

Sharing selfies

Uschi Klein

'Do you take selfies?' A friend asked me this recently while we were discussing photography, and I have to confess the question caught me by surprise. As a photographer, conversations around the medium are hardly unusual for me, but the assumption that I too might be taking photos of myself with a camera phone and posting them on Social Networking Sites (SNS), such as Instagram, Flickr or Facebook, struck me as a little strange, embarrassing even. Bourdieu (1984) might understand my reaction as a form of cultural or professional "distinction"; however, the rise of the selfie phenomenon in recent years suggests many others don't share my reluctance. Photography has long stopped being the preserve of an elite, but its place within social networking culture has changed amateur practice too. No longer called upon only for special occasions, popular photography – epitomized by the selfie – has rapidly become a cultural practice of the everyday.

A quick hashtag search on Instagram using the word selfie reveals countless variations of the term; from #selfietime to #selfiegame, #selfieoverload and #selfielove, people appear to be creative in formulating new hashtags containing the word selfie and adding their own images (often simultaneously) to different online pools of millions of selfies (at the time of writing #selfie alone has 217,932,440 posts on Instagram and the number is growing steadily). The everyday creativity of the form is expressed both textually and visually, as exemplified in one image in #selfiegame: the black and white image is composed of three different representations of a man's head and shoulders lying on the grass. While each variation takes up one third of the frame, the man's gaze is always straight at the camera, yet his facial expressions vary in each portrayal. This montage of different

versions in one image (rather than three individual selfie images) suggests a desire for visual originality that matches the textual creativity of #selfiegame.

And selfies are a global phenomenon, or at least a phenomenon of the global city. In 2014, the research project Selfiecity¹ surveyed the multitude of selfies in five cities around the world (Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, and Sao Paulo). Selecting 120,000 images from a total of 656,000 collected on Instagram the project found that fewer actual selfies are taken than people assume (approximately 4% of the image sample). While 4% might seem low bearing in mind that selfies are “photographs that one has taken of oneself” (Oxford Dictionary), not images of other people, food or animals, this still represents a significant volume of images.

The selfie is also a gendered form. In each of the cities more women than men posted selfies. Bangkok at 55% was the lowest, while 82% of selfies in Moscow were of women. Many of these images show their subjects posing with tilted heads, which might call for a more detailed study and comparison to Erving Goffman’s (1979) classic study of the performance of gender in advertising, but mostly we find an abundance of selfies illustrating people smiling. With millions of selfies on SNS, people seem to have a strong desire to share their selfies with friends and followers, otherwise why take them in the first place?

Selfies are a compelling and proliferating phenomenon in our contemporary popular and visual culture, raising important questions around the notion of photographic time, the visual performance of the self (Goffman 1959), the shifting boundaries of privacy and its wider impact on other social and cultural fields, in which people engage with everyday practices when they share selfies on SNS. These questions are crucial because selfies embrace all those aspects. Taken in fleeting moments and quickly shared in everyday life they relate to the lived experiences that

¹ <http://selfiecity.net/#>

are “composed of various social fields of practice that are articulated, codified and normalized ... in different ways ... each combining time and space in a unique way” (Burkitt 2010: 211). Selfies function to share the present moment with others on SNS.

So what is it about self-representation in our contemporary visual and popular culture that so many people are drawn to, and leads to the assumption that *everyone* who has a camera phone or who shows the slightest interest in photography is taking and sharing selfies online? In the following essay, I explore the notions of self-representation, online sharing, and the boundaries of privacy and online relationships. But, to better understand the cultural form of selfies and how they are shared via SNS, I want first to recall the history of photographic self-portraits.²

Are selfies really so new?

Selfies are ubiquitous and abundant. People appear to love representing themselves visually in contemporary popular culture. Self-representation in the form of photographic self-portraits is not, however, a new idea or a new cultural practice, even though the word ‘selfie’ only made it into the Oxford Dictionary in 2013. One of the earliest forms of photographic “self-portrait” was the “carte-de-visite”, invented in 1854 by Parisian photographer Andre Adolphe Disderi, and which subsequently took off as a “global phenomenon, being produced in huge numbers on every continent” (Batchen 2009: 81). Although often made in professional photographic studios or by professional photographers in the homes of sitters, the “carte-de-visite” bears comparison with the selfie. This distinctive photographic format was actively shared and exchanged with family and friends who often stored them in family albums. It was the beginning of a photographic era that was characterised by mass reproduction, consumption, and active use. Photography was not simply a means of making images but a significant cultural practice and a substantial arena of

² See Jeffrey (1981), Wells (2009) and Rosenblum (2008) for a more comprehensive historical overview and discussion of photography.

commercial enterprise. Cartes-de-visite were products of repetition and difference. They were multiples, printed and reproduced almost identically in the thousands, putting the authenticity of the original into question and establishing reproducibility as photography's most distinctive, and disruptive feature (Benjamin 1968).

While this multiplicity and easy reproduction was the primary selling point and success for the carte-de-visite (Batchen 2009), Walter Benjamin argues that “[e]ven the most perfect reproduction... is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (1968: 214). In other words, the reproduction of cartes, no matter how identical they were, replaced the uniqueness (or authenticity) and present moment of the single image for the plurality of copies that were now widely distributed and became an accepted form of commodity. They were collected in albums, consumed, shared, exchanged and discussed with friends and family. Cartes enabled people to recreate relationship structures “that overcame time and space, class and gender” (Batchen 2009: 91). Indeed, cartes facilitated the production of visual connections in albums, linking people who might otherwise have not been associated, arguably making cartes the predecessor of Instagram.

As I hope this brief account has indicated, practices of self-representation, the sharing of photographs and their use within social relationships, were firmly established within the history of photography before the arrival of the selfie.

What makes a selfie?

Examining a selfie at random, I am confronted by a woman who glances at the camera but does not smile. A close-up of her cropped head in the top left corner of the image depicts half her face, nose, left eye and eyebrow. Her medium ash brown hair fills the right side and a yellow scarf covers the bottom of the image. There is no discernible context and the effect of the closeness of the camera to its subject

creates a strange and rather unflattering distortion to the image. (It is interesting how rapidly these distortions, which would once have been regarded as a photographic mistake, have come to be an accepted part of the selfie aesthetic.) In another, the black and white image displays a medium close-up of a woman's head and shoulders. Her shoulder-length hair frames her face in the centre of the image. She smiles lightly and her eyes look straight at the camera. Both these images are self-representations of women, uploaded as #selfies on Instagram. As Nancy Thumim argues, however, "[u]biquitous self-representations may look alike but analysis of the various dimensions of mediation process shaping their production and display highlights the important distinction between them" (2012: 5). Indeed, the previously described selfies are different from each other as the women perform their selves in individual ways. Even within these tight visual limits, according to Martin Hand, "people are finding other ways to make their photos feel like *their own*" (2012: 91, italics in original). He claims that people increasingly resort to originality and creativity "in the face of ubiquity" to find novel ways to own an image as they are on a "quest to be original" (2012: 91-92), which at the same time prompts reflection on the cultural valuing of this novelty and creativity.

Mediated self-representation is not something that people do on their own. Rather, Thumim observes, participatory online communities are undergoing a continuous struggle "to make spaces for more democratic media production" (2012: 5). SNS facilitate self-representation as a condition of participation in Web 2.0, or the other way around, in order to participate in social media people must represent their self. People's experience of the everyday is individual and unique to them, therefore it is crucial that they have choices about which facet of their self they want to represent and how to represent them (Rivière 2005).

It is not an unusual idea that individuals make a presentation of their self to others. As proposed by Goffman (1959), each individual has various selves. Like a Russian doll, they are concealed inside each other and presented to others and the outside world according to the structure of social life. Thus, individuals perform their selfies to influence others. Depending on their roles, relationships, and statuses those performances are restricted by social and cultural norms. Performances are also idealized. As individuals are capable of experiencing pride and shame, they present their self in the best possible way while they safeguard their self against embarrassment.

The millions of mediated selfies on SNS may look alike to the casual eye but their role is not simply to visually present one's self to the world; selfies allow individuals to actively participate in it. Sharing selfies enables individuals both to visually perform their self and engage in a cultural form and everyday practice that facilitates their participation in an online community with which they can share their present experiences and moments. Pierre Bourdieu termed this idea "habitus" (1984). According to his ideas, moving across and between cultural fields shapes people's habitus and helps make sense of the different relationships individuals develop between social structures (such as SNS) and everyday practices (like sharing selfies). So selfies are not randomly posted. People choose what part of their selves they want to represent and how to present it before selecting the appropriate hashtag on Instagram.

Who looks at selfies?

Contemporary technological advances in popular and digital culture increase the use of SNS. Writers across disciplines observe that people create more digital photographs out of a perceived need to share them (Gómez-Cruz and Meyer 2012; Hand 2012; Murray 2013). Indeed, the fusion of the mobile phone and digital

photography enables users to share their selfies widely and, subsequently, for these selfies to be re-shared with others – often in seemingly arbitrary ways, and “in real time” (Gómez-Cruz and Meyer 2012: 214). Visual self-representation has become ubiquitous, “an extension of the way in which one sees oneself and it gives value to communicating with other people” in the present (Rivière 2005: 173). According to Geoffrey Batchen, “photography is predominantly a vernacular practice and has always been a global experience” (2008: 126). Indeed, photography is about sharing and interpersonal communication, which are both central to participation. Selfies are often shared without formal permission, maintaining a cycle of production, consumption and distribution – friends and followers on SNS actively share selfies with their friends and followers and so on. Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis maintain that the exposure of the private snapshot has increased to such an extent that, “snapshot photography ... is both ubiquitous and hidden” (2008: 10). Yet when the unstated codes and conventions that shape this cultural practice are breached, as in the recent example of selfies made at the Sydney gun siege in December 2014³, they can be quickly subject to public exposure and censure.

In this light, perhaps it seems necessary to consider how contemporary selfie images shift socially-agreed ideas of the private moment and the boundaries of privacy. Digital technologies have blurred the boundaries between public and private communication on SNS, as selfies are shared in an online space whose “publicness” differs according to individual privacy settings. Sharing selfies is self-generated and voluntary; it is not merely the social media institutions that frame, approve or heavily regulate them. Selfies are self-sponsored and self-circulated, which is how they have become so ubiquitous (Thumim 2012). However, as research suggests, privacy is important to users of SNS (Marwick and Boyd 2014), so instead of paying attention to

³ Metro UK, <http://metro.co.uk/2014/12/15/sydney-siege-people-are-taking-selfies-just-metres-away-from-hostage-cafe-4987447/>

the issue of whether SNS is private or not, users should “take as given that social networking is not a private activity and, consequently, that self-representations that are produced in the process of social networking are also not private” (Thumim 2012: 148).

Selfies and online social worlds

Digital technologies are increasingly changing the way individuals act in their everyday lives, enabling new activities and the formation of new communities (Barton and Lee 2012). To share selfies is to participate and collaborate in an online world and to interact as a member of an online community – sometimes by textually commenting on selfies, sometimes by sharing them with others. Furthermore, the cultural practice of creating and sharing selfies, no matter how original or mundane they are, asserts new identities through the performance of online selves in interaction with others and in the present moment. This interaction is a two-way practice, as one connects and relates to the world in different ways. While identity and self-expression have always been crucial to self-representation, and are particularly salient practices for teenagers and young people (Davis 2011), digital technologies have increased the proliferation of identity creation and the speed in which relationships and friendships develop online. In other words, the practice of selfies emphasizes the individual experience of seeing ourselves as part of the world, yet the relationships and connections we create and maintain with others by sharing selfies is no less important as part of our popular and visual culture.

Indeed, writers broadly agree that sharing and exchanging personal photographs, including selfies, is fundamental to maintaining off- and online relationships (Gye 2007; Davis 2011). As the mobile phone is no longer limited to merely transmitting voice and includes other functions such as photography, it enriches communication. Selfies communicate and establish both a visual presence

and photographic communication that functions to maintain contact without the content that is being exchanged being particularly meaningful. Thus, selfies are a form of relationship-focused, rather than task-oriented, communication, where the content that is being exchanged is less important than the maintenance of mutual presence (Villi 2012). Sharing selfies is therefore part of many people's daily lives and the fact that they are widely shared, even without consent, may simply contribute to being part of a wider network and increase the chances of online connectivity. This also means that identity has become fluid and multi-faceted as people move from one social context, using their selfies across different platforms and for different reasons.

Borrowing the linguistic term of contextual redundancy (Wit and Gillette 1999), others also argue that the concepts of repetition and ritualization are endemic to the genre of self-representation, otherwise we would not see the vast number of selfies on SNS that are taken at different times of the day or week – yes, the following hashtags do also exist on Instagram: #selfiemonday, #selfietuesday, #selfiewednesday, #selfiemorning ... You get the idea.

In conclusion, the selfie phenomenon is more complex than it first appears and it is not necessarily driven by self-absorption and self-love, or representative of a narcissistic turn in contemporary popular culture. The impulse to be creative and original when taking selfies indicates a strong desire to connect with others in a variety of ways and to share experiences in real time. Photography is about communication, which serves to maintain contact and relationships with others. Moreover, selfies are a condition of active online participation. They are shared, networked and connected visual reflections of everyday life. Those reflections help to maintain and expand social connections as selfies are shared and re-shared. Thus, they move from personal and private to public spheres. The proliferation of selfies is

contributing to the visual landscape of contemporary popular culture. Even those of us who don't take selfies cannot stay aloof, in one way or another we are likely to be part of the production, consumption, and distribution of them, as even the British monarch found out.⁴

Note

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Bio

Uschi Klein is a PhD candidate at University of Brighton, UK, and works as a photographer in London, UK. She studied Linguistics and Media Studies at undergraduate level, followed by a MA in Photography. Her research interests encompass the relationship between photography, visual culture, representation, identity and visual research methods. Her current research is a participatory, image-based study that explores the everyday photographic practices of young people with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

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