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Contemporary Media Forum

From Self-Portraits to Selfies

By John Suler

As a longstanding tradition ever since the invention of photography, the self-portrait represents what makes humans unique: our highly developed self-awareness that motivates us to capture and preserve ourselves in some material way, so we can re-experience, re-examine, and perhaps better understand not just ourselves, but also the very process of capturing our own self-awareness. But it was not until the invention of digital photography and the internet that this endeavor blossomed among both professionals and amateurs. Everyone had the opportunity to not just take self-portraits, but also to shoot as many as one desired at no extra cost, to choose the best results immediately by viewing the camera LCD screen, to edit the images oneself on a computer, and to share them online. As a result, self-portraits became highly popular in online photosharing communities such as Flickr in the early 2000s.

Having been a photographer all my life, as well as a psychoanalytic cyberpsychologist studying online behavior, I was fascinated by the impact self-portraits were having in online communities. Because our mind intrinsically rivets to the characteristics of the human face, seeing someone's self-portrait in social media makes them feel more real, more so than simply typing text. Self-portraits are a highly effective method of revealing oneself in cyberspace while attempting to control that projected self-awareness. The massive numbers of self-portraits that began to appear online provided an unprecedented opportunity to study this phenomenon in depth.

DID I SHOOT MYSELF?

The "objective self-portrait" creates the illusion that someone else might have taken the photograph, in traditional photography by placing the camera on a surface or tripod to shoot from a distance, or more recently in the use of the "selfie stick" that enables one to place a phone camera at the end of a pole. The greater the distance between camera and subject, the less likely the viewer will assume it is a self-portrait. If photographers close their eyes, look away from the camera, and avoid a self-conscious facial expression, they can create the impression that they did not even know a photograph was being taken, that "this is how someone else captured me." By fabricating this illusion of someone else's presence, the objective self-portrait suggests a relationship between the

subject and that imaginary photographer, a bifurcation of both identity and self-awareness often rooted in an unconscious reference to a particular person who took the shot (Figure 1). The person is posing for the introjected other who has now been projected into the role of the imaginary photographer, or perhaps posing in anticipation of how online companions will react to the portrait, online companions who are consciously and unconsciously expected to address the photographer's transference needs.

In the "subjective self-portrait" it is clear that the photograph is a self-portrait. We see the photographers' outstretched arms pointing the camera at themselves, or it is obvious that they were shooting into a mirror. When they also look into the camera lens, this impression of self-capturing-self is magnified. Subjective self-portraits tend to be more common than the objective types, especially in generic social media where the self-conscious need to tell one's ongoing life story is stronger than in the more serious photography communities where objective self-portraits prevail as a form of artistic expression. Subjective self-portraits are also easier to take, making them more amenable to the spontaneously immediate action of sharing oneself in-the-moment that has become the main attraction of contemporary social media. Whereas carefully executed objective self-portraits alleviate impressions of the photographer appearing narcissistically self-absorbed, subjective self-portraits tend to amplify that feeling of self-preoccupation.

ALL OR PART OF ME?

Self-portraits vary in how much people visually reveal about themselves. Perhaps drawing on unconscious memories of part-objects, some shots focus

Figure 1: Self-portraits.

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on a particular portion of the body, usually the face and eyes, but also hands, legs, feet, and hair. In wider angle shots, the person expands the field of view, showing all of themselves, things in their hands, and their surroundings – what professional photographers call "environmental" self-portraits. Because one's body language, clothing, nearby objects, and location reveal identity, what people show or hide in these self-portraits reflects mechanisms of dissociation, expression, and integration in the story being told about themselves. Turning a group photograph into a self-portrait by cropping out another person clearly shows how the photographer wants to eliminate or "de-introject" that person from the self being portrayed, often motivated by hostility.

THE OBSERVING EGO

When people post self-portraits in social media, they are commenting on and seeking feedback about something in particular about themselves and their lives: a past or recent experience, an accomplishment, their thoughts and feelings at the moment. However, they often are not consciously aware of everything their photographs reveal about them. The more they study these self-portraits and the reactions people offer, the more they might understand what those images say about them. Taking a self-portrait then posting it to social media can place them into a more objective viewpoint about their identity. It stimulates the observing ego, the ability to step back to look at themselves in a more detached way, as if through the eyes of others. It might serve as an experiment in understanding how others see them, or as a bridge between other's perceptions of their identity as compared to their own self-concept. It is interesting how some self-portrait photographers talk about their work as if the subject is someone else. They might even experience that subject as someone else, finding it easier to talk about the thoughts and emotions of the subject as a transition to talking directly about themselves.

OTHERS' OPINIONS OF ME

Some photographers say they feel freed up when viewers of their online self-portraits are strangers. They enjoy simply being themselves, without need for approval from friends or family. They create whatever image of themselves they want. Some people in online photosharing communities do seem incredibly candid in their self-portraits, baring their souls to strangers, sometimes to the degree that visitors feel uncomfortable leaving a comment that might intrude on the photographer's seemingly vulnerable self-reflective space. When strangers do offer comments and buttonized feedback in the form of "likes," some photographers cannot resist being influenced by those reactions. Often unconsciously, they dwell on posting specific kinds of photographs due to the acclaim they receive for them, while ignoring or avoiding other expressions of their identity.

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"My audience seems to like me best when I am the loving parent, the jokester, the athlete, or the lonely sensitive introvert, so that's what I'll keep posting."

People often design a self-portrait with particular viewers in mind, such as a romantic partner, family members, or good friends. When they post these images to social media, they subconsciously perceive a private space with these companions, even though it does not actually exist. Awkward, embarrassing, annoying, or otherwise problematic situations arise when someone for whom they did not intend the photograph comments on it. Photosharing communities offer features for restricting access to selected images, but some photographers take the risk of uploading their sensitive self-portraits for the whole world to see.

People sometimes post self-portraits to counteract the social impact of photographs that other people take of them then share online. Whenever people take a shot of a friend or family member, it represents their perspective on that person and their relationship with that person. The results can be flattering, or not – but in either case one has little control over how it affects other people's opinions once the photograph is posted. For this reason, it is not uncommon for displeased people to ask a friend or relative to delete from cyberspace a photograph they had taken, or for people to post unpleasant or intimate photographs of someone else as an act of hostility. On a widespread scale, our culture has grown more suspicious about what photographers might do with their shots, as if one's image has become an object to be freely used or abused.

THE RISE OF THE NARCISSISTIC SELFIE

Sharing self-portraits online eventually became so popular that a nickname was invented for it – *the selfie*. Why did it become so ubiquitous? In addition to the facilitating forces of digital photography and online photosharing, the emphasis in social media on narrating one's life led to the self-portrait as an important feature of that storytelling. When very light-weight, mobile phones included cameras with dual-view LCD screens, the ongoing visual autobiographies then catapulted to unprecedented heights. People could take selfies whenever and wherever they wanted, simply by holding out their hands to aim the camera at themselves. Aficionados professing an expertise on creating these types of selfies convinced so many people about the "right" way to take them that those styles proliferated like viruses. As one of my students said, "Everyone posts the same types of photos to the point where the only thing different is the actual face in the photo."

Critics claimed that the burgeoning of selfies in the early 2010s unveiled an age of uninhibited, superficial exhibitionism. People wanted to perform as stars in a reality show of their own making. It was pure narcissism, the critics claimed, an act of self-indulgence, a competitive comparing of oneself to others, a needy grasping for attention, an obsession with validation, a product of social dependence driven by the need to acquire "likes," and a desperate quest to counteract low self-esteem. Staring at oneself in the LCD screen in preparation for a shot seemed like the mythical Narcissus gazing at his reflection in a pond. Nude and sexually

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provocative selfies – a powerful way to attract an online audience, especially for females seeking male attention – felt like a source of narcissistic empowerment.

Constructed in a diminutive form, the word "selfie" suggests affectionate familiarity for a little bit of oneself that is being expressed in an immediate, impermanent, and insignificant way. Contrary to the history of the self-portrait as a tool for artistic expression, self-insight, and personal growth, the selfie simply became a throw-away item, usually offered simply as visual proof of having been in some situation, without providing much else of real substance to either the photographer or the viewer. In the history of photography, the transition from serious self-portraits as artistic expression to the selfie as a note-then-forget image marked a transition from potentially healthy narcissism to idle or even dysfunctional narcissism.

Many people feel tempted to post idealized versions of themselves in social media. They take many versions of the same self-portrait in a careful attempt to capture their perfected self. When the phone application called Instagam introduced editing filters that made it easy to glamorize a self-portrait, young people adopted it with gusto, especially those who used photosharing as a way to draw sexual and romantic attention. Very quickly everyone realized that attractive self-portraits were narcissistically contrived. Over time, some people noticed that friends and family responded as favorably, or even more favorably, when they posted photographs that were not meticulously posed and edited, that showed the real person, flaws and all. They appreciated honesty, vulnerability, and "being real."

SELF-PORTRAITS OVER TIME

When people first share a self-portrait, they often feel apprehensive, self-conscious about their appearance, worried about negative reactions. But if the outcomes are positive, and if they do not cave in to the pressure to post only the kinds of photographs they know will be received well, they become more creative, spontaneous, and even carefree about their self-portraits. Literally and figuratively, they show different angles on themselves. They take a closer look at what they like and dislike about their identities, revealing internal conflicts and ambivalent emotions. Patterns emerge that point to underlying, perhaps unconscious dimensions of personal identity that are not clearly evident in any one photograph. The ongoing self-portraits eventually become a kaleidoscope of images that reveal a more complete, multifaceted representation of the photographer. The more people do self-portraits, the more they think, "How much should I and am I revealing about myself?"

For photographers who create self-portraits on a regular basis – such as those who participate in "365" projects entailing one photograph posted everyday for a year – the process becomes an ongoing visual journal of identity exploration. Like a thermometer, the self-portrait registers one's predominant psychological temperature on a daily basis. Under optimal conditions, it enhances one's sense

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of self continuity and cohesion. Some people say that it even gives them a chance to decide who they want to be on a particular day, how they might actualize an idealized self even if they cannot express it directly. When asked about their motivations to undertake a 365 project, people always say that it is a big challenge – the challenge of asking oneself, everyday, "How am I feeling? Who am I? How will others react to me?" It is an ongoing quest in understanding what changes about oneself, as well as what stays the same.

In some respects creating self-portraits becomes easier the more people do them. Skills in using the camera, posing, and editing the photographs improve. In other respects they become harder. People hit creative blocks. They get stuck on particular types of self-portraits because they run into a psychological dead end. They become fixated on a certain type of self-perception, perhaps because they value it, need it, or are conflicted about it. Sometimes this blocking stems from their online audience that needs, applauds, and therefore reinforces only certain kinds of self-images but not others. At these dead ends, people often say that they need to take a break. On a subconscious level, they allow other life experiences to rejuvenate their motivations and insights, so they can rediscover what they want to express in their self-portraits.

When people do not succumb to the temptations of the superficial selfie in conventional social media, when they undertake ongoing self-portraits as a genuinely self-reflective process of seeing where they have been and where they might be going, the road can take unexpected twists and turns. In that sense, it is a lot like life.

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