

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

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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

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).

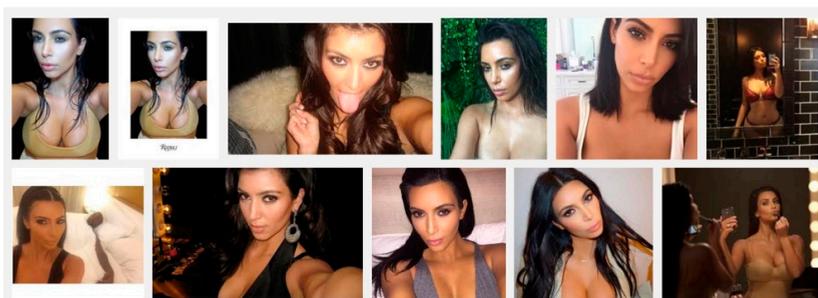


Figure 2. Detail of screen capture of Google image results of “Kim Kardashian, *Selfish*, 2015.”



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).

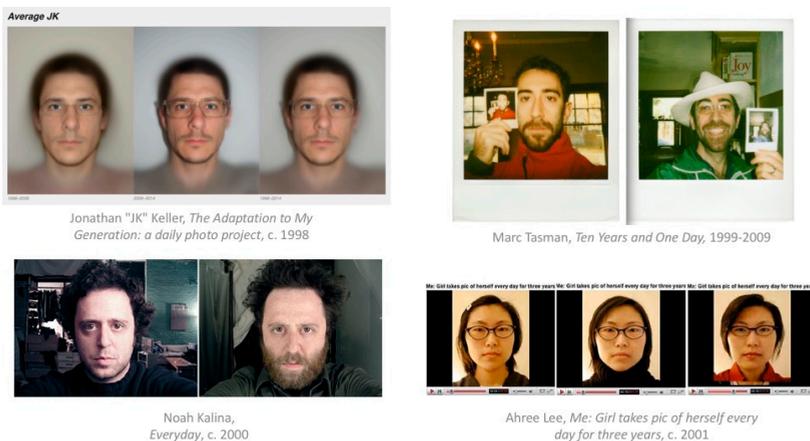


Figure 4. A ranking of the projects by their time out of the starting gate: Keller, Tasman, Kalina, Lee (left to right, top to bottom).

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).

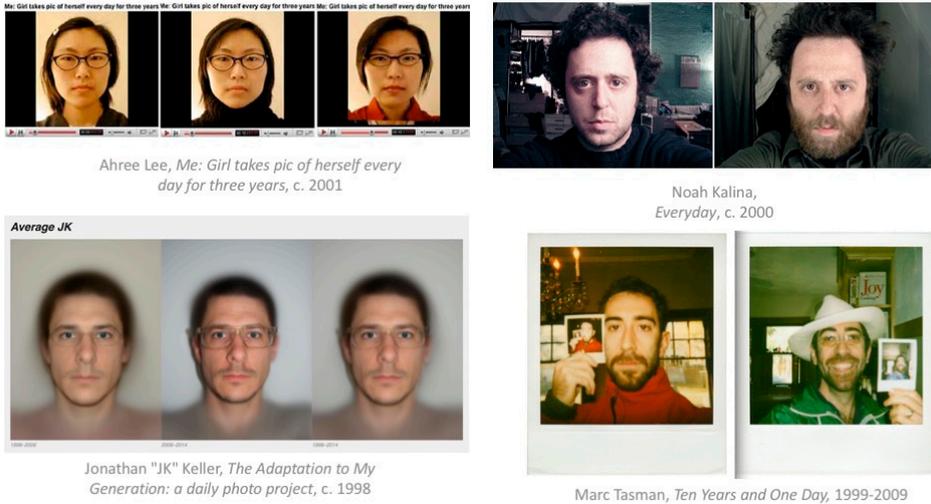


Figure 6. A ranking of the projects by order of appearance of a time-lapse video on the web: Lee, Kalina, Keller, Tasman (left to right, top to bottom).

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.

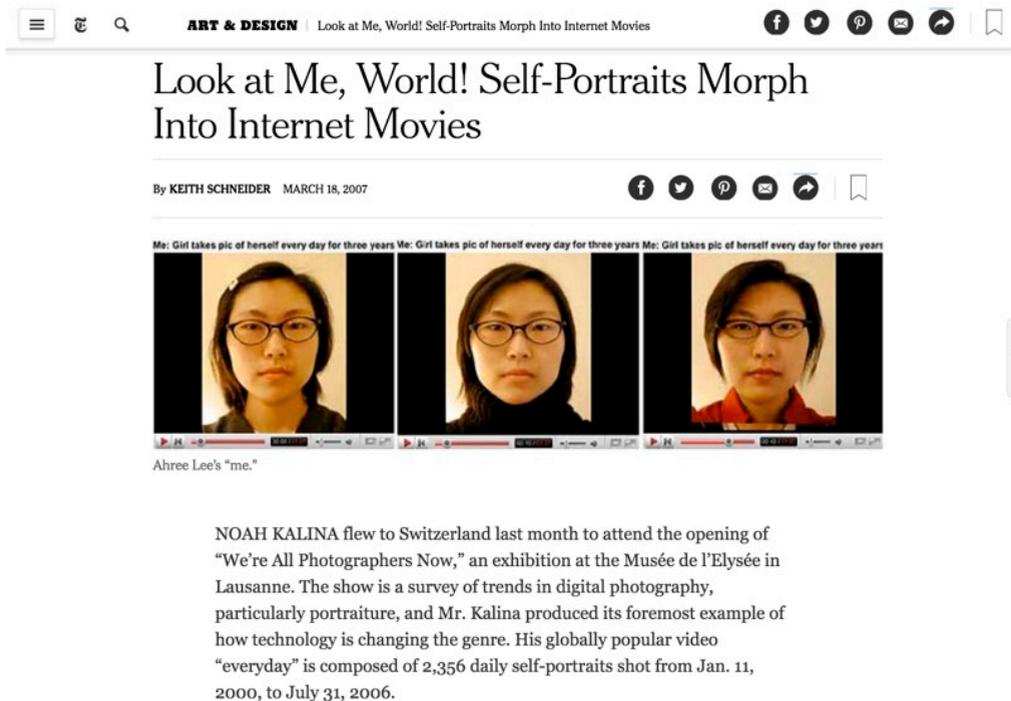


Figure 7. "Me" is the title of Ahree Lee's time-lapse video (Schneider 2007).

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).

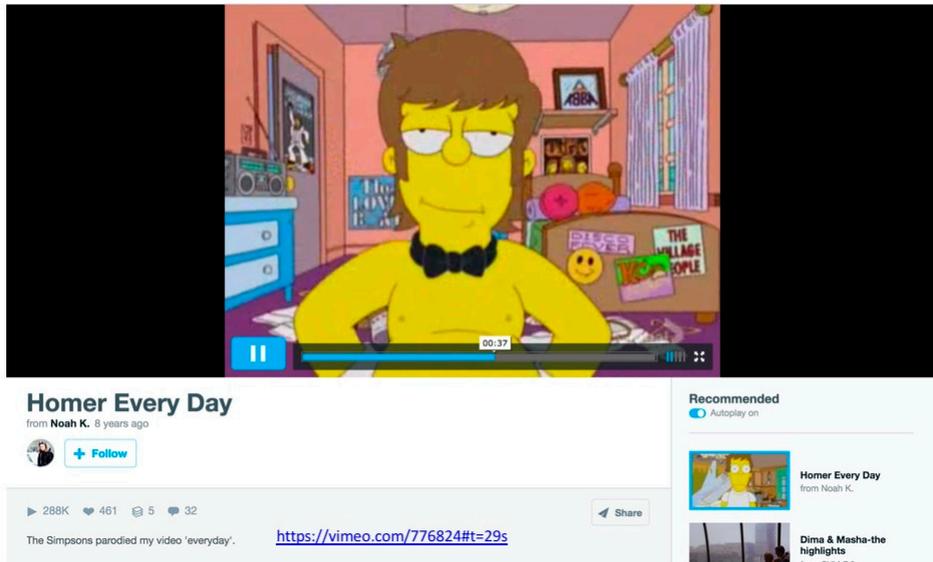


Figure 9. The use of Commando’s musical composition and Kalina’s video concept adapted by The Simpsons shows the work’s impressive viral power and reach into popular culture. Source: a screen capture from Noah Kalina’s Vimeo account.

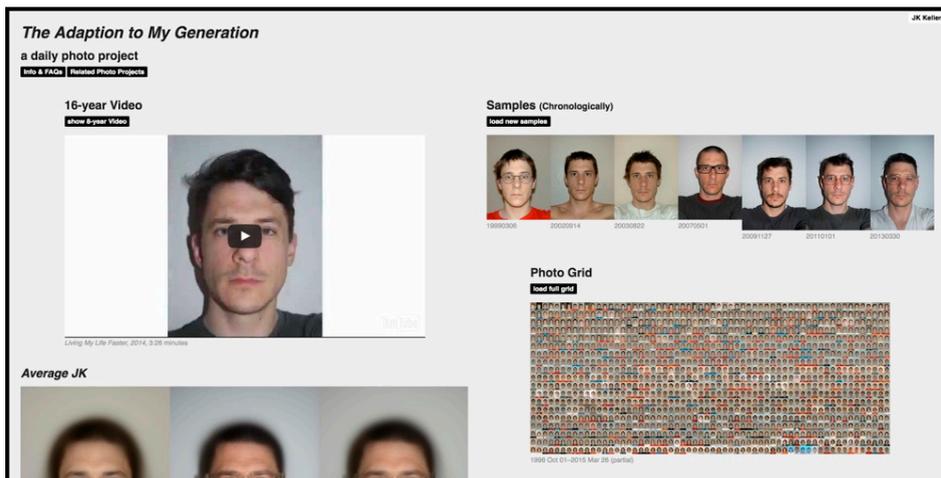


Figure 10. Screen captures of JK Keller’s *The Adaption to My Generation*—a Daily Photo Project.

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.

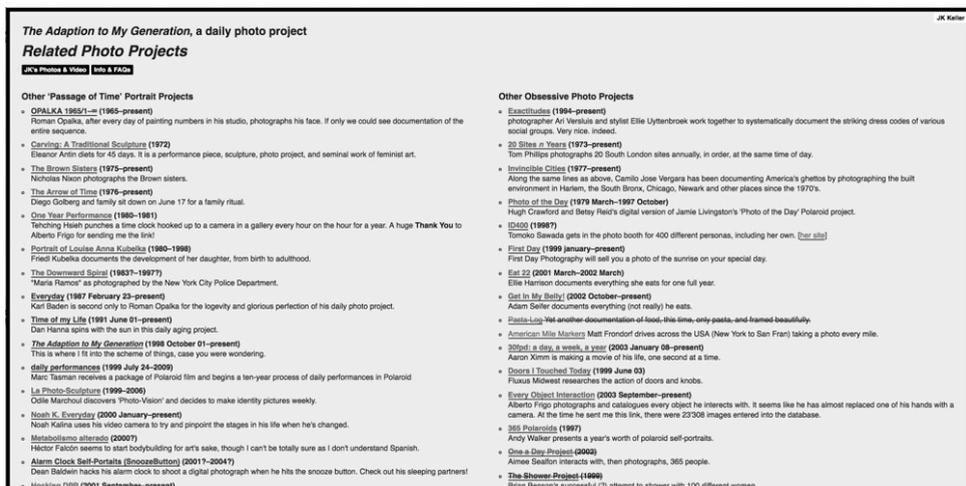


Figure 11. Screen capture of the archive of related photo projects, last visible on JK Keller’s website jk-keller.com in April 2016 (Keller 2016a).

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).

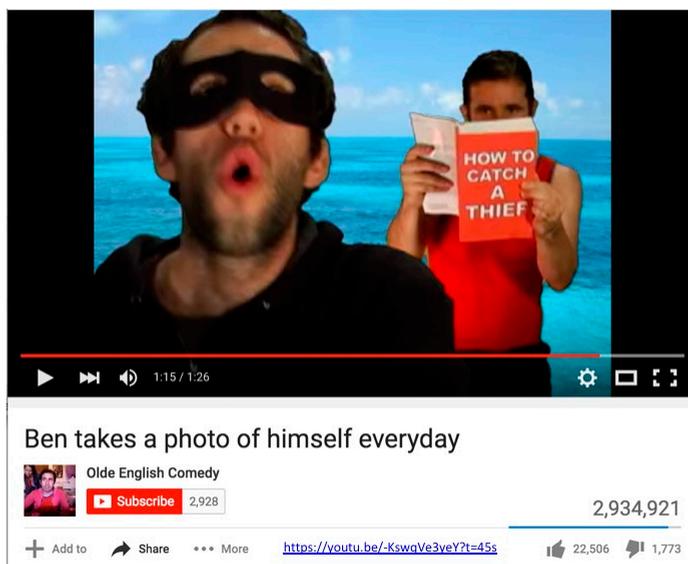


Figure 12. Olde English Comedy troupe assessed the everyday time-lapse self-portrait video phenomenon as a race to catch a thief

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.

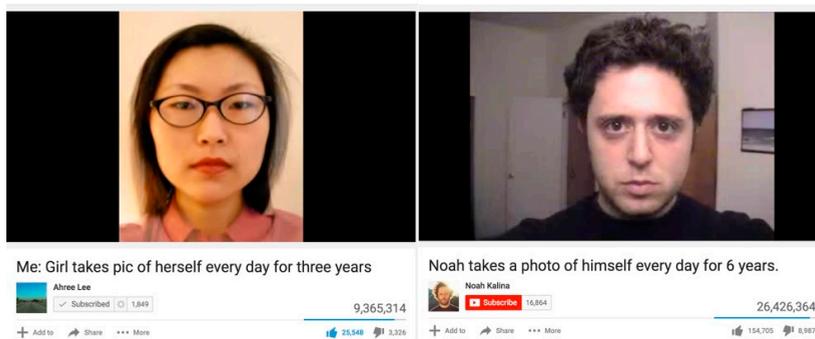


Figure 13. Lee's and Kalina's videos. Lee first shared the concept of a self-portrait time-lapse video but Kalina's enjoyed more attention. Both wear an expression lacking in affect.

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.

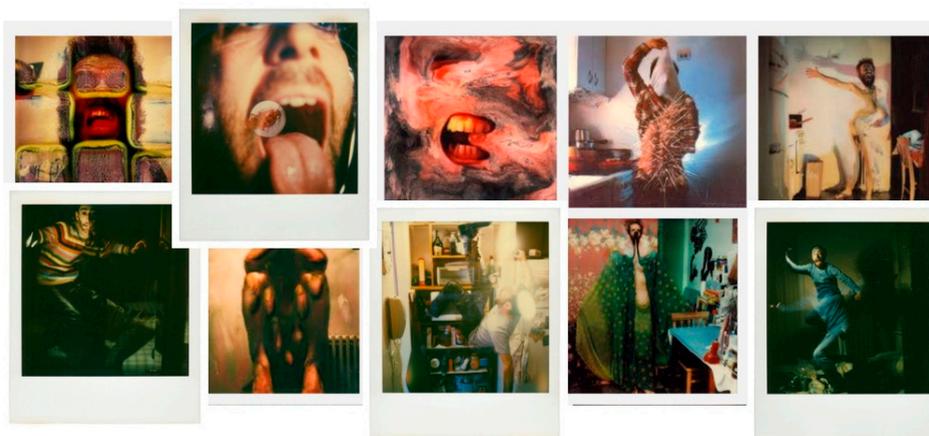


Figure 16. Samaras' *Photo Transformations* overlaid with images of Tasman's *Ten Year Polaroid Project*, 1999. See Appendix A for more context on this visual analysis.

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 Film 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).

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). Jacques 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

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.).

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

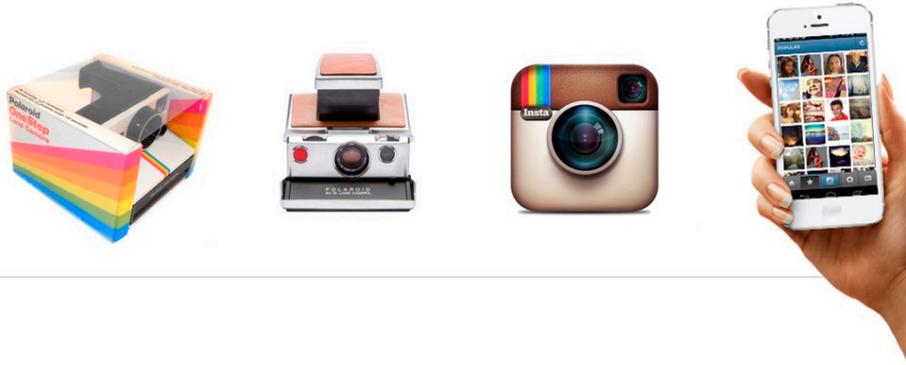


Figure 21. Polaroid’s branding and design aesthetics were mimicked in Instagram’s icon and interface. Source: Screen capture compilation by author.

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,

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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