Selfies, #me: Glimpses of Authenticity in the Narcissus' Pool of the Networked Amateur Self-Portrait

[Book chapter in *Rites of Spring*, (Black Swan Press: Perth, 2015)]

by Karen ann Donnachie, Curtin University, Australia

karenanndonnachie@gmail.com

Abstract

This research addresses the 'Selfie' as a significant phenomenon of contemporary photography, its unique methods of production and distribution, as well as the possible motivations driving this particular genre of the (amateur) self-portrait. I will argue that the Selfie happens at the crossroads between performance, narcissism, social tick, an intrinsic desire for self-projection and a possibly irrational quest for authenticity in the contemporary photographic image, and that its ubiquity cannot help but change the idea of the photograph as we know it.

The brief history of the selfie and why it matters

Although the popularisation of the neologism is often linked to Jim Krause from 2005, the first use of the word 'Selfie' has been attributed to an Australian sending an MMS (phone message with picture attached) as early as 2002.[1] Previous to its current use as a photographic genre, it was a lesser-known moniker for fans of the rock band Self. Despite its relatively brief existence, the term 'selfie' has been granted 'buzzword of the year' status in 2012, and inclusion in the Oxford dictionary from 2013 when it officially graduated to "word of the year."[2] In short, the history of the selfie is still being written, with art critic Jerry Saltz describing the genre as "in its Neolithic phase."[3] For the purposes of this research, the selfie (and related metadata equivalents or 'hash tags' #selfie or #me) is understood to be the photographic convention in which the subject/author is shown with the camera/device in hand – often photographed through a mirror reflection – or alternatively the camera is turned towards the subject held with an outstretched arm.[4]

A 2013 Google search for the term 'selfie' returned 11 million results, with over seven million entries resulting from 'self-shot.' Further, there are over 160 million images that incorporate the hash tag #me or #selfie on the photo-sharing network Instagram in 2014 (which can be viewed in real time through Tyler Madsen, Erik Carter and Jillian Mayer's internet artwork selfeed.com). What remains

unquantifiable is the number of selfies taken, shared and stored on and between individual mobile devices, dedicated services such as Tumblr, Facebook, mySpace, Flickr, photobucket and many more, as well as mobile software applications such as 'Shots' created exclusively for the making and sharing of selfies shot with forward facing cameras, devoid of the commentary, filters or sophistications of competing platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat.[5] These numbers are significant (if only) for the statistical inference that the quantity of selfies presently stored in our social networks or online photo repositories overwhelms the entire aggregated and recorded history of portraiture known to man prior to 2005, and the numbers are growing exponentially.

While human beings today are photographing themselves at a phenomenal rate, this appears to be an entirely new behaviour, despite the fact that the technology to enable self-portraits was available and affordable in western society throughout the 20th century (from the launch of Kodak's Brownie camera in 1900 through to the age of the Polaroid from the 1970s). In fact, Guy Stricherz, the author of *Americans in Kodachrome, 1945-65,* a comprehensive review of American domestic photography, remarked on the fact that of the more than 100,000 photographic submissions he received for his publication compiled over 17 years, fewer than 100 slides were self-portraits.[6] Essentially, it would seem in the 20th century people did not point the camera at themselves as they do today, or at least this behaviour was neither as frequent nor celebrated in the way the selfie is today. While we necessarily acknowledge that the 20th century domestic photograph has been generally neglected and relegated to oblivion, so too any quantity of vernacular self-portraits would remain in similar obscurity, our own cultural memory corroborates the theory that it just wasn't something you did. Additionally the intense discussion as demonstrated by the steady slew of articles and papers surrounding the phenomenon of the selfie testifies to its novelty and significance as a genre.

A portrait is not a selfie

Our collective infatuation with the selfie has brought some observers to see them in the most unlikely of places, from the (painted) self-portraiture of Van Eyck, Dürer and Rembrandt to the very first experiments in photography to iconic photographs such as George Harrison's fisheye self-portraits of the late 1960s to the more recent 'Myspace pic' once popular in the now surpassed social network. These endeavours by scholarship and journalism to deliver us the first selfie is not constructive to understanding the attributes, significance and poetics that are unique to the selfie. Historic national archives have been trawled to find 'proto-selfies' such as Robert Cornelius' daguerreotype image (Image 1), frequently cited in such selfie-archaelogies, perhaps in the hope that the selfie can be better analysed within historically established canons. This collective quest to uncover the 'first selfie' does however provide a useful clue; it confirms that we already cannot imagine ever having lived without this phenomenon.

Image 1: *Robert Cornelius, self-portrait; believed to be the earliest extant American portrait photo*: Daguerreotype Collection, Marian S. Carson Collection, Library of Congress, 1839. Photo: Image 1

This attribution to Robert Cornelius of the earliest American self-portrait may arguably be deserved and noteworthy, and indeed many of the first experiments in photography were self-portraits – the artist required a body and the most reliable and economical on hand was their own – yet, its affiliation with the genre of selfie is more tenuous. Such historic self-portraits are not selfies (or even proto-selfies) merely because they are photographic and self-portraits, and to describe them as such risks reducing their individual accomplishment or significance. To seek the origin of the selfie in previous genres of self-representation also becomes counterproductive for while there may be some formal or functional overlap between the selfie and previous genres of self-portraiture, the selfie consistently emerges as a contemporary manifestation, a discrete entity and/or activity, through its composition, technique, networked distribution, consumption and sheer ubiquity, it cannot be simply reduced to a digital remediation of the self-portrait.

Pejoratively, curator and critic Brian Droitcour also underlines the difference between the self-portrait and the selfie in his significantly titled "A Selfie is not a Portrait." [7] Droitcour's antipathy for the selfie (in this article) masks a nostalgia for a more classical (and imaginably endangered) portrait, while he emphasises the selfie's artistic shortcomings, as if the significance of the selfie were to depend on its acceptance (or not) as portraiture at all. Of course, this reactionary response is hardly without precedence. Gen Doy, remarking on scholars' reaction to renaissance artists painting non-noble subjects,

declared "as early as the sixteenth century, writings on art warned that the portrayal of ordinary, unworthy people would simply degrade the idea of the portrait."[8]

Droitcour's analysis embodies a dystopian commentary based on the perception of an inundation and dilution of culture through communal networked practice, which would include the act of the selfie. Art critic Jerry Saltz, in contrast, sees the selfie as a valuable addition to cultural production, with the potential for a new kind of expression:

> It's become a new visual genre—a type of self-portraiture formally distinct from all others in history. Selfies have their own structural autonomy. This is a very big deal for art … A genre possesses its own formal logic, with tropes and structural wisdom, and lasts a long time, until all the problems it was invented to address have been fully addressed.[9]

I will argue that the selfie is a much awaited, unique development of the photograph, comprising an intimacy and humanity without precedence, a complex collective post-human behaviour conceived within the network with the support of the prosthetic cameraphone.

The desire to photograph oneself

It would be useful at this point to discuss the technology serving the selfie in order to further underline the unique nature of the selfie. The camera-enabled smartphone is clearly the most prevalent tool for the production and distribution of the selfie at present, and it is forgivable that writers on the subject draw efficient causal inferences between the technology and the social product. The popular fallacy is that because we have phones with cameras on them, and we are using these cameras for taking selfies, then the camera on the phone was invented for taking selfies, or put simply, selfies were invented when the camera-functions were added to mobile telephony. Even the most cursory research into the history of the cameraphone, however, finds these hypotheses flawed, the camera as accessory to the mobile telephone preceded the onset of the selfie by at least a decade. Already in 1997 mobile phones offered the ability to send a text message with attachments such as photos (MMS). The service was immensely popular and generated unprecedented revenue for cell-phone carriers and cameraphone producers alike that by 2003 the sale of cameraphones outstripped those of digital cameras, but we didn't see the selfie emerge as a cultural phenomenon until almost 10 years later. Even the introduction of the now ubiquitous selfie-assisting 'forward-facing camera' from 2007 was primarily designed to promote paid streaming data traffic through the relatively costly video-telephony system, a practice which, despite gaining a mention in David Foster-Wallace's *Infinite Jest,* did not prove as popular as expected. The subsequent use of the camera-phone as a 'selfie-cam' was neither instant nor anticipated.[10]

4

The notion that the mere introduction of any technological capacity within a system does not guarantee its widespread adoption is argued by Geoffrey Batchen in his discussions on the beginnings of photography. Batchen details the historical setting for the first photographic systems and proposes that the technology necessary for the daguerreotype far preceded the correlated 'desire to photograph'.[11] Indeed, throughout all of the 20th century, despite western society's broad access to economical domestic cameras capable of capturing self-portraits, and a broadening middle-class who enjoyed capitalism's new privileges of leisure, prosperity and self-improvement, the selfie did not emerge. Likewise, the introduction/invention of the camera-enabled 'smart' phone or other similar mobile technology, which, while certainly facilitating the processes of capture and distribution of the selfie, cannot be reductively attributed the sole nor primary cause of the selfie phenomenon. Instead, following Batchen's argument, I propose that in the last 10 years we have witnessed the development of an unprecedented, intrinsic 'desire to photograph' *oneself,* and the rampant success of the forward-facing-camera-enabled smart-phone is a strongly correlated phenomenon. It will be interesting to see, in fact, how the selfie evolves through the introduction of devices such as the Oculus-rift and Google glass which do not readily accommodate the current manifestation of the selfie (both examples not having a forward-facing camera that can be directed at the user) or if the phenomenon of the selfie can shape the design or the advancement of the technology itself.

The function of the selfie

Returning to the discussion of the possible function of the selfie, and here is the overlap with classical portraiture to which I referred earlier, our selfies often serve to convey status: a new hairstyle, partner, bff (best friend forever), holiday location, meal, jewellery, bike, device, book, music etc. Sarvas and Frohlich in their *From Snapshots to Social Media: The Changing Picture of Domestic Photography* see in the selfie the function of construction and communication of social bonds and values, just as the formal family portrait did in the time of the daguerreotype. They use an example of a selfie of a father with his young son on his back and compare it to a formal family portrait taken in 1849 and, while highlighting the obvious differences in composition and demeanour of the subjects, they note that the social purpose of the two images is quite similar, emphasizing the social bonds between people in the photograph which would demonstrate membership in the family as idyllic. They conclude with "… the functions for which photography was domesticated in the 1840s have persisted for 170 years."[12] The self-portrait (still) serves the function of a medium through which we construct and convey an identity or that fictitious entity we call our 'self.' And the selfie allows or at least implies an unprecedented self-determination of this digital appearance, as we become experts at posing, framing and otherwise enhancing our self-portraits.

The production and distribution of the selfie has rapidly created the largest ever aggregated, constantly expanding, recursive and searchable public collection of human portraiture, and while necessarily acknowledging the demographic prejudice (of the distribution of the cultural and technological prerequisites as well as the semantic specificity of the use of the English term selfie), within this subset of humanity, the portraiture accumulating is significantly of and *by* the 'everyman.' We could auspice that this spontaneous, unprecedented mass-projection of self is a manifestation of emerging human self-awareness or that the process of taking and sharing selfies through the framing device of the screen holds the potential for a Heideggerian revealing. Or perhaps, just as Lacan's baby learns of the notion of a distinct self in a mirror, society in the 21st century may be testing its own collective identity in the networked self-portrait.[13]

Child psychologist David Elkind refers to a (predominately teenage) impulse to perform to "the imaginary audience" as a natural part of identity formation.[14] This impulse finds natural expression through the selfie, as the child may test out behaviours, appearances and posture in a private or anonymous setting before floating these behaviours to their networked peers through social media. Extending this behaviour to our pubertal society (and here I speak of maturity, not merely age-group), the selfie becomes an ideal medium for experimentation of personality for both kids and kidults (adults who continue to enjoy childlike activities).[15] Sarah Gram has expounded theories specific to the selfie with reference to the demographic of 'The Young-Girl' (and here the notion of the 'Young-Girl' is intended as elaborated by Tiqqun in her book *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*,[16] that is, not so much a description of any particular natural person, but more a generic classification of an engendered object of late capitalist society – an identity colonised by capital – or "the model citizen of capitalist society").[17] According to Gram, the Young-Girl works to maintain the femininity that provides her "entry into the world of consumer capitalism," the selfie then serves the Young-Girl both as "a representation of and … public recognition of that labour."[18] A manifestation of this phenomenon can be seen in the work of contemporary 'girlcore' artists (a term coined by artist Mary Bond) such as Petra Cortright, LaTurbo Avedon and Amalia Ulman, who notably exploit the gendered stereotype in their YouTube, Facebook and Instagram materialisations of Tiqqun's Young-Girl.

The Narcissus' image pool

Perhaps, as many a commentator has claimed, the selfie is simply a rampant, late capitalist act of vanity, or self-obsession. New media theorist Rosalind Krauss, in her late 1970s critique of the (then nascent) medium of video famously cautioned an "age of narcissism," as many video-artists were turning the camera on themselves.[19] Of course, artists in the photographic medium have also explored the full spectrum of self-representation from the candid (Nan Goldin, Andy Warhol [Image 2]) to the constructed (Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall), and they do not escape analogous criticism.
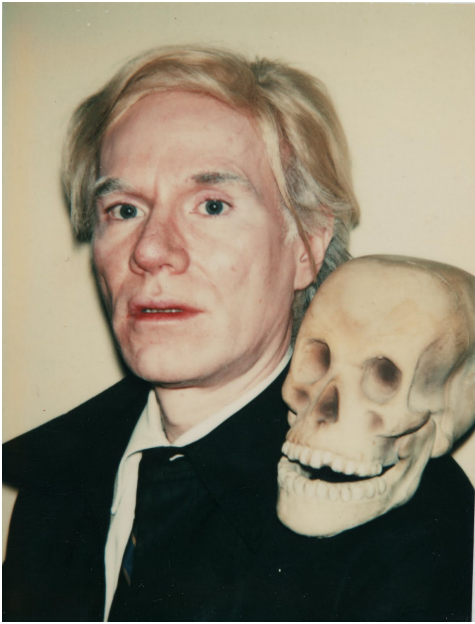
But in the hall of mirrors of the Internet, the phenomena of photo-sharing/blogging/social media provide a similar yet more complex environment for projection and perception of self to that which Krauss was referring, and the authors are no longer, for the most part, artists but rather the ordinary person. In addition, the medium of the video did not self-replicate as the networked self-portrait does, for while each discrete video or photograph would have its own edition, transmission, duplication and collection, it would not automatically aggregate itself to any networked repository or archive as the selfie does in the realms of Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Flickr et al.

Curators Kyle Chayka and Marina Galperina comment on the motivation behind the selfie on the occasion of their exhibition entitled "National #Selfie Portrait Gallery" (October 2013 at the Moving Image Contemporary Art Fair, London), "it's less about narcissism … it's more about being your own digital avatar."[20] In the context of the screen we are constantly renegotiating our identity, placing ourselves in the virtual society that we have constructed and are consuming, we see our photographs on the screen-mirror and indulge in the ambiguous reflection of self, gaze and contemplation. Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* speaks of an "anxious self-scrutiny" (which could arguably be manifested in the repeated action of the selfie) as serving a purpose – to create "an ironic detachment as an escape from routine,"[21] that is, no longer able to fully escape self-consciousness and not content with the life (or body) one is living, "[the subject] attempts to transform role-playing into a symbolic

elevation of life."[22] He argues that, in late capitalism, narcissism is tendentially pathological, caught in a feedback loop of behaviour and personality, creating a "state of mind in which the world appears as a mirror of the self." [23]

There is ample psychoanalytical theory on the motivations and causes of narcissism (too broad a subject to attempt to summarise here), but it is suffice to note that possibly due to its seductive concept there is often ambiguity in the use of the term: in its most reductive form and outside of a clinical environment, 'narcissism' is used to imply anything from simplistic self-affirmation, a Freudian 'self-love', to selfishness, self-absorption, and even, most recently, exactly the opposite of that as Papacharissi asserts "while narcissistic behavior may be structured around the self, it is not motivated by selfish desire, but by a desire to better connect the self to society."[24] Droitcour echoes this human desire to belong when he writes "… the selfie inscribes a body into a network… it asserts a body's connection to others through a network via their respective devices."[25] The necessity for the image to be networked constitutes an essential and definitive quality of the selfie, which arguably only becomes a selfie once shared on social media.

A connected self-image

Once delivered to the network, the selfie awaits social approval, often in the form of a 'like' (an approval/promotion function commonly found within social media software) or a reblog (a way of reproducing the image directly within one's own social stream or blog). Perhaps this pursuit of the 'like' subconsciously responds to the author's need to replenish 'narcissistic supply' (a term coined by Otto Fenichel in 1938 describing a constant need for affirmation in the context of clinical narcissism). In exchange for the 'like' received, the recipient 'likes' back, and thus social currency is exchanged which reinforces a co-dependency between the author and the audience. In her *New York Times* article "Facebook made me do it," Jenna Wortham describes the feedback loop of 'post' to 'like' (which encourages more sharing), as "the most addictive element of social media."[26]

When the authors of the selfie reach out into the network by sharing a self-portrait, they are clearly seeking this human connection to which Papacharissi and Droitcour refer but also, in the celebrity-focused fabric of social media, they are involved in an arguably irrational quest for a notoriety of their own (paradoxically coupled with anonymity, real or perceived). As David Giles in *Illusions of Immortality* writes, lasting fame (immortality) is attainable through the infinite repetition of image or *replication*, the posting of a selfie into the social flow, therefore, holds this potential.[27] Similarly, Sandra Kemp in *Future Face* uses the imagery circulating during and after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales as an example of the effect of the mass proliferation of image, correlating Diana's renown to the level of saturation of her effigy.[28] If, as Giles and Kemp both argue, fame is constructed through the

number of replications of a celebrity's image, then it is natural that the advancement of replicating devices, coupled with a multiplicity of platforms and audiences has "opened up opportunities for individuals to reproduce themselves on a phenomenal scale, thus providing an evolutionary rationale for the obsessive pursuit of fame."[29] The *ir*rationality lies in the numbers. Of the millions of selfies shared, only a statistically insignificant number will ever be noticed and replicated to the extent necessary to actually influence one's renown.

And then there is the actual 'celebrity selfie,' a sub-genre championed by performers such as Miley Cyrus, James Franco, Kim Kardashian, Justin Bieber, among others. In this case the subject/author has already attained celebrity status, the act of making/sharing the selfie therefore is to (not only) consolidate popularity and generate/sustain momentum in social networks, but to show gratitude to the followers and fans, to 'give back' to the masses. However in the complex economy of social networks this too quickly becomes leverage for the celebrity who can garner more interest within their relative industry (agents, writers, producers and directors) the more likes and retweets are generated, so once again taking a selfie is prone to become a selfish activity as it yields social currency for the celebrity.

In a 2014 *New York Magazine* article, Saltz critiques Kim Kardashian's popular 'ass and side-boob' (white swimsuit) selfie, and highlights the paradoxical 'un-revealing' that happens in the picture – that despite the osé nature of her pose and attire, Kardashian carefully masks out her private life from the frame, with her 'Japanese screens.'[30] Saltz notes that she seems entirely comfortable with the display of her body, perhaps as professional tool, yet the rest of her home and possessions are screened away, off-limits to the voyeur audience. His use of the notion of 'un-revealing' and his disappointment with Kardashian's self-censorship belies an intrinsic requirement that the selfie be an authentic object which I argue is one of the key elements driving the success of the selfie today.

While undoubtably narcissism, identity construction and quest for celebrity all play their hand to a greater or lesser degree in the phenomenon of the amateur mass projection of self – the former observed through the self-affirming notes on the author's own appearance that often accompany selfies – I argue that even a pandemic of pathological narcissism and/or megolamanic search for fame, manifesting itself in obsessive self-portraiture, would not be enough, in and of itself, to explain the rise of the selfie. Mere production and dissemination of the self-portrait (projection of self) would not suffice to sustain the current selfie ecology, we must also question its consumption, or the participation of the viewer as accomplice, or enabler to the alleged narcissist. Thus, leaving aside for the moment the problematic notions of author and intention, we need to contemplate that perhaps the selfie serves some other purpose, has some residual value as photograph, portrait or anthropological artefact?

9

In search of the authentic other

The traditional (pre-digital) photograph, as modest and naïve object, if not necessarily representing 'the truth,' would (according to the outmoded discourses of Sontag or Barthes) witness the fact that at one point the subject was materially in front of a camera; Sontag spoke of the photograph "stencilling" reality.[31] Decades on, the digital environment ordinarily offers infinite opportunities for the manipulation of the image, and, especially with regard to the human face, we are consistently made aware of the mediated nature of the digital (manipulated) portrait which smiles at us from the covers of glossy magazines or billboards. Lister and Batchen as others have since re-defined the role of the photographic image, they claim that not being tied any longer to an immaculate notion of truth, the photograph has adopted the role of a cultural rather than technological object, that we mediate the meaning in the photographic image rather than merely reading it as representative of some reality. Vilem Flusser in his prescient essay of 1986 "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object" writes "… the new photo will hold objects in contempt," implying that there is a broadening schism between reality and the photographic image.[32]

And yet there remains an arguably irrational, residual faith, particularly in the selfie as verisimilitude of human *being*, or presence. When we see a selfie we appreciate it for its candour, its immediacy and ultimately for its honesty. The selfie says "look at me, here, now." Even the prolific celebrity selfie-ist James Franco in his *New York Times* article "Selfies the Attention Grabber," candidly admits to seeking an authentic identification of the other in the selfie "In our age of social networking, the selfie is the new way to look someone right in the eye and say, 'Hello, this is me.'"[33] Saltz re-affirms this notion with emphasis on the immediacy of the image when he equates the selfie to "the cartoon dog who, when asked what time it is, always says, 'Now! Now! Now!'"[34] The selfie manifests itself at an intersection of time and space, and this simultaneity provides the foundation for an authentic act.

The selfie contains and transmits within its visual code the clues to its construction, with the device (camera or camera-phone) often framed within the image in the case of the mirror-selfie, or alternatively if the device is held in the hand and turned on the author, we witness the telltale outstretched arm or bent shoulder. Liz Losh coins the term 'transparent mediation':

> Transparent mediation describes a significant subset of images … in which the apparatus shooting the photo is present within the frame. … [S]howing the hypermediated character of one's lived experience is actually a strategy to establish credibility and that demonstrating how authentic presence is mediated through a viewer or screen explicitly is a way to communicate trustworthiness.[35]

The apparent candidness, the revealing of the selfie's architecture including the device, location, and technique, the descriptive hashtags, geolocative information, timestamp and other metadata which travels encoded within the image (this can include for example the type of camera used, aperture, shutter speed and so on) reinforce our instinct to accept the selfie without reserve as a true representation of the subject. The setting is a casual protagonist, the choice of a bathroom or bedroom for example may allude to intimacy and solo performance, in it the subject appears vulnerable or fragile which serves to heighten the candid impression of the selfie.

The detection and deciphering of these technical characteristics is what allows us to immediately identify a selfie from other genres of photography, we instinctively apply the rules of its proprietary visual code. Saltz expounds on how to recognise a selfie, and one rule he shares is "if both your hands are in the picture and it's not a mirror shot, technically, it's not a selfie — it's a portrait."[36] The formal taxonomies surrounding the selfie have been rapidly established and reinforced, which has helped consolidate the selfie's unique place in contemporary photography.

The selfie and its double

Another essential element, and one of the most common of many a selfie, is the mirror. Whether present in the frame of the image (as in most bathroom selfies) or inferred, the mirror is one of a series of screens through which the selfie is made and projected. Chieregato and Torselli in their essay "L'autoritratto" ("The Self-Portrait") write of the mirror;

> … at once a symbol of truth or trickery and almost always a metaphor for something other, necessary accomplice of each self-portrait, means of revelation of our dark side, custodian of our perceived identity, becomes the true iconographic subject in the self-portrait …[37] [my translation]

While the author, at the moment of the selfie, cannot but be looking at him or herself, reflected in either the mirror, the app or simply the glossy surface of the device, this ambiguous mirror/screen bound to the selfie is the locus of performance, for the selfie is created to be seen, shared, exhibited, it is not literally and solely a mirror for self-reflection. There is already a placement, positioning, appreciation of the self inside the image, and the network, as the selfie is forecast into the subject's social context, and this becomes another defining attribute of the selfie, it is shot for networked distribution.

Worthy of note, and yet another homogenising trait of the selfie, is that the image most often consists of a close up of single or multiple faces, in fact the selfie is primarily about the face – the genre even has its own repetoire of facial expressions (among the better known is the 'duck-face'). Formally speaking, this can be attributed to the mechanical limitation of the camera's focal distance (approximately an

11

arm's length). Yet the mere limitation of field-of-view would not solely explain the overwhelming preference for creating close-ups of the face, arguably it is the combination of a desire to be recognised by others with the mesmerising effect of our reflection, all of which ultimately affects the framing within the visual codes of the selfie. In a discussion of the cinematic close-up, director Ken Miller cites theorist Mary Ann Doane and concurs that "the face as surface is the perfect complement to the photographic image as surface … in combination, we experience surfaces that promise depths, exteriorities that imply interiorities."[38] In cinema, as Miller and Doane argue, the close-up momentarily distracts us from the narrative to allow us to reflect, ponder, engage with the face. Miller goes on to discuss the notion of 'visual self-inscription,' which could easily be transposed onto the act of the selfie with its "desire to view the self as a mediatised other and, in a sense, could also be thought of as a replay of the narcissistic psychic drama of alterity, in which one attempts to find the other in the self and the self in the other."[39] In other words, it is in composing our selfie close ups that we objectify our selves while the close up images (both ours and others') lure us to distraction with the promise of complexity.

This blurring of subject and audience occurs firstly in the process of creating the image as the author actively edits the content, the context and the framing while watching (gazing upon) their own reflection in the capture-device's screen, and then again as the image is shared and cast into a pool of likenesses to reside among others' selfies that look more or less the same. The viewer encounters the selfie (their own and others) almost exclusively on-screen, the mechanics of which cannot help but reinforce self-reflection either due to the glossy surface of the viewing device literally acting as a mirror projecting a persistent translucent reflection over the content, or because the genre or trope of the selfie – the similarities of pose, focal distance, frame – experienced on the same device, in the same virtual environment where their own selfies are made and posted will favour the viewer seeing it as a further refraction or reflection of themselves. The author ultimately consumes his orher own selfie along with all the others in the constant flow of social media. This blending of subject and viewer has the potential to exacerbate latent narcissistic tendencies of 'bad boundaries' (the inability to distinguish between self and other).[40]

Once immersed in the social network, Franco argues that "selfies are avatars: Mini-Me's that we send out to give others a sense of who we are."[41]As we gaze at our reflection (initially physical, ultimately virtual) through the process of the selfie we test our identity and await affirmation. The affirmation, in the form of a 'like' of the photograph, is taken enthusiastically as a personal appreciation of oneself or of the image. However, as the much sought after 'like' consists of a generic positive sign, arguably a mere social tick (comparable to a tip of a hat or a real world 'thumbs up'), the affirmation may be lent with any number of criteria, not necessarily or always because of the presence or appearance of any particular individual portrayed in the image, indeed it may appeal to the viewer on some entirely

different level. The user may have other political or social motivation to 'like' the images viewed. Yet the author, recipient of the 'likes' will take them as if supporters *like* what they see, this will then encourage reciprocal 'likes' and so on.

Ultimately this affirmation cycle provides (albeit fleetingly) both a sense of connection and appreciation, while the selfie, reinforced by the dogmatic qualities of the inclusion of the device, flash, mirror, location and date stamp in the image – meta-photographic elements which lend signatures of a real time (now) and place (here) – may offer a contemporary version of the 'footprint of our being.' This immediacy or reality would offer an antidote to the current dissolution of the photograph as technological object, as each selfie potentially becomes once more an *authentic* image, "true to the moment of creation."[42] I propose that this quest for authenticity plays a major role in the rise of the selfie; we desire, even require, an authentic encounter with the self and the other.

The triumph of the selfie in contemporary social networks is further consolidated in complex ecologies of recursive self-affirmation and co-dependent narcissism, reinforced by the architecture of social media. This narcissistic supply and demand is perpetuated with each new selfie that falls like a drop into the pool of human likenesses into which we may occasionally risk a gaze.

Notes

[1] Oxford Dictionaries, "Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2013" *OxfordWords Blog*: Oxford University Press. Accessed November 23 2013 http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013/

"ABC Online (forum posting) 13 September 2002 'Um, drunk at a mates 21st, I tripped ofer [sic] and landed lip first (with front teeth coming a very close second) on a set of steps. I had a hole about 1cm long right through my bottom lip. And sorry about the focus, it was a selfie.'" Cited in OxfordWords Blog, http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2013/11/word-of-the-year-2013-winner/

[2] Oxford Dictionaries, "Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2013."

[3] Jerry Saltz, "Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie," *New York Magazine*, February 3 2014. Accessed January 30 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2014/01/history-of-the-selfie.html

[4] Curiously, other subgenres have simultaneously emerged, such as 'self-shot' or 'nakie' for the more explicitly sexual or naked selfie.

[5] See http://www.shots.me. At the current rate the number of photos uploaded to Facebook will be 75 billion per annum.

[6] Alex Williams, "Here I Am Taking My Own Picture." *The New York Times*, February 19th 2006. Accessed 3 September 2013 http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/fashion/sundaystyles/19SELF.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[7] Brian Droitcour, "A Selfie Is Not a Portrait," in *Culture Two* (Brian Droitcour, 2013). Accessed 30 October, 2013 http://culturetwo.wordpress.com/2013/10/24/a-selfie-is-not-a-portrait/

[8] Gen Doy, *Picturing The Self : Changing Views Of The Subject In Visual Culture,* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 25.

[9] Saltz, "Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie."

[10] "Camera phone," Wikipedia, accessed August 9, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camera_phone

[11] Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea : Writing, Photography, History.* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 129.

[12] Risto Sarvas and David M Frohlich, *From Snapshots To Social Media : The Changing Picture Of Domestic Photography*, (London ; New York: Springer, 2011) 148

[13] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology & Other Essays*. Translated by William Lovitt. (London; New York: Garland publishing, 1977), 21.

[14] David Elkind, "Egocentrism in Adolescence" *Child Development,* 38 1967: 1025-1034.

[15] "Kidult,." Wikipedia, accessed 25 May, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kidult

[16] Tiqqun (Collective) and Ariana Reines, *Preliminary Materials For A Theory Of The Young-Girl*, (Los Angeles, CA, 2012).

[17] Gram argues further, that "The Young-Girl is the model citizen of contemporary society not because we worship her, but because by expending her energy on the cultivation of her body, her potential as a revolutionary subject is neutralized. If young girls are the hated bodies of capital (along with immigrant bodies, racialized bodies, LGBT bodies, etc) then they must also be predictable bodies; that is why we spend inordinate amount of money on emphasizing the importance of beauty, the importance of fashion, the importance of youthfulness and desirability and individuality."

Sarah Gram, "The Young-Girl and the Selfie" In *Text Relations.* Accessed 25 September 2013 http://text-relations.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-young-girl-and-selfie.html

[18] Gram, "The Young-Girl and the Selfie."

[19] Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism." *October,* MIT Press, 1 Spring (1976), 50-64.

[20] The installation features a rotating series of short form video selfies (eg. Vine or Instagram video) of 19 emerging artists of the millennial generation commissioned by curators Kyle Chayka and Marina Galperina.

Eugene Reznik, "Off Your Phone and On View: The National #Selfie Portrait Gallery," In *Time Lightbox* (2013): Time Inc. Accessed October 30 2013 http://lightbox.time.com/2013/10/16/off-your-phone-and-on-view-the-national-selfie-portrait-gallery/www.moving-image.info/national-selfie-portrait-gallery

[21] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture Of Narcissism : American Life In An Age Of Diminishing Expectations*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 94.

[22] Lasch, *The Culture Of Narcissism : American Life In An Age Of Diminishing Expectations*, 33-34.

[23] Lasch, *The Culture Of Narcissism : American Life In An Age Of Diminishing Expectations*, 34.

[24] Zizi Papacharissi, *A Networked Self : Identity, Community And Culture On Social Network Sites*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 269.

[25] Droitcour, "A Selfie is not a Portrait."

[26] Jenna Wortham, "Facebook Made Me Do It," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/sunday-review/facebook-made-me-do-it.html?_r=1&

[27] David Giles, *Illusions Of Immortality : A Psychology Of Fame And Celebrity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000)

[28] Sandra Kemp, *Future Face,* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 131.

[29] Giles, *Illusions of Immortality*, 53.

[30] Saltz, "Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie."

Kardashian image can be found at http://instagram.com/p/fjw59uuS7b/#

[31] Susan Sontag, *On photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

[32] Vilem Flusser, "The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs," *Leonardo*, 19, 4 (1986): 331.

[33] James Franco, "Selfies The Attention Grabber," *New York Times,* December 29, 2013. Accessed December 30, 2013 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/29/arts/the-meanings-of-the-selfie.html?_r=1&

[34] Saltz, "Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie."

[35] Elizabeth Losh, "Beyond Biometrics: Feminist Media Theory Looks at *Selfiecity,*" In *Selfie City Theory,* accessed 20 August, 2014, http://selfiecity.net/#dataset

[36] Saltz, "Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie."

[37] Gianmarco Chieregato, & Vilm Torselli, "L'autoritratto (Parte II)," In *Art on Web,* 2008, accessed 22 October 2013 http://www.artonweb.it/artemoderna/linguaggiartemoderna/articolo5bis.html

[38] Ken Miller, *More Than Fifteen Minutes Of Fame : The Changing Face Of Screen Performance,* Film Cultures V.6 (Peter Lang, 2013), 214.

[39] Miller, "More Than Fifteen Minutes Of Fame," 215.

[40] Sandy Hotchkiss & James F Masterson *Why Is It Always About You? The Seven Deadly Sins of Narcissism* (Simon & Schuster, 2003), http://books.simonandschuster.com.au/Why-Is-It-Always-About-You/Sandy-Hotchkiss/9780743214285#sthash.go3iopSR.dpuf

[41] Franco, "Selfies The Attention Grabber."

[42] Laura Cumming, *A Face To The World : On Self-Portraits*, (London: Harper Press, 2009), 7.