts and overlays, which allow a different perspective on the face's fabricated character. In this respect, dissolution points to certain techniques of creating an image or of designing an image in a different manner in order to express alternative ways of designing and perceiving subjectivity. In this context, the "sellotape selfies" are still circling around the iconic primer of the classical portrait, based—despite all the self-staging of disfigured monstrosity—on a visual resemblance between the image and the object it represents. On the other hand, one might consider practices of de-mediatization that do not so much shift the core substance of the subject but try to grasp the subject from its periphery. For example, users of the photo sharing website Pinterest can pin collections of pictures including descriptions on virtual walls and propagate

sequences of images that compartmentalize the subject into endless attributes without generating a meaningful center.

7. Media Practices of Creating Anonymity

Practices of creating anonymity are widely common on online platforms, where they confront the physiognomic code with its own withdrawal, absence or disappearance. The transition (Figure 3) from the face to its possible evaporation and imagelessness can be shown based on numerous exemplary practices of creating visual anonymity. I would like to use the following example to demonstrate that the visual strategies for the dissolution of self-representation always oscillate between the poles of removal and affiliation, between reversing and recreating anonymity.

Figure 3. Image strategies of anonymization are based on the stereotypical use of known images. Source: Pixabay.

In reference to the German model casting show "Germany's Next Topmodel", the visual filler text "Unfortunately, I don't have a photo for you today" points to the selective mechanisms of visual self-representation. What seems to me the most relevant observation in this context is that the imagelessness in the social web that attempts to win users a minimum of substance, privacy and opacity at least indirectly, must not be equated with a radical act of de-personalization in that practices of creating anonymity always include instances of addressed communication that are also partly inherent to the images themselves. Even those images that are used to create anonymity, addressing the face as a formation of action including identification,

assessment and evaluation, participate in a collective stock of images and refer to mutually shared negotiation processes, controversies and demarcations.

8. Conclusions

Strategies of facial dissolution may be identified as “resistance” against procedures of personal registration and identification on online platforms and social network sites. It still remains open in this context whether “old action programs and settings” will be reintroduced along with these practices of facial dissolution. First of all, I was looking at the homogenizing dichotomy of “old” versus “new” and ask whether facial dissolutions correspond to tendencies of de-mediatization making recourse to “old”, “overcome” or “defensive” action. In the case of the defacement of personal profile pictures that operate with the withdrawal, the fragility and the inconsistency of the digital countenance, a pure dichotomy between new and old image-related action on the part of the agents involved cannot be established for the following reasons:

1. The types of deconstruction of the facial appearance of profile pictures I have addressed by way of example in my analysis aim at representation within the formal specifications of digital action programs. They address inter-subjectivity via visual media, thus more or less blanking out the computer in its capacity as a computing medium. In this respect, my examples of visual de-mediatization are primarily meant as socially conveyed forms of self-thematization-images. While aestheticizing practices of facial dissolution reflect the place of facial representation as a venue of recognition and identification procedures, they are unable to fundamentally change the media dispositive for creating biometrical features and facial semantization.
2. The practices of de-mediatization I have addressed in my analysis can be counted as a gain in distinction when users use their strategies of creating anonymity to build up their image. Accordingly, instances of de-mediatization of the subject constitute a prerequisite for instances of reflecting re-mediatization users use to communicate their criticism of their own “datafication”.

The examples of the dissolution of visual cultural patterns of self-thematization oscillate between instances of de-mediatization and those of re-mediatization. They are configured to break with certain conventions and constellations of self-representation on the one hand and to build compatible boundary objects on the other. These boundary objects of de-mediatization can be compatible with heterogeneous interest groups and constitute a low threshold for entry to various kinds of communication and action contexts.

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New Selfie Precedents

“First Ever Selfie Cover!”: *Cosmopolitan* Magazine, Influencers, and the Mainstreaming of Selfie Style

Mehita Iqani

Abstract: This paper offers a critical analysis of a single image: the recently published “first ever selfie cover” of *Cosmopolitan* magazine (the South African edition) published in March 2019. The image features three South African “influencers”, and was purportedly taken by the women themselves, using a remote shutter release attached to a cable. In examining the image that was included on the cover, I make an argument about both its aesthetics and politics. In terms of the former, I examine the production values and composition of the image and consider how it relates to selfie style as understood in scholarship so far. In terms of the latter, I consider the extent to which the naming of the image as a selfie intersects with claims made about the genre’s capacity to empower and reshape oppressive visual culture. I argue that this case study shows how the selfie has been appropriated into mainstream commercial visual culture. This case study is situated within relevant scholarship to do with the consumer magazine and selfies, before the image in question is introduced and contextualised. Finally, the chapter develops an analytical argument about the aesthetics and politics of the commercial appropriation of selfie imagery.

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to reflect on some of the ways in which selfie culture has become mainstreamed and appropriated by powerful commercial institutions that both construct and profit from particular narratives of consumption and aspiration, such as women’s magazines. Specifically, I examine a particular case study, the so-called “first ever selfie cover” of the South African edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which was published in February 2019. In examining the image that was included on the cover, I make an argument about both its aesthetics and politics. In terms of the former, I examine the production values and design of the image and consider how it relates to selfie style as understood in scholarship so far. In terms of the latter, I consider the extent to which the naming of the image as a selfie intersects with claims made about genre’s capacity to empower and reshape oppressive visual culture. This chapter is structured as follows: first, I situate this case study within relevant scholarship to do with the consumer magazine and selfies; second, I introduce the image in question and discuss its composition and dissemination; third, I develop an

analytical argument about the aesthetics and politics of the commercial appropriation of selfie imagery.

2. *Cosmopolitan* Magazine, Glossy Covers, and Selfies

A huge amount of research has been done on magazines, and a detailed discussion of this is outside of the scope of this paper (though refer to Iqani (2012b) for an indicative summary of classic literature on the genre, as well as Rooks et al. (2016) for a sense of new emerging scholarship on magazines). In terms of work specific to the *Cosmopolitan* brand, a similar wealth of scholarship is evident, which is worth briefly touching upon. The history of the magazine has been written, with its roots in the White feminism of the 1960s and how this was embodied in the life and career of the *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley-Brown (Hauser 2016; Scanlon 2010) and its links to the rise of feminised consumer culture has also received attention (Landers 2010) and, of course, critique from feminist scholars (McCracken 1982, 1993). The extent to which the "fun fearless female" discourse is globalised (and localised) in various national editions of the magazine has been articulated (Machin and van Leeuwen 2005; Machin and Thornborrow 2003; Machin and van Leeuwen 2003). How the magazine intersected with traditional culture in Taiwan has been explored (Chang 2004), how its advertising content in various national editions differs in terms of its sexuality (Nelson and Paek 2005) and in terms of strategies and tactics (Nelson and Paek 2007) has been compared. The racial dynamics of representation in the magazine has been considered, with scholars making arguments about the ways in which whiteness is prioritised in various national editions of the magazine, for example, Indonesia (Saraswati 2010). How the magazine gives relationship advice has been studied (Gupta et al. 2008; Gill 2009), how it narrates women's sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s has been analysed (McMahon 1990), that the poses and postures adopted by the women featured in the magazine are similar to those shown in *Playboy* has been demonstrated (Krassas et al. 2001), and how it reproduces the deterministic sociobiological narratives of gender has been articulated (Hasinoff 2009; Saraceno and Tambling 2013). In addition, how audiences read and interpret the magazine has been explored (McCleneghan 2003; Donnelly 2008).

Alongside this breadth of research on *Cosmopolitan* magazine, some key perspectives on the cover as genre are worth considering in a little more depth, as context. As Caroline Kitch has noted, the "girl on the magazine cover" has a long legacy (Kitch 2001), and magazines have played a key role in constructing gendered stereotypes of women in American culture. Furthermore, as I have written about at some length, cover imagery on consumer magazines plays a key role in constructing and disseminating the core values of neoliberal consumer culture in the West, including individualised narratives of commodity acquisition, sexiness, and consumer self-hood (Iqani 2012b; McCracken 1993). Close-up portraits of the faces of

famous people or models on the covers of women's magazines can function as key resources in individual identity projects, signalled through the invitation to imagine the self, encoded in the intimate eye-contact of almost life-size portraits (Iqani 2012b, pp. 140–58). The texture and sensibility of glossiness on the magazine cover plays a key role in the creation of the idea of celebrity as well as the general desirability of mass market commodities (Iqani 2012b, pp. 82–102). Women's bodies and cars are similarly represented on the covers of men's magazines, in such a way that the smoothness of both types of bodywork contributes to a process of commodification (Iqani 2012a). These perspectives on the discursive work done by magazine covers shows that they can be theorised as one of the key sites in the consumer media economy. In many ways, the magazine cover stands in synecdoche for the entire media economy of consumer culture: it is at once an advert (for the magazine content itself, for the celebrity brands featured, for the commodities worn by the cover stars) and a site through which media owners sell the attention of their audiences on to advertisers. As an iconic genre of commercial media, the magazine cover remains relatively influential in popular culture, despite the rise of interactive digital media platforms. Indeed, recent research has shown that readers remain attracted to the glossy aesthetic of the magazine (Webb and Fulton 2019).

In the past ten years, social media sites have arguably become equally powerful sites for the communication of consumer values, practices, and identities. YouTube remains one of the most prolific and popular platforms through which young people can create and share content, often through video blogs or 'vlogs' in which a selfie-style of filming is central (Burgess and Green 2018). Instagram could be seen as the new "magazine" due to its unparalleled ability to curate and disseminate visual content and, indeed, it has been favoured as a platform for those who work in and consume fashion, art, and other forms of creative expression (Lee et al. 2015). Instagram is one of the most widely used social media platforms. At the time of writing, the platform claimed to have 1 billion active users. It is used not only by individuals sharing visual narratives of their lives, but by advertisers and corporations who use it as a platform for communicating their brands (Chen 2018). One of the key features of the rise of digital media and the broad uptake of social media platforms by so many is the rise of the selfie. One of the key uses to which social media are put is self-expression, and this often takes the form of literal imaging of the self: the selfie (Murray 2015). This can serve as a route to a new form of celebritydom, being "instafamous" (Marwick 2015). Selfie culture is, to an extent, produced by celebrities, for example, Kim Kardashian, who became famous partly through her prolific and sexy self-representation on social media (McClain 2013). Celebrities regularly share glamorous selfies as a mode of keeping an intimate sense of connection alive with their fans (Iqani 2016, pp. 160–92). An argument could be made that many selfies imitate the kind of glamorous portraiture seen on magazine covers, especially in

the highly stylised sexy selfies that young women (cis and trans) often create and share online.

The rise of selfie culture has been documented, in depth, by a blooming field of critical visual studies and media studies. Purportedly a photograph of a person taken by that person using a mobile smartphone, laptop computer, or another digital device, the selfie must be understood as both an object and practice, that is both a commodity form and a consumer practice (Iqani and Schroeder 2016). In terms of the former, the selfie needs to be seen as a thing that has a genealogy, linking it to other forms of everyday visual culture, such as the snapshot (Schroeder 2013). In terms of the latter, the selfie is a particular genre of visual communication that signals the participation of ordinary people in mainstream visual culture. Some scholars have argued that the selfie should be understood as an emancipatory form of communication, in that the person who is featured in the images is in charge of the framing, taking, and disseminating of that image. Indeed, selfies are being used by several marginalised groups to make statements about belonging and being (Frosh 2015; Nemer and Freeman 2015), including for example trans and queer individuals (Vivienne 2017) and refugees (Chouliaraki 2017). Arguably, the selfie can be understood neither as purely empowering nor as evidence of wholesale buy in to consumer culture (Kedzior and Allen 2016). With many scholars contributing to the debate on the moral positionality of the selfie within popular culture (Senft and Baym 2015; Thumim 2017; Cruz and Thornham 2015; Kuntsman 2017), what remains clear is that selfies have become an increasingly less controversial aspect of digital culture and consumer culture. Indeed, the question arises as to whether the selfie has become so "everyday" that it has been mainstreamed onto the cover of a magazine.

3. *Cosmopolitan*'s "First Ever Selfie Cover"

The US edition of *Cosmopolitan* was first published in 1886 (Landers 2010, p. vii), and once revived by the vision of Helen Gurley Brown in the 1960s (Hauser 2016), quickly went on to become a global media brand. In South Africa, the title was published by Associated Magazines, owned and managed by the powerful Raphaely family. The South African edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine was published from 1984 (Donnelly 2001, p. 5) and closed up shop in 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. True to the global brand values of "fun fearless female", it consistently produced content that spoke to the perceived interests of its target market: sex, fashion, careers, relationships, and beauty. In its 2019 advertising rate card, *Cosmopolitan* South Africa claimed a total audience of 1.9 million, and a combined social media following of 975,000. In 2017, it appointed, arguably, its first ever millennial editor,

Holly Meadows, a young White woman[1] with a degree from the University of Cape Town, who stated that her aim was to take the title "into the future" and integrate a digital sensibility into its brand positioning and content (Tennant 2017). One of the innovations that Meadows introduced was an issue dedicated to "influencers" and the first "influencer" edition was published in March 2018, featuring studio portraits of three chosen Instagram influencers, with customers able to choose a magazine featuring their favourite of the three. In 2019, the magazine published its second "influencer" issue in partnership with YouTube. According to the press release announcing this "historic" magazine edition, the cover features a selfie, a first for the brand: "On the magazine's March 2019 cover are local influencers Mihlali Ndamase, Nadia Jaftha and Jessica Van Heerden. *Cosmopolitan* editor Holly Meadows said she chose the three influencers because they are the most recognisable female talents on YouTube right now" (Associated Magazines 2019). The cover is framed as a collaboration between YouTube and *Cosmopolitan*. To give some sense of each of the influencer's reach, their followings on key social media platforms (at the time of writing) are summarised in Table 1. All three young women are notable in that they have gained fame and recognition through their creation of social media content, usually oriented around their social lives and consumption of commodities, such as fashion, make-up, hair treatments (which have historically been stereotyped as female and feminine but which are increasingly appealing to a broader spectrum of masculine, non-binary, and queer consumers). In a previous generation, they may have been termed "glamour models" or "socialites", but due to their social media presence, they are known as "influencers" in millennial culture.

Table 1. The social media reach of the three influencer cover models.

Influencer	Known For	YouTube	Instagram	Twitter
Mihlali Ndamase	Beauty, Lifestyle	170,000	773,000	196,000
Nadia Jaftha	Pranks, Beauty, Music	37,000	323,000	16,500
Jessica Van Heerden	Beauty, Lifestyle	38,800	23,600	700

There is an emerging literature on influencers, with some key observations being made about the links between them and brand management (Booth and Matic 2011; Burns 2016; Uzunoğlu and Kip 2014; Veirman et al. 2017), cultural labour and value creation (Abidin 2017; Iqani 2019; Khamis et al. 2017), and gender (Abidin 2016). Some important writing has also mapped out the relationship

[1] Only a handful of Black women have been appointed as editor of *Cosmopolitan* South Africa, with Sbu Mpungose only serving nine months in the role in 2012 (as reported in Sowetan Live, 17 September 2012).

between young women and content creation on YouTube (Banet-Weiser 2017, 2012; Duffy 2017; Duffy and Hund 2015; Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017). As the image in question in this chapter shows, YouTube remains a key site through which millennial self-expression is operationalised. The public profiles of three of the women featured on the *Cosmopolitan* cover can be understood in relation to this literature, as all three have strong followings on YouTube and Instagram (though rather strangely, while Ndamase and Jaftha have strong Twitter followings, Van Heerden does not).

Figure 1. A screenshot from the Instagram profile of one of the influencers featured in the selfie cover, Mihlali Ndamase.

The cover image (see Figure 1) shows the three influencers clustered around a small white cube, with Ndamase in the centre, holding a remote shutter release attached to a cable. Ndamase leans forward with her hand on the cube, and the two other women, Jaftha and Van Heerden, are positioned slightly behind her, each holding up a hand with the palm facing the camera. All three are dressed in trendy, bold streetwear: Van Heerden in a houndstooth miniskirt and jacket with a bikini top underneath, Ndamase in an orange sports jacket and huge hoop earrings, and Jaftha in a gold lamé shirt and chequered trilby. While Ndamase grins delightedly, Van Heerden narrows her eyes and grimaces in punk style, and Jaftha

scowls glamorously. All three influencers released the same image on their Instagram profiles simultaneously, presumably timed with the magazine's availability in stores, featuring slightly differently worded captions in which all enthuse about their honour at being featured on the cover alongside the other two, expressing their gratitude for the recognition and collaboration, and tagging the *Cosmopolitan* SA Instagram handle and the other two women.

In terms of the composition of the image, the only thing that suggests that it is a selfie is the presence of the remote shutter release. In photography, there are multiple technologies available for taking self-portraits, including timer settings that delay the shutter release, wireless remote shutter releases that can be easily hidden by the self-portrait photographer, and even, more recently, digital cameras with sensor technologies that recognise hand gestures (Chu and Tanaka 2011). It is, therefore, significant that the team that assembled the cover selfie chose to use a cabled shutter release device. What the cable and the device in Ndamase's hand signifies is that it was she who made the decision about when to take the photograph, that she pushed the button, so to speak. Whether or not the cable and shutter release device were simply props or were actually deployed by Ndamase as indicated in the image is not clear from any of the promotional material shared about the image. This agency—being both the subject of the photograph and the person who takes it—is at the heart of how selfies have been defined in critical cultural studies. And it is this agency that *Cosmo* accentuates in its promotional write up about the cover, that the "YouTube stars" are "taking (and calling) the shots, literally and figuratively" (Marcopolous 2019). But the *Cosmo* selfie, aside perhaps from the general sense of youthful fashionability and trendy defiance communicated in the postures, gestures, expressions, and outfits of the three influencers, carries few other indications of the selfie genre as it has been understood in the scholarship. Selfies have been largely defined as low-fi images, taken on smartphones or handheld devices in the flow of everyday life, and sharing a certain texture of the ordinary. For example, many selfies are taken in mirrors in bathrooms or even while seated on the toilet (hardly glamorous locations), on public transport, in the home after putting on make-up, or on social occasions with friends. By contrast, the *Cosmo* selfie is clearly taken in a studio setting, with a professional backdrop and lighting, and with professional stylists and make-up artists. In a "behind the scenes" YouTube video posted by van Heerden, the professional photography studio setup is documented, as well as the team of experts present. The *Cosmopolitan* image seems to be suggesting that the only thing that makes a selfie a selfie is that the person in the image is the one that pressed the shutter release, and that the inclusion of highly professional settings and strategies does not change this. As well as having been professionally produced, the image tells a story about how the discourse and aesthetic of the selfie has come to

take on new meanings, other than those already identified in the literature. It is to this thematic that I turn next.

4. The Design of the Influencer Cover Selfie

In true magazine cover style, the cover selfie is very glossy and glamorous. The three women in the *Cosmo* self-portrait are immaculately dressed and styled. They are wearing the latest fashions, each has carefully styled hair and perfect make-up, including conspicuous manicures. The textures of their clothes, skin, and hair communicate youth and stereotypical feminine beauty. We can see the texture of glossiness in operation in the magazine cover. Magazine covers are smooth, glossy objects; so too are the subjects featured on them. Of course, by virtue of having their images placed on the magazine cover, the message is that they are celebrities. The tagline "the influencer issue" boldly states the reason for their treatment as celebrities: by virtue of having achieved instafame, they are now being validated in the iconic media genre that signals celebrity status: the magazine cover. As such, the message is clear: being an influencer is a direct route to becoming a celebrity. A callout bubble promises that a feature inside the magazine will teach readers "how to make bank on insta"; that is, how to monetise social media profiles and become effective, and well-paid, online influencers. Interestingly, the text and image combine to create a new message about celebrity, as well as how both traditional and digital media interact in the project of celebritisation. Here, we see the magazine cover operating as a space in which consumer subjecthood is produced and validated. Successful self-promotion on social media can lead to mainstream validation on magazines, in television, and so on. While this route to visibility might promise to give marginalised people an equal chance at recognition (and the income that comes with it), in this specific image, we see instead neoliberal consumer culture succeeding in reproducing its values in multiple media sectors. While, on the one hand, the selfie is an organic media form, built by ordinary people from the ground up and used to stake a claim of being and belonging in visual culture, the self-portrait has also been a tool used by elites to communicate power. Indeed, in the rise of the selfie itself, commercial strategies and consumerist aesthetics have played a central role (consider the rise of Kim Kardashian, her fame almost entirely produced through sexy, glossy, self-representation online) (Kardashian West 2015). While some selfies are snapshots, in the everyday sense, especially in celebrity culture, selfies also play a central role in producing the glossy, glamorous aesthetic that communicates fame. Indeed, many "ordinary" women use various types of selfies to try to construct a glossy, glamorous, and hyperfeminine sensibility in their own personal social media narratives (Marwick 2015).

That the cover photograph features three women is key. As South Africa is a multicultural society with a history of racial oppression, the racial make-up of the

three women is important to note. Ndamase is Black African, Jaftha is Indian (in South Africa, a designation categorising citizens of South Asian descent), and Van Heerden is White. The "diversity" of the image more or less ends there, as all three women are young, feminine, beautiful, and slim. Notably, the lighting and postproduction of the image brings a very similar resonance to the skin tones of all three women. Jaftha and Van Heerden both wear their hair blonde and straight, though in different lengths, and Ndamase wears a long curly weave, scraped back from her face into a voluptuous ponytail. The choice of outfits is not typically heteronormative or hyperfeminine, with Jaftha's hat introducing a mildly androgynous feel, and Ndamase's tight shorts, sports bra, and gold hoop earrings suggesting an inner-city sporty atmosphere. Precisely because they are not wearing ballgowns or cocktail dresses, as is often the case on *Cosmo*, the three come across as youthful, hip, and irreverent, which represents online youth culture.

The typical aesthetic for the *Cosmopolitan* cover is of a single celebrity or model, usually cropped in a very similar way, at the hips or thigh and crown of the head, wearing a "sexy", revealing outfit, glamorously styled, and gazing out at the viewer making direct eye contact. Breaking with this tradition, the "selfie cover" features three woman in a carefully arranged group portrait. This mimics one of the key subgenres of the selfie—the group selfie, when one person in a group of friends uses the selfie function to capture everyone together, either simply with the arm outstretched or using a selfie-stick. As Jonathan Schroeder has argued, the use of group portraiture in commercial communication has a long history, stretching from the Dutch masters through to portraits of the community of creatives in Andy Warhol's factory (Schroeder 2008). In group portraits, the positioning of each subject is key, and usually carefully orchestrated to say something about their social standing and relationships to the others. Consider the famous group selfie of Ellen DeGeneres at the Oscars in 2014 (Kedzior et al. 2016), and how it displayed the links between that year's A-list performers. As the most "powerful" influencer, in terms of the numbers of her followings on her various social media platforms, Ndamase is placed in the middle of the image and leans into its foreground and, crucially, is given the power (be it symbolic or actual) of taking the image through the shutter control. The other two influencers, in keeping with their slightly more modest reaches, are set slightly back from Ndamase, and through their hand gestures, collaborate in framing the shot. The effect is something like a portrait of a pop band, with the sense that Ndamase is the lead singer and Van Heerden and Jaftha the back-up singers. The message sent here is that in the project of monetising influence, numbers matter more than anything, and it is because of her superior reach to audiences that Ndamase is "in charge" of this image. It is nevertheless crucial that Ndamase is not featured singly in the cover image (as was the choice with the 2018 influencers featured), but that the three influencers share the space. This communicates something about the collaborative

and community aspects of social media, that influence and reach is built through tangible networks, both the technological networks of the internet that span the globe and the devices that connect, and the human networks of aspiration, status, and taste that connect people socially. These connections are hinted at by choice of a group portrait for the cover selfie and is echoed in the complimentary comments that each of the influencers wrote when posting the cover image. In this context, the critique of narcissism that is often levelled against selfies, especially when taken by young women, falls a bit flat, because of the support and camaraderie being portrayed in the group image and the ways in which it was shared by all the women in the image.

While the three influencers are "celebritised" by the cover, that is, validated as having sufficient fame, recognition, and beauty to be featured on the cover of one of the most popular magazines in the country, they too serve to validate the magazine's brand. In service of the goal of making the brand more digitally relevant and reaching an audience of young millennial readers, digital natives, it is increasingly urgent that mainstream media brands, especially those that were born in a pre-digital age, situate themselves as relevant to that audience. Drawing on the vernacular of the selfie, taking it for granted as something that young women and groups of friends do with their smartphones, possibly every day, *Cosmopolitan* is not only validating selfie culture but telling young women that the brand understands them and can speak for them. As such, there is a kind of branded symbiosis taking place in the image, not only between *Cosmopolitan* and YouTube, who collaborated on the "influencer" issue, but also between the individual brands of each "influencer" and the established media companies. Through the selfie cover, the brand of the magazine and the brands of the influencers are collaborating to promote one another on their respective platforms—the three young women offer *Cosmopolitan* exposure to their followers, and *Cosmopolitan* offers them exposure to their readers, helping both to build their followings and reach. Considering how classic media economics operates, the attention of audiences is the only really monetizable asset that any media brand can own.

5. The Politics of the Commercial Appropriation of the Selfie

By naming the image on the cover as a "selfie" in its promotional material, *Cosmopolitan* is explicitly signifying that it handed over representational power to the women in the picture. It is worth considering how much control the three women had over the image. As consummate self-representors, it would be amiss to assume that they were completely controlled by the magazine's production team. This said, it would be equally amiss to assume that they were fully in charge of every aspect of the image. The collaborative aspect of the image, that it was produced together by the influencers and the magazine, signalled by the handheld remote shutter release, suggests that there might have been an equal play of decision making

between both the subjects of the image and its producers. This particular selfie signals a wholesale buy-in to the commercial power of mainstream media and celebrity culture. It also represents the extent to which the taking of a selfie can be monetised and commoditised. In setting up the image, *Cosmopolitan* is producing what I will term a "professional selfie". A professional selfie can be understood to be a hybrid of the generic components of online, everyday visual self-expression and studio photography, and that seeks to mobilise the most powerful communicative aspects of each: the claim to authenticity of the former, and the glossy glamour of the latter. Of course, I am not suggesting that the image discussed in this paper is the first iteration of a professional selfie; I am simply using it to help delineate a new terminology for understanding the intersections of commercial culture and selfie aesthetics.

It would be incorrect to assume that the commercial application of the selfie, that is, putting one on the cover of a magazine, is a radical departure from selfie culture. Jonathan Schroeder has written about how the snapshot aesthetic has been appropriated by advertising that seeks to communicate a brand's sense of authenticity (Schroeder 2013); the same dynamic is arguably at play here. Selfies are more than snapshots that feature a moment in a person's life, they are also pieces of communication that, to an extent, build identity in personal brands. Many scholars have written about how the notion of self-branding is becoming central to the practices that young people undertake online (Gandini 2016; Khamis et al. 2017; Banet-Weiser 2012). From this perspective, the selfie is not a form of popular culture that has been appropriated by the powers of commerce, but it is a form of commercial imagery in its own right, and has been for some time, as Kim Kardashian has shown. Of course, this perspective is rooted in a very neoliberal conception of the self: as a sign of both identity and income, as well as a sign of both personal brand and profitability. These values have arguably become intensified in recent years, and with the rise of digital media, the forms of self-presentation that take place online are increasingly being linked to ideas about career prospects, marketability, and success (Dutta 2010). The image under discussion in this paper sums up, in some ways, the neoliberal narrative about success and how it is produced through individualised online self-representation. The three influencers featured had, long before the opportunity to model on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine came along, decided to share stories and images about themselves online and find ways to monetise those narratives. As such, they are, in a sense, uber-successful neoliberal subjects who have cleverly and strategically used the opportunities presented by digital media platforms to forge media careers for themselves. Being on the *Cosmo* cover is a signal of them having "arrived", having succeeded in their content creation work and, thereby, having gained wide recognition. They already sold themselves through their personal social media platforms and video blogs and, arguably, there is little

difference between that and selling themselves on the cover of a magazine. As their effusive commentary on their Instagram posts of the cover reveals, all three consider the opportunity empowering. They say: "blessings on blessings" (Ndamase), "I'm so proud, what a privilege" (Jaftha), and "so proud WOW" (Van Heerden).

Of course, it is important to not read too much into the success and agency, both individual and collective, claimed by the image. As many writers critiquing post-feminist culture have articulated (Dosekun 2020; Gill 2007, 2008; Gill and Scharff 2011), while claims to consumer self-hood and individualistic achievement are prioritised by neoliberal culture, the extent to which women are truly liberated (be it economically or socially) by an inherently patriarchal economic system requires ongoing critique, especially when that so-called empowerment looks very similar to what used to be considered oppression (for example, when women are validated only when they have money, show their bodies, and act sexually permissive). While Ndamase, van Heerden, and Jaftha are all performing a particular narrative of personal success, materialistic beauty, and economic freedom in their group self-portrait, they also conform to many of the limiting narratives about those things that serve the power structures of consumer culture. While on the one hand, they are narrating how they achieved fame by being their authentic selves and gained a following through choosing when and how to represent their stories, lives, and personalities, on the other hand, an argument can be made that they were precisely successful at this project because they already conformed, to a significant extent, to a pre-determined idea of what a young, successful (cishet) woman looks like and how she acts. There is a deeply circular logic at play. *Cosmopolitan* chose these three influencers to be on their cover because, as the editor said, they have achieved recognition on YouTube. However, the kind of recognition that they have produced for themselves already fits very much with the *Cosmopolitan* brand image: a cursory look at the vlogs and Instagram profiles of each woman reveals a strong focus on make-up, clothing, socialising, parties, the easy, sexy display of their bodies, a strong orientation towards wealth as a life goal, and an unquestioned acceptance of heteronormative popular culture. These strategies fit directly with the *Cosmopolitan* brand of being fun and fearless, sexy and successful, career-oriented, and confident. What came first, the *Cosmopolitan* post-feminist brand, or the influencers' performance of the same values in their own personal brands? It is possible that the aspiring influencers, in forging their online personae and crafting their content, took reference from the many existing powerful consumerist and post-feminist discourses available in mainstream media culture, including of course, the influential *Cosmopolitan* brand.

Although it might be tempting to write the image off as yet another example of the exploitation of women by patriarchal culture through the performance of self-internalised forms of body work, management, and beauty required by consumer culture in order to be considered fierce, fun, and fearless (a *Cosmo* girl, in charge of

her career, her body, and her looks, but still sexy, pleasing to the heteronormative gaze, and a wholesale champion of market exchange), it is nevertheless important to take seriously the ways in which the three influencers have been able to exercise their agency. These can be read off the image in the collaborative sense of their playful participation in creating it together, as well as in their confident, even irreverent expressions, gestures, and postures. While they clearly had some say in their image (perhaps more than any cover model before them), they also were controlled by the styling, lighting, and postproduction processes that were implemented by the magazine itself, as well as by the discursive strategies of the *Cosmopolitan* brand.

All of this said, however, and no matter how lucrative being an influencer and making online content has been for each woman featured in the selfie cover, their particular financial and cultural empowerment needs to be considered in the bigger picture of the media economy. Powerful corporate media brands like *Cosmopolitan* magazine have a great deal more power and influence than aspiring video bloggers—at least for the time being. While there may emerge exceptions in the future—for example, should one of the influencers supersede the *Cosmopolitan* reach in their personal viewership and do a better job than *Cosmo* at creating content that young viewers and readers want to consume—for now, it is still the big media companies and brands to which the influencers aspire to gain access and validation. It is *Cosmopolitan* that, for now, has the greater reach in terms of audience and greater resources to maintain, and communicate with, that audience.

This chapter has shown how, through innovative partnerships across the online and offline realms, and between formal media institutions and self-made media entrepreneurs, the selfie has been mainstreamed into commercial magazine culture, creating a new genre, the "professional selfie". These can be used to build the brands of all parties involved, by reaching out to a millennial audience using its own vernacular. Although the selfie has been mainstreamed and professionalised, it is a very specific version of the selfie (both in content and form) that has achieved this crossover. By deploying strategies of glossiness and a post-feminist sensibility, the *Cosmo* selfie cover functions more like a magazine cover and less like a selfie, regardless of the fact that the person who pushed the shutter button was in the centre of the image. As such, future critical thinking about selfies will need to accommodate new ways of understanding how this mode of communication can be commoditised and appropriated by profit-oriented media actors.

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Self-Image as Intervention: Travis Alabanza and the New Ontology of Portrait Photography

Ace Lehner

Abstract: A close analysis of the Instagram feed of Black British, gender-non-conforming, trans-femme performance artist Travis Alabanza reveals their production of non-binary, trans-femme iconography via the social media platform Instagram as a timely and necessary intervention into contemporary culture. In self-imaging complex, expansive, and intersectional identity, Alabanza's oeuvre not only produces new visual exemplars, but constitutes an imperative and complex representation that defies the stereotypes and erasures of such constituencies produced by dominant culture, while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of photography and self-portraiture. To understand the nuances and interventions of Alabanza's self-images, this chapter will model a trans-visual studies approach, in which methods of analysis are co-informed by the object of study. Alabanza's work unfixes the photograph, breaking open the space between looking at a surface of a picture and the person referenced by the image. Simultaneously, Alabanza's interest in surface is not superficial; the images seem to encourage us to view aesthetics as being about communicating, identity, play, performativity, and in discourse with numerous visualities and aesthetic languages, including gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations.

1. Introduction

In an image posted on their Instagram feed, on 13 January 2020, Travis Alabanza wears a dark pinstriped blazer, open in the front over a lacey red and black bra and dark, high-waisted pinstriped suit bottoms (see Figure 1). Their hair is straight and long, a gold hoop earring catches the side light coming from what might be a nearby window; they lean back toward the bare white wall behind them in a slightly sultry pose, lips pursed, cat eyes looking directly at us through the picture plane.[1] Alabanza is mobilizing a sophisticated and sexy version of themself, a non-binary femme-ness unabashedly wearing a bra while having a slightly hairy chest. They take up the central location in the frame, cropped at the hips, with a small amount of negative space above their head, frontal facing in shallow pictorial space; the framing, frontality and composition of the image references the aesthetics of a long tradition

[1] Alabanza's appropriate pronouns are the singular uses of the pronouns they/them/theirs.

of Western portraiture, traceable back to the sixteenth century.[2] However, here, the aesthetics of the image-maker/subject are a radical intervention into the visual field. Rather than a cis Caucasian man self-imaging via entrenched art historical materials, Alabanza disrupts aesthetic and media-based hierarchies and traditions of self-portraiture.[3]

The ethos of Travis Alabanza's self-imaging praxis does not embody a desire to create positive visibility, but rather to be understood outside of current regimes of visualities. Moreover, while Alabanza lives and makes images in a location ideologically invested in the idea that *seeing is knowing*, Alabanza's self-image photographs are performed as intentional interventions into visual culture, and are challenging the very understanding of representation, portraiture and visual encounters.[4]

Trans self-image makers like Alabanza are invested in challenging how we have come to view and conceptualize representation and photography in the so-called "West." Alabanza's work unfixes the photograph, breaking open the space between looking at a surface of a picture and the person referenced by the image. Simultaneously, Alabanza's interest in surface is not superficial; the images seem to encourage us to view surface aesthetics as about communicating, identity, play, performativity, and in discourse with numerous visualities and aesthetic languages, including gender, racialization, class, and subcultural affiliations. The Instagram feed of Alabanza, in its production of non-binary, trans-femme iconography, presents a timely and necessary intervention into Western visual culture, bringing into being complex, expansive and intersectional identities while reworking Western concepts of photography and portraiture. Alabanza's oeuvre not only produces new visual exemplars, but their Instagram feed constitutes an imperative and complex representation that defies the stereotypes and erasures of such constituencies

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[2] See my introductory chapter in this volume (Lehner 2021).

[3] This chapter aims to interrogate what Alabanza's self-images on social media are doing as an intervention in discourses photographic portraiture and identity representations. In this chapter, I will not focus extensively on the debates around selfies. I have traced these in the introduction of this book (Lehner 2021). I have also written more on the debates around self-portraiture and selfies in "A Multi-Dimensional Matrix of Visual Apprehension: The Gender-Non-Conforming Selfies of Alok Vaid-Menon," in *Trans Representations: Non-Binary Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography* (Lehner 2020) ProQuest ID: Lehner_ucsc_0036E_12015. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5rn8jgp. For other sources on debates within selfies and self-portraiture, see (Cruz and Thornham 2015; Schlief 2004). Moreover, see (Murray 2015; Giroux 2015; Goldberg 2017; Gorichanaz 2019).

[4] It is important to note that the very idea of being able to create "positive visibility" is itself a misconception; representations can never remedy social issues and injustice, but rather are always bound up with the negotiation of identity. Many feminist scholars have made this point; see, for example, Solomon-Godeau (1991). Similarly, one could discuss this as a feminist practice of narcissism in conversation with what Amelia Jones has observed regarding the female [in this case femme] narcissist as being a threat to patriarchal systems as she (or they) makes the male viewer irrelevant as she (or they) need no confirmation from him of their "desirability." (Jones 1998).

produced by dominant culture, while simultaneously challenging our previously held conceptions of photography and self-portraiture.

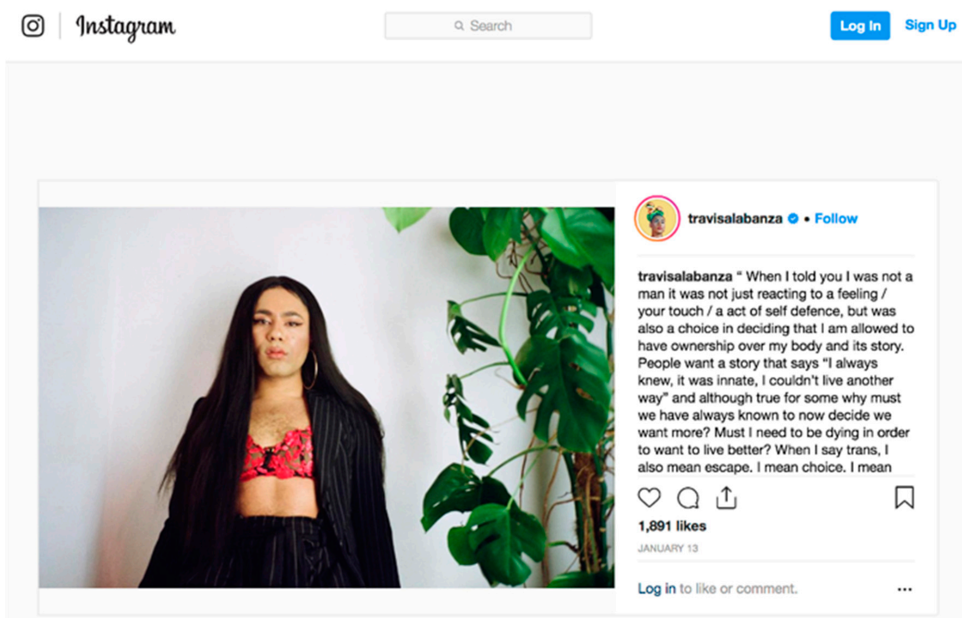

Figure 1. Self-Image of Travis Alabanza on their Instagram feed, posted 13 January 2020. Source: Screen grab image courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza via Instagram messaging exchange 21 December 2020.

To understand the nuances and interventions of Alabanza's self-images, this chapter will model a trans visual studies approach, in which methods of analysis are co-informed by the object of study. Wherein I aim to attend to the specificity of Alabanza's self-imaging and undo essentialist ideas about interpreting work. In order to situate the discussion of Alabanza's self-images, I will briefly discuss key points in the representation of trans femmes in visual culture, the discursive framing of photography in the West, and the intersecting visually oppressive regimes of racialization and gender as bound up with representation and identity formation. I will then briefly situate Instagram as an extension of contemporary photographic art practices, and finally, I will attend to Alabanza's work as an intervention into the above-outlined areas.

2. Travis Alabanza

Predominantly known for their work in performance, Black British, non-binary, trans femme artist Travis Alabanza grew up in working-class Bristol, England,

and is currently based in London, active in the performance and theatre scenes there.[5] In 2017, Alabanza became the youngest recipient of the artist in residence at the Tate workshop program. They've performed in venues such as the ICA, the Roundhouse, and Barbican. Alabanza has toured throughout Europe and the United States in hundreds of venues (Minamore 2019; Pengelly 2019; Rasmussen 2019; Sanyang-Meek 2016).[6] Using the platform Instagram, Alabanza inserts radical aesthetics into the visual field, critically engaging in discourses of trans identity formations, photography, and representation. Blurring distinctions between self-portraiture and selfies, the use of Instagram by image-makers like Alabanza mobilizes the platform as an ever-evolving, self-curated solo exhibition of self-portraiture. This not only presents a challenge to how we think of and define portraiture and photographic practice, but also confounds the way in which stereotypes of marginalized constituencies are established. Rather than creating static and reductive representations that narrowly demonstrate essentialized ways of being an acceptable trans subject, Alabanza's self-representations present a diversity of potential ways of being non-binary and Black, while the specifics of Instagram also facilitate that they speak for themself.

Alabanza's self-images defy Western, binary gender aesthetic expectations, juxtaposing symbols assigned to the category of masculinity (the hairy chest or five o'clock shadow) with aesthetics assigned the role of femininity (red lips, floral crop top, and long hair). Standing shoulders-back, eyes meeting ours through the picture plane, Alabanza presents an empowered figure who is disinterested in performing within the frameworks of binary gender. Through their mobilization of self-image and text, Alabanza invites us to reconsider how we conceive of gender and trans identities, specifically taking on the narrative of trans folks that was established when media originally spectacularized trans people and psychiatric and medical industries pathologized them, and which has been perpetuated by mainstream media since. This history suggests that a trans person is trapped in the wrong one of two body types, and that they must transition as quickly as possible into the other to "feel like themself."[7] This reductive narrative reinvests in the gender binary and effectively

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5 Black British refers to British citizens of either Indigenous African Descent or of Black Afro-Caribbean (or Afro-Caribbean) background and includes people with mixed ancestry as well. This is a term by which Travis Alabanza self-identifies. Non-binary refers to someone who does not identify with the gender binary. Trans femme is used here to differentiate from trans woman. While trans woman as an identity category reinforces the conflation of gender and biology and is rooted in a rigidly bound category with a history of tensions, trans femme recognizes that gender is a free signifier not essentialized nor reductively attached to any gender or biological sex, but rather is about aesthetics, gestures and performances.

6 Moreover, see Alabanza's website www.travisalabanza.co.uk.

7 Part and parcel of perpetuating the binary gender system is the pervasive narrative popularly referred to as being "trapped in the wrong body." This idea has been prevalent since the initial pathologizing

erases all who exist outside of or between masculine and feminine. Alabanza's oeuvre prompts questions about how we assign gender qualities to aesthetics; not offering any easy answers, Alabanza uses the image caption to promote further reflection (see Figure 1):

> When I told you I was not a man it was not just reacting to a feeling/your touch/an act of self-defiance but was also a choice in deciding that I am allowed to have ownership over my body and its story. People want a story that says "I always knew, it was innate, I could not live another way' and although true for some why must we have always known to now decide we want more? When I say trans, I mean escape.

Taken together, image and text propose that we need not belong in either one of two gender choices, that our genders may change any time in any way, and that their potential transformations are infinite. For Alabanza, trans is a way out of rigid identarian regimes, a praxis and a life free of living within preset boundaries. Both image and text push us to imagine other ways of being not already modeled around us.

A performer intimately aware of how their corporeality disrupts many peoples' realities, Alabanza mobilizes the aesthetics and possibilities of Instagram to image themself as an intervention into visual culture. With over 70.2 thousand followers around the globe, Alabanza's praxis on Instagram constitutes a compelling intervention into discourses of representation in conversation with contemporary photography discourse and the utilization of self-portraits to interrogate identity formations (see Figures 6 and 7). Alabanza's self-imaging praxis is not an isolated occurrence; it is part of a larger movement of trans folks self-imaging as intervention, a movement building on a long lineage of feminist, and queer photographic interventions.[8] However, perhaps the most contemporary movement that Alabanza's work discourses with is post-feminist photographic practices.

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of trans people. The idea that a trans person is "trapped in the wrong body" comes from the medical establishment's requirements that in order to gain services, trans people had to articulate disgust at their current biology at the time of seeking services. This was established by the early formulation of trans identities as a diagnosable condition in need of a cure. See Stryker and Aizura (2013). See also: Prosser (1998), Preciado (2013), Ochoa (2014). Moreover, see: Tobia (2019), and "Galvanizing Aesthetics in the Trans-Masculine Visual Field: *Original Plumbing|Trans Male Quarterly*," in Trans Representations: Non-Binary Visual Theory in Contemporary Photography, 2020 ProQuest ID: Lehner_ucsc_0036E_12015. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5rn8jgp.

8 Here, I position Alabanza's intervention in a lineage of feminist and queer artists, such as Adrian Piper, Cindy Sherman, Renee Cox, Cathy Opie, Del la Grace Volcano, Juliana Huxtable, Tourmaline, Loren Cameron, Tammy Rae Carland, Nikki S. Lee, Kalup Linzy, Tina Takemoto, Mickalene Thomas, Zanele Muholi, Amrou Al-Hadhi, Tejal Shah, and Alok Vaid-Menon, to name a few. I also situate Alabanza in discourse with scholarly interventions dealing with debates in performance, intersectional identity and representation by the likes of Derek Conrad Murray (Murray 2016), Amelia Jones, José Esteban

In "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," interdisciplinary visual studies scholar Derek Conrad Murray offers insightful theorizing of what he views as a post-feminist movement reflected in the ethos of the many young women self-imaging on social media. According to Murray, selfies of the post-feminist movement are characterized by a disinterest in taking on the problems of mainstream depictions of one's constituency, instead favoring self-imaging in ways that mobilize the self as sexual, empowered, and an intersectional subject engaging in imaging practices in discourse within one's community. Murray deploys the term "post-feminist" not to signal the triumph of feminism and thus the ending of its necessity, but rather to signal a shift in feminist priorities and strategies that move away from investments of Second and Third Wave feminisms (Murray 2015). He observes that contemporary image-makers working in post-feminist practice in photography engage in aesthetics and discourses that move beyond those of earlier feminist priorities. Positioning Alabanza's praxis in conversation with a post-feminist ethic pushes the limits of post-feminism. To include non-binary trans feminine self-imaging praxis as post-feminist forces the question of the ontology of feminism and unmoors it from outmoded essentialist ideas about gender oppression as rooted in a binary framework, thus calling into question the structures by which feminism is delimited. Post-feminist projects (and feminism) are not necessarily bound to (cis) women, but, instead, are invested in dismantling gender oppression, which can and should be done via frameworks that view gender not as a binary but as a system. The post-feminist ethic creates new aesthetics via viewing perspectives disinterested in debates about the "dominant male gaze" and investing in worlding projects (ibid.).[9]

Muñoz, Mel Chen (Chen 2017), C. Riley Snorton, micha cárdenas, Susan Stryker, Jack Halberstam, Che Gossett, Julia Serano, and Marcia Ochoa, to name a few.

[9] It must be stated plainly that not all selfies are engaged in post-feminist activities, in fact there is great diversity in how selfies are being mobilized and to essentialize them all under any rubric is methodologically flawed. Some will necessarily be invested in reifying problematics of dominant culture values, such as the neo-liberal capitalist, surveillance state, as argued by the likes of Henri Giroux in (Giroux 2015; McRobbie 2009). It must also be stated that, elsewhere, feminist media scholars such as Rosalind Gill have positioned post-feminism as a "sensibility" and a means of articulating a seemingly regressive practice engaged in by young women that involves self-surveillance, views femininity as a "bodily property" and can be observed in mainstream media in the post-feminist moment. See Rosalind Gill (2007). While other feminist cultural studies scholars such as Sara Banet-Weiser, and Catherine Rottenberg frame post-feminism as contingent on one's perspective, rife with paradoxes and bound up with neoliberalism in late capitalism. See Banet-Weiser et al. (2020). Also see (Bae 2011), (Hall and Rodriguez 2003) and (Holmlund 2005). It is imperative in this case to situate Alabanza's work in a lineage of feminist interventions in visual culture and indeed in line with a post-feminist ethos in order to keep the trajectory of feminism reflecting its alleged commitments, i.e., primarily working to dismantle the oppressive framework of gender inequity. For more on the imperatives of the trajectory of feminism see: (Doyle and Jones 2006) This is critical as, recently, feminist discourse has weaponized biology and transphobic notions of womanhood to malign trans folks and precisely why a trans feminist praxis like Alabanza's is relevant to the work of feminism. See (Serano 2007, 2013; Ahmed 2017).

Alabanza's oeuvre is actively disinterested in imaging subjects (themself or others) within normative visual culture standards. Post-feminist qualities are observable in Alabanza's practice, which barrows art historical traditions of portraiture (stance, framing, frontality), but inserts Black British, non-binary femininity as subject and artist, thus resisting art historically entrenched codes of imaging the cis feminine body as passive bodies for visual consumption, thus, intervening in the reductive binary and cis-gendered frameworks of portraiture. Alabanza deploys racialized and gendered aesthetics that rupture art historical expectations and are imaged for Alabanza's community.

3. Representation, Racialization, Gender, and Trans Femmes in Visual Culture

Representations are constituent of how expectations are set up regarding what corporealities are valued by a given culture at a specific point in time. Representations of trans femmes of color today in the Western context correspond with the erasure of and violence perpetrated against trans femmes of color in daily life. As Richard Dyer has insightfully argued, the psychological significance of stereotypes is that they outline the parameters of life for various constituencies at a given point in time in a particular location. (Dyer 1993). What trans femme stereotypes translate into when it comes to depicting trans people and trans characters in dominant culture is deeply fraught. Mainstream representations of trans people narrowly present acceptable ways of being trans, demonstrate which trans constituencies are impermissible, and side-line the majority of actual trans corporealities and experiences.

In the recent past, there has been an unprecedented number of visual culture examples of trans feminine people in Western European and North American contexts. While it is imperative to not overstate or overdetermine how this current wave of trans representations is shifting culture, it is necessary to study the aesthetics and implications of this moment. While mainstream visual culture, steeped in dominant ideologies and motivated by capitalist investments, has tended to image a narrow set of trans icons (reflecting investments that maintain allegiance to Western art history, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy), in other areas of trans visual culture, one can observe more complex representational strategies, unprecedented aesthetic practices and interventions that de-normativize dominant visual traditions, cultural ideologies, and capitalistic aims.

When encountering trans femmes of color in physical space, people have already been ideologically informed via visual culture on how to treat them based on stereotypic representations perpetuated in visual culture. This process is exponentially dangerous when the subject sits at an intersecting point on the visual matrixes of gender and racialization, which positions them as dually visually disrupting of cultural norms. This thinking is indebted to the legacy of Black feminist thought and actively interrogates intersectionality as it impacts trans and

non-binary lives. These observations specifically build on Black queer studies methods, which has pushed Kimberlé W. Crenshaw's scholarship on intersectionality to consider interconnectedness as it specifically relates to trans bodies and racialization (Crenshaw 2003).[10] Queer of color critiques have provided additional insightful revelations about the complexity of intersectionality as it applies to scholarship, culture and life. As E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson observe, identity politics have historically often reinforced hegemonic power structures and homosexuality has been disavowed in Black scholarship, while race has not been attended to in queer theory. Johnson and Henderson also argue that to ignore the way that multiple subject positions interconnect is theoretically naïve and politically dangerous. They urge scholars to consider intersectionality and to engage in the cross-pollination of theories in order to reflect upon the ways in which relying on reductive binary oppositions (for example, heterosexuality versus homosexuality) prevents scholars from critically examining the politics of representation (Johnson and Henderson 2005).

Embodying feminine aesthetics, trans femmes deploy aesthetics associated with those we have been trained to devalue and consume; but in embodying femmeness beyond cis femininity, they become objects of spectacular fascination. The heightened sexualization and exploitation of trans femmes in dominant visual culture is aligned with dominant cultural ideologies invested in dehumanizing them in ways that go beyond the exploitation of cis women. The coupling of both transphobia and misogyny directed at trans femmes objectifies them and their bodies, and demeans their personhood, positioning trans femmes as objects to be perused, exploited, and discarded. In her text *Trans-Misogyny Primer*, trans scholar and activist Julia Serano observes how mainstream culture mobilizes trans femmes in ways that depict them as sexualized bodies in a "titillating and lurid fashion" (Serano 2007, 2012). Transmisogyny has resulted in the "Sensationalization," and "demonization," of trans feminine people in mainstream media (Serano 2016). Transmisogyny has also led to the media's now decades-long depiction (starting with Christine Jorgenson) of "the trans revolution in lipstick and heels" (ibid., p 70). Moreover, the intersection of racism and gender oppression continues to create uneven, problematic, and often dangerous intersections perpetuated in visual culture.

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[10] The term "intersectionality" is historically linked to the work of Black feminist scholars. The term itself can be traced to Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which specifically deals with the study of how different power structures interact in the lives of minorities, specifically Black women. For more information, see (Crenshaw 2003). To hear Crenshaw speaking and to contextualize the critical emergence of intersectionality that comes out of the application of Black feminism to antidiscrimination law, see (Crenshaw 2014). For more on intersectionality and its roots in Black feminist thought, see (Hancock 2016; Collins and Bilge 2016; Collins 2009; May 2015; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). Numerous trans and queer scholars have taken up issues in intersectionality as applicable to trans subjectivities, including the likes of Mel Chen (2017), Jack Halberstam, C. Riley Snorton, Kai M. Green, Treva Ellison, and others.

Figure 2. Behind-the-scenes footage of Jenner's photoshoot with Annie Leibovitz, as aired on *I Am Cait*, for her iconic *Vanity Fair* cover story, June of 2015. Source: Screen-grab courtesy of Ace Lehner.

Mainstream visibility for some trans folks comes at the expense of others. Representations of trans femmes in mainstream culture promote specific "acceptable" ways of appearing as trans in the world, while sanctioning acts of aggression toward those who fail to replicate these representations (Cárdenas 2017; Griffin-Gracy et al. 2017; Snorton 2017). Repeatedly positioning trans femmes like Caitlin Jenner (see Figure 2) as the pinnacle of "trans success" reflects what micha cárdenas has suggested is the incorporation of trans folks who uphold neoliberal agendas and ideologies while keeping other trans folks out of public view (Cárdenas 2017, p. 173). In writing about contemporary U.S. culture and the increasing inclusion of queerness in mainstream media, Jasbir Puar observes, "these fleeting invitations into nationalism indicate that U.S. nation-state formations, historically reliant on heteronormative ideologies, are now accompanied by—to use Lisa Duggan's term—homonormative ideologies" that produce and perpetuate essentialized and narrow nationalist ideals of race, class, and gender (Puar 2007). Bringing these observations into conversation with the insights of C. Riley Snorton reveals that not only is the binary gender matrix regulating lives and representations, but its intersection with racialization is always necessarily invoked. *In Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, Snorton traces the interconnections between racism and gender as regulating apparatus. Snorton sees Caitlin Jenner (see Figure 2) in an established canon of trans representations traceable to the first widely celebrated trans woman to appear in visual culture—Christine Jorgensen (see Figure 3). Snorton observes that the canonization of Jorgensen as the "good transsexual" set up a framework in which Caucasian trans women gained an "acceptable subject position," contingent on their Caucasian-ness and their commitment to

embodying and reflecting narrowly prescribed cultural norms associated with Caucasian womanhood (Snorton 2017, pp. 140–43)—tropes that are observable in the multiple visual examples we see today of Caitlyn Jenner: affluence, passivity, inviting the gaze, and being Caucasian. Snorton furthers that it was through "whiteness" that trans women were "sanitized" in dominant culture and thus became visible. Snorton also suggests that, in making a narrow fraction of trans femmes acceptable via the whitewashed and rigidly bound gender category, the iconizing of Jorgenson set up a mold against which other trans femmes would be compared (Snorton 2017). Those who did not reflect Jorgenson's precedent lay outside the bounds of acceptable trans embodiment, either due to gender beyond the binary or due to racial appearance other than Caucasian. It must be stated plainly that Jorgensen herself was already repeating entrenched raced and gendered tropes of acceptance. One needs only to look back at the history of portraiture and visual culture in the West and view the lineage of Caucasian women imaged within this narrow aesthetic.[11]

Figure 3. Image of Christine Jorgenson, the world's first trans celebrity, from Susan Stryker's film *Christine in the Cutting Room*. Source: Screen-grab courtesy of Ace Lehner.

Inseparably, when depicted in mainstream culture (if at all), trans femmes of color are overwhelmingly deployed as working in dangerous professions, marginally housed, and often victims of sexual assault and various hate crimes. These stereotypic caricatures reflect mainstream cultural beliefs about trans women

[11] On the topic of decolonizing gender and its racist implications, see (Carter 2007; Schuller 2018; Somerville 2000).

of color, demonstrating trans women of color as only ever tragic, unfulfilled victims. A particularly poignant version of this perpetuated, racist, transphobic trope came in the form of the feature film *Tangerine* (2015).[12]

Lauded for starring two trans women of color as the protagonists, *Tangerine* has been the most widely popular representation of trans women of color in mainstream media in the recent past.[13] The two protagonists, Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra, are played by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor, both African American trans women. Casting actual trans women of color to play starring roles -not cis men as is often the problematic practice in cinema as observable in *Dallas Buyers Club*, 2013 and the *Danish Girl*, 2015 (Friess 2014; Lees 2014; Puchko 2015)- the characters and plot of the film reinforce and reify racist, transphobic expectations, and stereotypes about trans women of color, being incarcerated, violent, and engaged in unlawful activities, to name a few (see Figures 4 and 5). Both the promotional rhetoric and the plot of the movie forward the notion that tragic and tumultuous trajectories are to be expected of trans femmes of color, and create a narrative that makes light of the hardships that they face. The protagonists are both sex workers. Sin-Dee Rella has just been released from jail to find her pimp boyfriend cheating on her with a cisgender woman, and the movie's widely circulated tagline flippantly reads "A hooker tears through Tinseltown on Christmas Eve searching for the pimp who broke her heart."[14] Writing about the film, Morgan Collado observes, "trans women of color are almost always seen as objects to be controlled, held and exploited" (Collado 2015). Such mobilizations are reminiscent of colonial anthropological photographs framing colonized people as less than human, and thus deserving ill treatment (Marien 2015).[15] At first glance, *Tangerine* seems to break through this paradigm in forwarding trans women of color

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[12] There is an argument to be made here that links the technology of the iPhone to trans femme representations. Low budget and consumer-grade technologies are being used to image trans and non-binary people rather than the high-quality technology and canonical photographer that was used to produce Caitlin Jenner's likeness for the cover of *Vanity Fair*.

[13] Other notable mainstream representations of trans femmes of color include Neil Jordan and Stephen Woolley's *The Crying Game*, from 1992, and the appearance of Laverne Cox as Sophia Burset in Jenji Kohan's *Orange Is the New Black* from 2013–2019, wherein trans femmes of color are also framed as tragic, and criminal.

[14] This catchphrase was printed on the promotional posters for the movie as well as appearing in publications for the film. It can be seen as the tag line on the film's IMDB page here: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt03824458/.

[15] Notable contemporary intersectional feminist photographers like Carrie Mae Weems and Pushpumala N. Have used photography to speak back to these damaging photographic traditions, particularly in Weems' project *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I Cried* (1995); see (Weems 2000). Moreover, see the artist's website http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html; also see Pushpumala N.'s *From The Ethnographic Series Native Women of South India: Manners & Customs*, 2000–2004. See Saatchi Gallery site https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/pushpamala_n.htm.

as the stars of the film, but on further assessment, the representations mobilized by *Tangerine* shore up transphobic, racist perceptions about trans women of color.[16]

Alexander Weheliye's scholarship on the complex interconnectedness of violence, racialization, and corporeality proves instructive in light of the specificity of visual culture, life, and the ideological processes of racialization. Weheliye fervently urges that race be viewed as a socio-political relation and not assumed to be a de-politicized visual descriptor. Weheliye is concerned with the ways that visible human difference has been considered in Black studies to better understand the political, economic, and social exploitation of noticeable human differences. Weheliye's conception of "hieroglyphics of the flesh" (Weheliye 2014) mark and include some bodies in the realm of the human, based on the aesthetics of their corporeality, while also demarking other bodies based on their aesthetics as outside the realm of the human (ibid.).[17] Weheliye's articulation of the process of racialization is crucial, when it comes to the relationship between visual culture and real-life encounters with trans femmes of color. His formulation highlights how this active process of valuation is linked to the physiology of individuals. It ideologically sutures culturally specific concepts of humanity to constituencies as necessarily tied to visual appearance. Racial assemblages rely on stereotypes, to ultimately naturalize the expulsion of some from the category of human. This visual and cultural process works to sediment racializing assemblages into political relations, normalizing racism, and racial injustice. Racializing assemblages, however, rely on the permanent fixing of identification to the body (ibid.). The use of Weheliye's concept of difference as attached to the body is informative in thinking through the political and social situation surrounding trans women and trans femmes of color. Weheliye's insights help to explain the ideological suturing of values to people based on essentialisms about corporeal aesthetics and why such stereotypes of trans femmes of color persist in order to make the oppression of trans femmes of color appear to be natural and expected.

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16 Not insignificantly, the film was lauded as well as being entirely shot on smart phones (the same technology that selfies are made with), but the image maker in this case was a cis white man and the final venue was the film-making circuit.

17 Redefining how we view processes of identification and racialization, Alexander G. Weheliye writes about alternative ways of thinking about race as racialized assemblages, the politics of which Weheliye argues are implicated in global power structures, and should be understood as being defined by intersections of neoliberal capitalism, racism, settler colonialism, immigration, and imperialism. He states further that if we want to understand and abolish our extremely uneven global power structures, that we need to challenge the creation and maintenance of systems of domination, criminalization, exploitation, and violence. Moreover, we must see how all of this is predicated on racial, gender, sexual, and political inequities.

Figure 4. Alexandra, played by Mya Taylor, engaging in sex work. Source: Screen-grab of film courtesy of Ace Lehner.

Figure 5. Sin-Dee Rella (played by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez) fighting with the woman she discovered her boyfriend to be cheating with. Source: Screen-grab courtesy of Ace Lehner.

One cannot fully understand and articulate the spectrum of how racialization is enmeshed with visual culture unless one considers how gender regulation is enacted. For, as race is culturally constructed and visually maintained, so too is gender. When trans femmes of color like Alabanza present gender options beyond the narrowly prescribed iteration of binary gender, these performances and corporealities become living examples of how binary gender is unable to contain us. Often, rather than viewed as liberatory for us all, trans people whose genders disrupt binary systems are met with violence, enacted by those who seek to keep intact the binary gender system.

Judith Butler's research investigating regulatory practices that govern gender and culturally intelligible notions of identity is particularly useful here. Her scholarship reveals that some identities must not exist in order for the system of gender to

exist. For example, she writes, identities where "gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender," (Butler 2006, p. 24) threaten to expose limits of the regulatory system (ibid. 2004, pp. 67, 42). Those who live outside the domain of the matrix, she articulates as abject, and describes these lives as "unlivable" (Butler 1993). Butler sees the cultural compulsion to maintain a "heterosexual imperative" as enabling specific sexed identifications and disavowing others. She calls this phenomenon an exclusionary matrix (ibid.).[18] If one sees the matrix of gender historically and currently dominating Western ideology as binary and invested in cis normativity, then clearly those folks making other gender options visible cannot co-exist with the binary gender matrix. For the binary sex/gender system to remain essentialized, collapsed, and intact, those whose identities make apparent other gendered options must be punished or made examples of—-as offenders of the system. This is observable in visual culture: we see trans subjects who most fully reflect dominant cultural ideologies being marginally incorporated (i.e., Jorgenson and Jenner), while subjects existing too radically outside sanctioned genders are depicted as not only expendable but necessarily eradicateable, as exemplified by the countless acts of violence and aggression perpetrated against trans femmes and trans women of color, and observable in mainstream visual culture in films like *Tangerine.* The interconnection of visual culture and how it reflects and structures cultural ideologies and expectations about who is valued in society is particularly volatile concerning representations and the lives of trans femmes of color. The total number of trans femmes of color whose lives were lost in hate crimes in 2020 surpassed that of 2019, only half way through the year (NCTE 2020; Aspergen 2020).

Alongside the neoliberal incorporation of Caucasian, cis-invested trans women like Jenner, there has also been the incorporating of token trans women of color, perhaps most notably Laverne Cox. What this inclusion has provoked adds to the cultural reactions informed by narrow expectations of who is a permissible trans subject. Trans femme of color and longtime activist Miss Major Griffin-Gracy notes that the hypervisibility of African American trans femme actress Laverne Cox has, in many ways, led to increased violence perpetrated against other trans femmes of color. Griffin-Gracy suggests that because Cox is presumably unreachable to most, racist, transphobic aggressors turn their acts of violence against the trans folks who

[18] Butler's personal situatedness and allegiance to philosophy and semiotics frame her argument in that she roots her observations in the way that these practices are played out in language. This is interesting, but more fitting for this project is to apply visual culture as a means of applying Butler's observations rather than language. Butler observes that, via language, identities are brought into being, while at the same time, also inscribing us into discourses of gender and sex. Thus, naming delimits but also reinforces the norm while granting the quality of humanness. Significantly in this text, Butler observes that gender is a historical category and terms like masculine and feminine are notoriously changeable and contingent on time and place.

come into their proximity. Griffin-Gracy notes that femme people, in general, are subjected to heightened social regulation (Griffin-Gracy et al. 2017). [19] Griffin-Gracy's insights about the regulation and regimentation of femmes dovetail with micha cárdenas' argument that "the increased mainstream visibility of transgender people has brought about solidification of who is an acceptable trans person and who is disposable"; " now more than ever," Cárdenas writes, "it is evident that visibility is a trap" (Cárdenas 2017, p. 70). To understand the complexity of the "trap" of visibility politics, it is necessary to investigate the ideological framing of the ontology of photographs.

4. A Brief History of the Discursive Framing of Photography

Tangerine was praised for being shot entirely on an iPhone 5S, the high-quality photographic technology of a consumer-grade mobile camera phone (Newton 2015; Sharf 2017; Erbland 2018). Not only did *Tangerine* reflect dominant cultural values rooted in a legacy of transphobia and racism, but it did so via a specific discursively framed ontology of photography. The conceptual framing of portrait photographs in locations descended from the colonial project, by and large, maintain the ideological apparatus that outlines lens-based images as necessarily able to transmit "truth," (Sekula 1986; Tagg 1993; Solomon-Godeau 1991; Berger and Dyer 2013; Berger 1990; Sontag 2001), or as Snorton has argued, "reality is sutured to the privileging of sight" (Snorton 2017, p. 140). This ideologically constructed and upheld belief has been attached to photography since its inception in the Western context and has facilitated photography's deployment as an apparatus of cultural ideology (Batchen 1999; Berger 2005; Solomon-Godeau 1991; Woodall 1997). The conceptual flattening of the space between the image and the referent is crucial in upholding colonial ideologies. The very conception of photographs at the inception of the media in the mid-1800s was deeply enmeshed with the period's dominant ideologies, invested in the colonial project, and hinged upon upholding the binary opposition that positioned Caucasian masculinities as the pinnacle humanity (ibid.). Jack Halberstam has observed that in the colonial project, binary oppositions were established precisely to facilitate the demarcation of others as "knowable" or "visible", only in order to degrade and dehumanize them (Halberstam 2018, pp. 6–7).

Since its inception in the West, photography has been viewed as an objective recorder of the world. Moreover, we know (as pointed out by many photography scholars, perhaps most extensively by John Tagg) that photography is highly subjective

[19] Griffin-Gracey's interlocutor CeCe McDonald points out that she herself does not readily fit the narrow prescription of what a trans femme should be and look like. For more on CeCe McDonald, see (Erdely 2014; Lockett 2016; McDonald 2014; Qian 2017).

(Tagg 1993). There is still a deep interconnection between viewing lens-based images and a culturally perpetuated belief in these images as somehow factual. The ideological construction to photography in the Western context has fixed ideas of indexicality, evidence, and authenticity to pictures. Yet, photographs are always about power differentials, highly fabricated, and situational. The discursive construction of photographs via this framing sets up a belief about their ontology that perpetuates what Tagg has referred to as the photographs "regime of truth" (Tagg 1993). In other words, photographs are part of constructing our collective reality. Since the inception of the media, they have been mobilized as instructive tools of disseminating cultural ideology often believed simply to be information (Sontag 2001; Sekula 1986; Solomon-Godeau 1991; Trachtenberg 1991; Mitchell 1992).

Photographer and visual culture theorist Allan Sekula poignantly argued that, while pictures are not actual representations of the lived world, the cultural belief in the truth value of photography makes most people consider photographs "congruent with knowledge in general" (Sekula 1986, p. 56). In "The Body and the Archive" (1986), Sekula traces several ways in which bodies have not only been symbolically but physically possessed. He traces some of the histories of photography through the trajectory of physiognomy and phrenology, as well as police use of photography to reinforce racial and class hierarchies (ibid., pp. 10–11, 51–56).[20] Sekula writes: "the archive [of police photographs] could provide a standard physiognomic gauge of the criminal, could assign each criminal body a relative and quantitative position within a larger ensemble" (Ibid. p. 17). Sekula also contends that racist classification or physiognomy is an impulse in photography that is difficult to repress (Ibid. p. 62). The cultural belief in the "truth value" of photography becomes particularly powerful when dealing with images of people. Elaborating on this issue, Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes that "photography, a medium which by virtue of its supposed transparency, truth and naturalism have been an especially potent purveyor of cultural ideology—particularly the ideology of gender" (Solomon-Godeau 1991, p. 257).

Portraits are products of the people who make them, discursively framed and understood via the viewer's highly situated perspective. Portraits are always enmeshed with the ideologies of the image-maker and the viewer. In particular, photographic self-portraits are deeply bound with the cultural belief that the image reveals some inner workings of the subject (Bright 2011, 2015). Via the conception

[20] Physiognomy is generally understood as the assessment of a person's character or personality from their outer appearance, especially one's face. Sekula describes at length the racist underpinnings and evolutionist tendencies of this assessment. Phrenology is generally described as what is known and understood to be a racist pseudoscience that once believed a person's skull could determine their character.

of photography as indexical and ascribing knowledge to images, dominant cultural groups can assign themselves a higher value than those that look different from them that they would like to oppress (Jones 2012; Halberstam 2018; Weheliye 2014).

5. Photography Now

In recent decades, artists have been increasingly interested in photography, and photographers have turned to portraiture for its sophisticated ability to rework concepts behind representation, to engage in different types of power dynamics, and to explore self and identity, both critically and intimately (Bright 2011, 2015). Conceptual art photography purposefully tries to look de-skilled, emphasizing what or who is imaged rather than the technology through which the subject is pictured. Such works often call attention to the very ontological contradictions of pictures and highlight the interconnection between photographs, performativity, and indexicality (Cotton 2004. Photography scholar Charlotte Cotton observes that "the use of seemingly unskilled photography is an intentional device that signals the intimacy of the relationship between the photographer and his or her subject" (Ibid., p. 137).

A mashup of "Instant Camera "and "telegram," Instagram (also known as IG, Insta, or "the gram") is a free photography and video-sharing social media platform launched in 2010; it remains the fourth most downloaded application of the 2010s (Miller 2019).[21] Designed to be used on smartphones and consisting of scrollable feeds of images, Instagram enables users to create endless streams of images to be shared instantaneously. Connecting on Instagram is primarily based on liking other people's images, and communication is facilitated by the ability to comment on images as well as "heart" them. Key features include the user's ability to post images to their feed, scroll images posted by others, and search for images by their hashtags, such as #trans #selfie or #blacklivesmatter, to bring up images tagged with the hashtag in descending chronological order. From its beginning and still true a decade later, the emphasis of Instagram is images. Positioning images as primary forms of communication makes Instagram an integral component of visual culture, as part of contemporary art and art history, and facilitates interventions into photographic imaging practices and discourse.

While initially the interventions that Instagram users make may seem a radical break with art history, they sit in a long lineage of photographic imaging practices are deeply bound to art historical aesthetics and often build on a legacy of intersectional feminist, queer praxis of self-imaging as intervention (whether intentionally or not).

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[21] Created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in San Francisco CA; the social media application has been owned by Facebook since 2012.

Considering the complex history of photographic portraiture, it should come as no surprise that, as photography scholar Susan Bright has observed, "the deliberately ambiguous strategy of 'performed' portraiture is just one of many approaches that artists have adopted to deconstruct and question what a portrait can do and how it functions" (Bright 2011, p. 21). Following Bright's thinking, we can view Travis Alabanza's praxis as engaging in a politics of representation invested in challenging the seeming "truth value" of the photograph in efforts to deconstruct the photograph's ability to create objects out of subjects, while also challenging the cultural belief that we can visually assign people values based on their corporealities.

6. Alabanza's Insta-Interventions

The aesthetics of Instagram as a platform present their viewer/user with the options of viewing one image after another, in a linear top-down feed, or of perusing a set of images in several square pictures across and a variable number down (depending on the size of one's device). The frame of the viewing device almost always contains another partial image (or images) and text. Even on the few occasions that the device frames a solo image, the understanding of the feeds' function and interactivity as continually scrollable suggests ever more images to peruse. By its very design, Instagram lends itself to the production of multiple versions of oneself, a constantly shifting representation of the image-maker.

Alabanza's Instagram feed is a steady stream of self-representations hyper-aware of their physical appearance while continuously creating an overall self-portrait that is uncontainable and always in flux (see Figures 6 and 7). What has yet to be discussed art historically and is particularly apparent when observing Alabanza's use of self-representation on social media, is that the aesthetics of Instagram not only presents a challenge to how we think of and define photography and photographic practice, but it also counteracts the way stereotypes of marginalized constituencies are established.

Making photographs and looking at photographs are both active processes deeply enmeshed with, and informed by, ideology (Marita and Cartwright 2001; Sontag 2001; Tagg 1993). During both of these acts, our naturalized—and thus often unknown to us—cultural ideologies are deployed in the process of making images and in making assumptions about who or what we are looking at (Marita and Cartwright 2001; West 2004). The construction of the stereotype in visual culture is contingent on flattening ideas about a person or an identity constituency to a fixed, essentialized icon of said group. Thus, when trans femmes of color are repeatedly imaged as tragic and comedic tropes, and Caucasian femmes are spectacularized, we are bearing witness to the continued suturing of specific ideas to particular constituencies via

the perpetuation of stereotypes (Bhabha 1994).[22] We should remain wary of the complicated relationship between the icon and what it represents; we should also view the lens-based image as always ideologically saturated. Moreover, one ought to always consider any portrait as fabrication with significant political motives, whether consciously intended by the image-maker or not. When photography is framed as indexical, "truthful," or "objective," it behooves us to understand that this is rooted in a colonial project, set up to make visual distinctions between oppressor and oppressed (Halberstam 2018; Weheliye 2014; Bhabha 1994). To make a critical intervention into problematic issues in representation, it is necessary to begin to challenge the very discursive framing of the ontology of lens-based images.

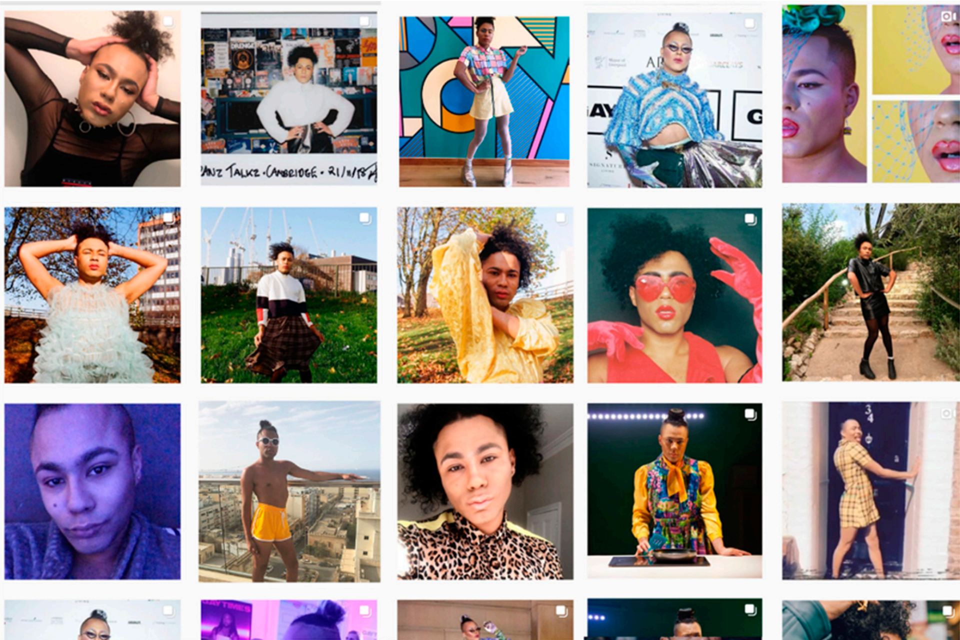

Figure 6. Alabanza's selfies on Instagram. Demonstrating pattern jamming as well as showcasing their ever-shifting gender. Source: Screen grab Courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza via Instagram messaging exchange 21 December 2020.

[22] Homi K. Bhabha argues that stereotypes operate by playing on the above outlined cultural assumptions and mobilizing representations of marginalized identity categories as a "fixed reality" which is at once an "other" and produced as knowable by being visible. Bhabha also describes the operation of the stereotype as relying on an anxious repetition of the fixed image.

Rather than creating static and reductive representations, an icon, or stereotype, Alabanza's selfies present a diversity of potential ways of being a Black British gender-non-conforming trans femme (see Figure 6). They showcase Alabanza's gender and intersectional identity as continually shifting and ever augmenting. Their self-imaging on Instagram reflects no investment in the technologies of art world hierarchies. Instead, Alabanza deploy a vernacular aesthetic, while contemplating the space that photography occupies between index and performativity. The resulting images are highly complex and distinctly contemporary in the service of the conceptual underpinning of the work, and the nuanced process of the negotiation of identity.[23] Alabanza's images land as discourse within contemporary debates in photography. For, as Charlotte Cotton, the photography scholar, has observed:

> Rather than offering an appreciation of virtuoso photographic practice or distinguishing key individuals as "masters" of photography, conceptual art played down the importance of craft and authorship. It made an asset of photography's unshakeable and everyday capacity to depict things: it took on a distinctly "non-art," "deskilled," and "unauthored" look and emphasized that it was the act depicted in the photograph that was of artistic importance (Cotton 2004, p. 21).

Alabanza's self-images challenge established modes of production (with no elaborate or expensive equipment expected in Artworld scenarios), they elide established art world forms of circulation by using social media networking; they also reach potentially massive audiences instantaneously and are readily and easily consumed. They are not beholden to the art world or mainstream media exclusionary practice governing the type of images that go public.[24] Because of its ability to circumnavigate regulatory apparatus, the content that appears on social media sites (such as Instagram) is often more radical, in terms of content, aesthetics, and significance, than that observable in the art world, or popular culture. As art historian and visual studies scholar, Jennifer A. González has observed, increasingly contemporary forms of activist art utilize the Internet and mass media while also interrogating "the politics of representation, the politics of corporeality, and the

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[23] Such practices are reminiscent of the work of Nikki S. Lee, a now canonical conceptual photographer who herself is imaged in her *Projects* series, but is not the person depressing the shutter. For many years in the late 1990s through the early 2000s, Lee, a Korean-born, NYC-based conceptual art photographer, embarked on a series of projects where she embedded herself in various subcultures adopting their aesthetics and ways of life and had herself imaged with members of given constituencies via a point and shoot camera replete with the time stamp photographed by someone else (Murray 2004; Lyon 2002; Allison 2009).

[24] Circulation, production, consumption and regulation are the concerns of Cultural Studies, the underlining methodology that I employ for this project. For a fuller discussion on cultural studies, see (Turner 1990).

politics of the gaze" (Flanagan et al. 2007, p. 5). Enacting González's observation, trans self-images like those of Alabanza intervene in the politics of representation, corporeality, and the gaze. Visualizing new subjectivities outside of sanctioned parameters and critically reflecting upon a variety of power structures that have historically marginalized and dehumanized them, trans and non-binary self-images, especially those of Alabanza, utilize social media platforms like Instagram precisely for the reasons mentioned above.

7. Between the Image and the Subject

Trans, as a rejection of assigned gender, is a rejection of what was attached to us based on our physical attributes, or assumptions based on surface aesthetics. Trans subjects reject a gender that has been ascribed us based on interpretation of our physical surface, in favor of living our lives based on our internal feeling—something not visible, but rather often expressed visually. Gender is communicated in part via playing with the aesthetics and expectations of gendered performances and embodiments (Cárdenas 2017; Halberstam 2018). Trans, as an analytic, offers a method to view representations not only as distinct and distant from the subject rendered, but in tension with it. A trans self-imaging praxis like that of Alabanza provides a method that prompts a rethinking of surfaces necessarily relating to essence, identity, and authenticity, unfixing the surface from the subject.

Travis Alabanza's trans self-imaging practice intervenes in methods of photography and its complex relationship to seeing as equating to knowledge, and notions of lens-based imaging as related to unmediated "truth," revealing that the indexicality that we associate with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways we in the West are taught to assume the exteriority of a subject matches their self-identification. Current discourse around identity is shifting via trans cultural production and we are seeing a move away from the idea that one can categorize others based on interpretation of aesthetics. Thus, we are now witnessing a shift wherein we learn to respect people's self-identifications, regardless of what identities and values viewers may want to suture to them based on visual assessment (for example, identities such as class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and value such as worthiness of being treated as a person, or worthy of degradation and cruelty etc.). In their prolific self-imaging, using the aesthetics of a media platform that enables the construction of a continually evolving self, Alabanza's work visually problematizes our cultural belief in the photograph's correlation with authenticity and truth.

Beyond mobilizing Instagram as an intervention into discourses of representation, Alabanza's ever-shifting representation acts as radical maneuver in reworking the conceptual ontology of photography. Alabanza performs iterations of self that deploy various displays of their complex identity and expansive gender expression. Part of

the ontology of transness as an identity is well-suited to challenging the Western conception of photography. For, as trans identities often unmoor notions of surface aesthetics equating to some notion of authentic self, they undo the equation that visually interpreting a surface can lead to the procurement of knowledge, or precisely how photographs have been framed ideologically in the Western context. Thus, when Alabanza makes a self-image, they intentionally play with the idea that they are in control of how their gender appears; they are performing a picture while intimately aware that a surface is never necessarily correlative to any notion of interiority, authenticity or truth. This conceptually opens up and troubles the relationship between the image and the subject and intervenes in this space. There can be no flattening of one image and one version of Alabanza; one must continually consult Alabanza's feed to view the gender that they perform at any given point in time, in any given location.

Scrolling through Alabanza's feed, one views their gender shift from high femme donning full makeup and pursed lips to wearing short shorts, and no top with a hairy chest (see Figure 6 bottom left and one in from bottom left). Alabanza presents themselves as a hip fashion visionary, wearing edgy, retro fashions full of color and attitude (see bottom row right), not only countering stereotypic representations (as discussed with the example of the film *Tangerine*), but providing a plethora of non-binary and Black British corporealities that push open the trans visual field. That is to say, in forwarding countless images of themself as discrete iterations, Alabanza is mobilizing an infinite oeuvre of Black British trans femme ways of being.

Alabanza's Instagram feed consists almost entirely of self-images. From one image to the next, Alabanza always appears as a new example of gender non-conforming femininity (see Figures 1, 6 and 7). On the whole, their Instagram feed confounds an easy collapsing of image and subject by continually shifting their self-representation. In contradistinction to the functioning of the stereotype where one images is anxiously repeated and ideas about the subject ideologically, albeit problematically sutured to the token representations of a given constituency, which is bound up with the belief that a singular portrait image is demonstrative of the subject and the subsequent belief that we can assign value and categorization to portrait representations as well as people in daily life. Travis Alabanza mobilizes their Instagram feed in a way that suggests that even with a seemingly endless flow of self-representations, there will never be enough images to depict Alabanza in their entirety, and that identity and gender are continually morphable. Thus, with one image or a thousand images, one will never be adequality capable of articulating a singular visual "truth" about Travis Alabanza.

In contradistinction to the singular isolated iconic portrait photograph, Alabanza's Instagram feed is made up of countless images, always augmenting and showcasing the subject as nuanced, malleable, and continually reinventing

themself. Non-binary trans femme self-representations like theirs directly challenge how we have defined portraiture in Europe and North America since the Renaissance. Amelia Jones has observed that in the West, we have a cultural tendency—especially in portraiture—to collapse the representation for the thing itself (Jones 2006, pp. 2–5, 13–14; Jones 2012, pp. 23–24). For the purpose of understanding how Alabanza's work is an intervention in Western photography discourse, it is useful to think through Jones's articulation of the complex space between the surface of the image and the subject imaged. Jones's "gap" is temporal, spatial and conceptual. The flattening of time, physicality and ideas is precisely how images have been confused with evidence, truth and fact, and when we bear in mind that the image is always removed via this multidimensional gap from the subject, then we are infinitely more capable of viewing the image just as a surface rendering and not confuse it for the subject in the photograph.

8. Deploying the Strategy of Pattern Jamming

Alabanza's mobilization of loud, intricate, nuanced, visual aesthetics continually focuses viewers' attention to the surface of the image, making it difficult to see the photograph as a "window into a world." In using visual strategies that keep attention on the surface of the image through the deployment of a bold juxtaposition of pattern, texture and color, Alabanza reminds viewers that photographs are flat surfaces, Alabanza implements aesthetic resistance to the inclination toward believing the image *is* the subject and that simply by looking at pictures, one gains information about the person imaged.

Within the frame of each square image, Alabanza deploys fashions and compositional aesthetics that call attention to the surface of the picture plane, visually reminding us that the photograph does not and cannot contain depth, that it is two-dimensional both physically and conceptually. For example, in the top center image of Figure 6, Alabanza stands in a color blocked outfit that mimics the colors and shapes of the wall behind them. The wall itself runs parallel to the picture plane and appears close behind Alabanza in the image, thus flattening the pictorial space stopping the illusion of depth. The visual similarities between the shapes and colors of the wall are mimicked by the outfit conflating surface of the figure and the surface of the background, further calling attention to the flatness of the photograph. Alabanza's imaging praxis in this way reflects tactics deployed in post-colonial contexts. Such images challenge the ideologically constructed "indexical" relationship between the surface of the picture and what is imaged (Pinney and Peterson 2003). Nicole Archer has noted that contemporary trans artists often use a technique she describes as "pattern jamming." Archer notes that several contemporary trans visual artists, deploy this successful tactic to defray reading through the image, keeping viewers' attention on the surface of the work (Archer 2017, pp. 293–319).

In a small, gridded section of Alabanza's Instagram feed (see Figure 7), the visual rhythm of the work becomes akin to that of an abstract painting. That is to say, the eye is continually moving around the surface, jumping from color to similar color and shape to similar shape, tracing the outline of the figure from one frame to another. In the top left image, the bent knee first appears and is echoed in the second image to the right; in the image below, the bent knee appears again in the opposite direction. A pop of red appears in the top right corner and then again in the image to the left, again still in a small square in the central image, and the eye moves on to note the orange in the bottom row. Then, the blue of that backdrop carries the eye to the bottom left to notice the blue of Alabanza's dress as they sit on a bench, and so on, in keeping the eye moving around the picture plane and on the surface of the image. The ways in which Alabanza mobilizes their likeness in conjunction with fashion, colors, and composition enable a continually augmenting self-articulation that keeps our attention on the surface of the image.

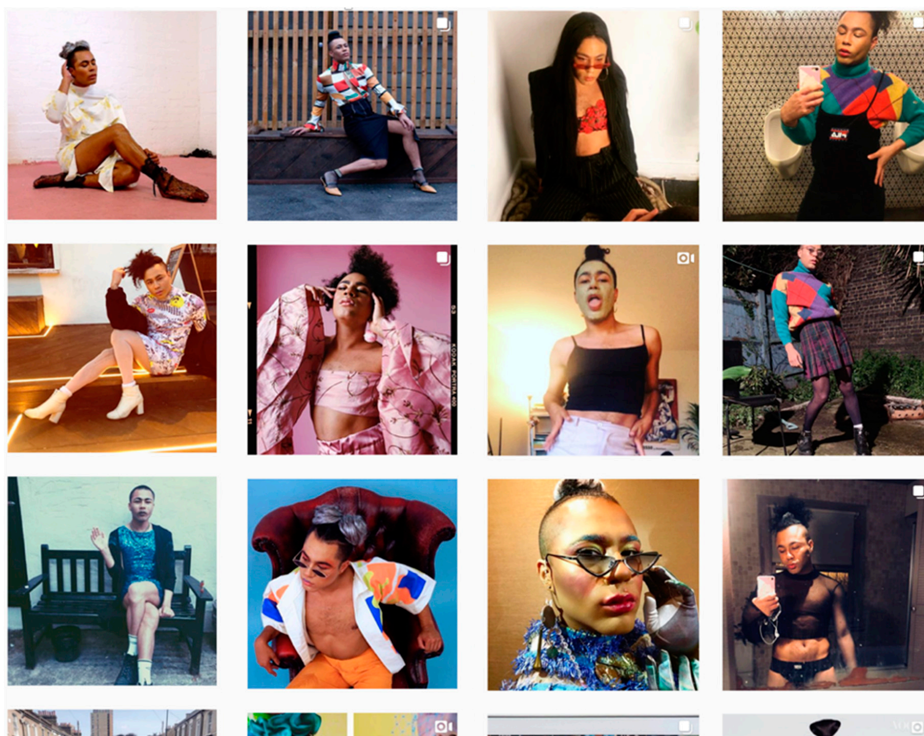

Figure 7. Alabanza's selfies on Instagram. Demonstrating pattern jamming as well as showcasing their ever-shifting gender. Source: Image courtesy of Ace Lehner and approved by Travis Alabanza via Instagram messaging exchange 21 December 2020.

It should not be surprising that artists working in postcolonial geographic locations, and trans artists working in post-colonial locations (ideologically speaking), share a commitment to undoing the conception of photography as necessarily able to transmit information via a surface rendering; it is the discursive framing of photography as a medium of "truth," indexicality, and facticity that has bound it so tightly to the construction of stereotypes and has enabled its being used in the service of the oppression of colonized subjects and trans folks, especially trans femmes of color.[25]

9. Decolonizing Beauty

The matrix of gender and the regime of racialization become more noticeable as their edges become visible, which often occurs when non-binary folks of color come into view. Their very existence disrupts visually regulating matrixes of gender and racialization (Butler 1993, 2004, 2006; Weheliye 2014; Lehner 2019). Alabanza does not replicate established tropes of trans femininity (the neoliberal incorporate-able: Jenner, the tragic trans figure worthy of mistreatment: *Tangerine*, or the token trans femme of color who fits within established frameworks of expectations about gender and race i.e., Laverne Cox). Alabanza's continuous image feed demonstrates a radical intervention exploding gender expectations, unfixing them, de-binarizing them and proposing new ways of being Black British and gender non-conforming. Forwarding themself as hip, self-assured, fashionable and sexy, Alabanza unapologetically disidentifies with femininity, juxtaposing fashion choices associated with masculinity and femininity, visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and Caucasian supremacist, cis, heteropatriarchal notions of beauty.[26]

In Figure 6, the top left image, we see Alabanza in a black-studded leather choker, tight fishnet shirt over a black tank or bra; they parse their painted lips, beneath sultry eyes, and a hoop earring dangles from their left ear while their hair erupts off the top of their head, in a small dark poof just above their hands. The image is tightly cropped, and Alabanza is cut off at the elbows and chest. They stand in front of a whitish wall in shallow pictorial space. Alabanza looks at us through the picture plane embodying femme goth sultry sexiness through their clothing and

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[25] For more on writing about the "truth" and indexicality of photography and its links to oppression see (Tagg 1993; Solomon-Godeau 1991; Berger and Dyer 2013; Berger 1990; Sekula 1986; Sontag 2001; Halberstam 2018).

[26] In his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz developed the indispensable concept of disidentification. The term describes acts wherein queer performers adopt parts of dominant identificatory categories, while perverting and jettisoning other parts of those identities with which they do not identify. See: (Muñoz 1999). For more on regimes of gender and Caucasian supremacist, cis, heteropatriarchal notions of beauty, see (Bederman 2000; Benjamin 2019; Carter 2007; Herzig 2016; Lehner 2019).

expression. In the central image in the top row, Alabanza expresses a perky bright persona via their attire, and poses in front of a bright patterned, muralled wall. In this full-body picture, Alabanza is only cropped at the glittery platformed toe and the top of the flamboyant hairdo. Their outfit consists of bold color-blocked, large check top and short butter-yellow skirt. Alabanza's right hand is on their hip and their knees point slightly toward one another, while their left hand juts out from the elbow in a performative gesture (as if they are about to snap), one that references film-noir cinema and a femme hand holding a long cigarette. In this pose, Alabanza references tropes of feminine glamour in visual culture history.[27] While their outfit is a nod to playful femme fashions of the 1980s and 1990s.

In an image in the bottom row, Alabanza stands topless, wearing only yellow swim trunks and big white sunglasses with black lenses. Alabanza looks to be on a rooftop, their left arm extending outward along the top of a glass wall with a cityscape in the distance, while their right arm hangs down at their side. Alabanza's chest is flat above their shorts, which are worn high-waisted. While there are many other photographs in the screen grab of Alabanza's Instagram feed (Figures 6 and 7), considering just these three, a viewer will be hard pressed to delineate Alabanza's gender identity clearly as fitting neatly into any particular category based on binary cis-gendered stereotypes. In fact, no one image reflects a normative and reductive version of binary gender, and neither do all three of these showcase consistencies with any one type of binary gender or racialized expectation. From each image to the next, Alabanza's gender shifts along with the frame, location, and attitude. One might surmise that the image in the top left is a queer cis woman, the image in the middle-upper row a femme-identified retro fashion queen, and the figure in the swim trunks identifying with masculinity in some way. However, these assumptions are all about the same person and are all based on interpretation of aesthetics (clothing, pose, performance), underscoring that gender is not fixed but rather is malleable and contingent, often changing in relation to setting, mood, and companions.

Visually decolonizing current regimes of gender and Caucasian supremacist transphobic notions of beauty, Travis Alabanza demonstrates gender as performative, but also as a malleable and mobile set of endlessly mutable and ever-deployable signifiers, based in large part on visual communication. Alabanza visually asserts femme-ness as a free signifier, not necessarily in the domain of any particular biological characteristics. Underscoring that biological sex has nothing to do with gender, nor is Alabanza's deployment of masculine or feminine otherwise tied to biology. By creating a multiplicity of non-binary, Black, trans corporealities,

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[27] Marcia Ochoa observes that glamour is often invoked as a "form of power" that enables "legibility," "affirmation" and "survival." (Ochoa 2014, pp. 89–90).

the field of representations mobilized by Alabanza expands visual examples of gender presentations for subjects to emulate and brings new modes of intersectional identities into being. This work begins to create space for new aesthetics of beauty, not measured against dominant systems, but celebrated for their multiplicity and transgressiveness.[28]

10. Parting Thoughts

The long-established art historical hierarchy around portraiture based on the method of creation, venue of the exhibition of the work, and the artist's relative situatedness in the art world is not only outmoded, but such thinking leads to critical blind spots, in need of reassessment in order to keep art discourse relevant. Measuring the success of a portrait or self-portrait is more productive when based on its conceptual underpinnings, intellectual rigor, and intervention into various visual matrixes. So, when we assess photographic representations, I propose we ask such questions as: How does the image challenge various ideological structures? How does it intervene in visual culture? How does it disrupt previous established aesthetics, methods and hierarchies? It behooves us to change our assessment of contemporary portraiture and self-portraiture and move beyond archaic and insufficient methods of analysis. In writing off contemporary works made using social media because they are made in a relatively new and widely accessible means is akin to writing off earlier forms of photography, like vernacular photography, color photography, Polaroids, and slideshows—-all of which have been inducted into the canons of art history and photographic practice.[29] The category of photographic portraiture and self-portraiture needs to include works in the emergent form of social media, regardless of previous exclusion based on material hierarchies.

Alabanza's self-images are the very definition of a self-portrait: "portraits of oneself done by oneself," but they facilitate a more nuanced understanding of self-portraiture. Alabanza's Instagram feed creates new representations that radically challenge the creation of stereotypes, and, again, they represent a multi-faceted self-portrait of a subject continually evolving—a self-portrait in a state of perpetual production, or what one may call tranifesting (Green and Ellison 2017). Alabanza's self-images produced in the context of their world, their community, and their perspective insert trans non-binary Black British subjectivity in context into broader

[28] For more on creating new aesthetics of trans beauty that are not measured against dominant systems, but celebrated as beautiful and worthy of life in their very transgressiveness, see (Lehner 2020; Wilchins 2017).

[29] Consider, for example, the success and canonization of William Eggleston's vernacular style color photos, Warhol's prolific use of Polaroids, and Nan Goldin's now legendary vernacular style slide shows.

culture in a way that is not a stereotype and models otherwise unseen ways of being. Thus, effectively, their Instagram feed constitutes a praxis of worlding, of bringing oneself into existence via permitting oneself to appear in visual culture; a radical intervention from someone who represents a constituency actively erased from visual culture and daily life.

Modelling an interdisciplinary trans visual studies method of analyzing Alabanza's work reveals that there are many hierarchies that could factor into the lack of attention garnered by these important cultural interventions. The scholarly neglect of trans femmes prolifically self-imaging on social media may lie in their being femme, or trans, or not Caucasian, or that the majority of these representations appear as selfies. All of these intersecting factors position these self-image makers and their images as antithetical to what have historically been valued forms of self-representation in the West. Yet, studying these images is integral to understanding visual culture and art today, and many of the self-imaging praxis of trans femmes of color like those of Alabanza radically rework Western discursive framing of the ontology of photography, unseating investment in notions of truth and indexicality, challenging how we understand gender, exploring the intersection of gender and racialization, and creating new forms of self-representation. Thus, I suggest that we view self-images like those of Travis Alabanza as critical and necessary praxis in and of themselves, within the discourse of issues in representation, art history, gender, intersectionality, racialization, contemporary art and self-portraiture.

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