

CHAPTER 1

HOW TO SEE YOURSELF

In 2013, the *Oxford English Dictionary* announced that its word of the year was *selfie*, which it defined as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.” Apparently, the word was used 17,000 percent more often between October 2012 and October 2013 than during the previous year, due in part to the popularity of the mobile photo-sharing site Instagram. In 2013, 184 million pictures were tagged as selfies on Instagram alone. The selfie is a striking example of how once elite pursuits have become a global visual culture. At one time, self-portraits were the preserve of a highly skilled few. Now anyone with a camera phone can make one.

The selfie resonates not because it is new, but because it expresses, develops, expands, and intensifies the long history of the self-portrait. The self-portrait showed to others the status of the person depicted. In this sense, what we have come to call our own “image”—the interface of the way we think we look and the way others see us—is

the first and fundamental object of global visual culture. The selfie depicts the drama of our own daily performance of ourselves in tension with our inner emotions that may or may not be expressed as we wish. At each stage of the self-portrait's expansion, more and more people have been able to depict themselves. Today's young, urban, networked majority has reworked the history of the self-portrait to make the selfie into the first visual signature of the new era.

For most of the modern era, the possibility of seeing an image of oneself was limited to the wealthy and the powerful. The invention of photography in 1839 soon led to the development of cheap photographic formats that placed the portrait and the self-portrait in the reach of most working people in industrialized nations. In 2013, these two histories converged. At the funeral of Nelson Mandela

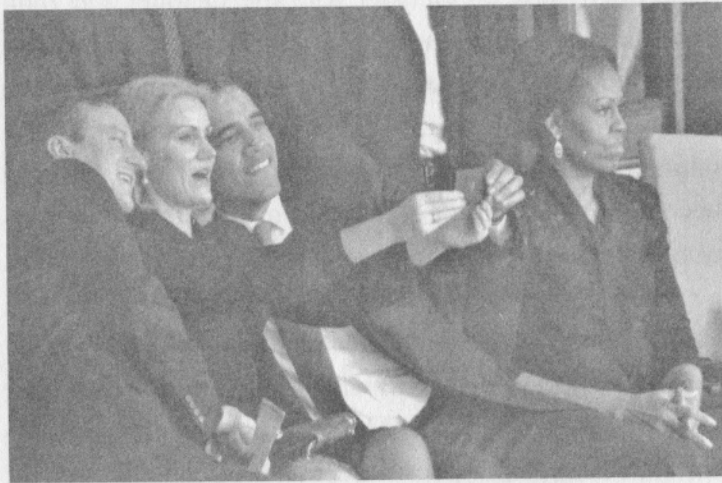


Figure 7. Thorning-Schmidt, Obama, and Cameron taking a selfie

on December 10 that year, Danish prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt took a selfie that included US president Barack Obama and UK prime minister David Cameron.

While some commentators questioned the propriety of the moment, it marked a departure from the lifeless posed official photograph and a new investment in a popular format. The photograph of the selfie being taken was reprinted worldwide, although the selfie itself was not released to the media. Only a few weeks later, the world's best-known actors converged around Ellen DeGeneres at the 2014 Academy Awards to be in a selfie taken by Bradley Cooper that became the most popular tweet to date (also cited as the most popular of all time). The selfie is a fusion of the self-image, the self-portrait of the artist as a hero, and the machine image of modern art that works as a digital performance. It has created a new way to think of the history of visual culture as that of the self-portrait.

THE IMPERIAL SELF

These intersections—of the self-portrait, the machine image, and the digital—have their sources in the history of art, which we can follow. The Spanish painter Diego Velázquez's masterpiece *Las Meninas* (1656) linked the aura of majesty to that of the self-portrait. The painting is a set of visual puns, plays, and performances that revolve around the self-portrait of the artist.

As we look at the painting, Velázquez stands to our left-hand side, holding his brushes. The canvas he is working



Figure 8. Velázquez, *Las Meninas*

on blocks our view. In the foreground we see the Maids of the title, the curtsying women, who are the attendants of the little girl in white. She is a princess, known as the Infanta, daughter of Philip IV of Spain. At once we notice that almost everyone in the painting is looking at someone

or something, which appears to be located at the viewer's vantage point. As we look back into the painting, we see two figures in a frame on the wall behind the main group. The frame is much brighter than the other gloomy paintings hanging on the wall, and we conclude that it must be a mirror. In fact, is it not reflecting the people everyone is looking at? And these are no ordinary people. They are the king and queen, which is why everyone seems frozen to the spot.

In a famous analysis of the painting in his book *The Order of Things*, French philosopher Michel Foucault described it as depicting not just what could be seen within it but the very means of ordering and representing a society ([1966] 1970). The subject of the portrait is the ways in which it is possible to depict living things in a hierarchy depending on the presence of the king, ranging from the dog at the front, to the dwarf who was a court jester, the ladies-in-waiting and other nobility, the painter, and the royal presence. Foucault's approach in turn helped inspire what was called the "new art history," and later, the concept of visual culture. Foucault showed that the place that everyone is looking at is the center because the king is there, noting:

the triple function it fulfils in relation to the picture. For in it there occurs an exact superimposition of the model's gaze as it is being painted, of the spectator's as he contemplates the painting, and of the painter's as he is composing his picture.¹

The mirror reflects the models that the painted painter is working on. It also makes visible by implication the place from which the real Velázquez worked. And it is the same place where we now stand to look at the finished painting. Foucault observes:

That space where the king and his wife hold sway belongs equally well to the artist and to the spectator: in the depths of the mirror there could also appear—there ought to appear—the anonymous face of the passerby and that of Velázquez.²

So, the “mirror” does not obey the laws of optics so much as it does the laws of majesty, like the painting itself. The seventeenth century was a period in which monarchs around Europe claimed the power of absolutism. That is to say, they were more than just people. Kings were God’s representatives on Earth, symbolized by their being anointed like a priest during the coronation ceremony. Combining secular and spiritual power, the absolutist monarchs claimed overwhelming power that was centered in their very person.

How, then, should the king be shown to convey a sense of this power? Not every individual person that happened to become a king or queen was impressive. Even the most powerful have their moments of weakness, illness, and decline. Against the fallible individual person of the king, European royalty devised the concept known as the body of the king, which we can call majesty. Majesty does not

sleep, get ill, or become old. It is visualized, not seen. Any action that diminished majesty was a crime called *lèse-majesté*, violating majesty, which could be severely punished. It even became a criminal offence to take a piece of paper with the king’s name on it and crumple it up. Physical attacks on the monarch were met with truly spectacular punishments because it was a double attack on the person of the king or queen and the institution of majesty.

Las Meninas is invested throughout with this power, making the image of the king at least the equal, and in some ways the superior, of the king himself. It also makes a set of claims for the power of the artist by association. As we have seen, the “mirror” is not optically accurate. Art historians like Joel Snyder have shown that the arrangement of perspective in the painting does not in fact converge on the mirror, but on the arm of the man standing in the open doorway to its right as we look at it (1985). Although the scene appears to show a mirror reflecting the king, it actually shows the mirror reflecting Velázquez’s painting of King Philip. It is possible that Velázquez’s perspective was not so precise or that he wanted to create a visual trap for his audience. Whatever you believe, the “mirror” shows something that the spectator would not usually be able to see—either the painting that the artist is working on, as Snyder has it, or the king and queen standing in front of it, as Foucault had it.

So, the mirror misrepresents, but it also shows a world of possibility. *Las Meninas* makes a tremendous claim for the power of the artist, both literally and metaphorically.

The remarkable skill of the piece makes it clear that the painter is capable of accomplishments others are not. Only twenty years earlier, Velázquez had to pay the same kind of tax on his art that shoemakers did on their shoes. Here Velázquez claims the power of majesty for art by association and by depiction. He also put a red cross on his costume, indicating his claim to the status of nobility, before he could actually claim to be a noble in real life. Today, when it is common to see paintings sell for millions, even hundreds of millions, the elite status of the artist is taken for granted. It is, in fact, a relatively new and unusual idea that arose first in the imperial nations of the modern world.

Las Meninas plays with what we can see and what we cannot. It keeps out of sight the source of the Spanish monarchy's power and authority, namely its empire in the Americas. Louis XIV (1638–1715), the absolutist king of France who married the older half-sister of the Infanta seen in *Las Meninas*, had an obsidian mirror in his Cabinet of Wonders, said to have been plundered from Moctezuma II himself, the last Aztec emperor (ruled 1502–20). Obsidian is a material formed by cooled lava that is both black and reflective. Mexican artist Pedro Lasch, who has worked with the black mirror, emphasizes that “in pre-Columbian America, as in many other cultures, black mirrors were commonly used for divination. . . . The Aztecs directly associated obsidian with Tezcatlipoca, the deadly god of war, sorcery, and sexual transgression.”³ If the European mirror image was a place of power, its American equivalent added violence, sexual ambivalence, and storytelling to the imperial mix.

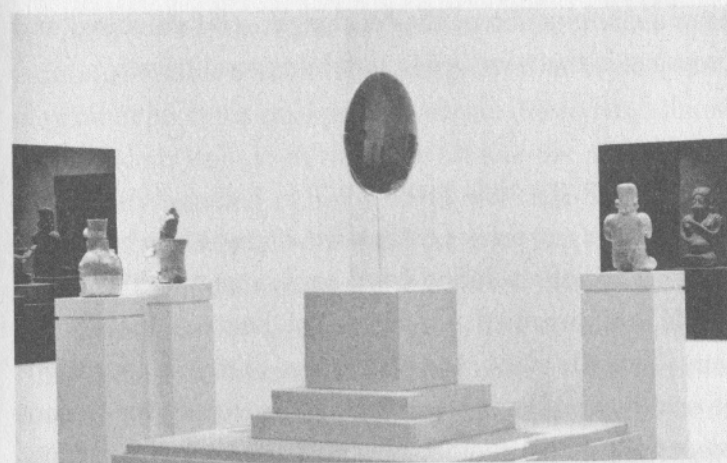


Figure 9. Lasch, *Liquid Abstraction*

In both the pre-encounter Americas and in medieval Europe, the mirror was a place of divination, where fortunes were told and where contact could be made with the dead and other spirits. In short, the mirror is a visual bridge between past, present, and future.

The imperial portrait in the absolutist era (1600–1800) was, then, never just one image. The portrait of the individual who happened to be king also depicted the majesty of the king, or the power of representation itself. The self-portrait of the artist claimed that art was the work of nobility, not artisans. The mirror reflects either the real king and queen or the painted portrait of the king. Or, in some not quite mathematical but nonetheless perfectly intelligible sense, both. The black mirror and the optically incorrect painted mirror show us how things are now, but are also a place to access the past and the future. These reflections and images

were a combination of theater, magic, self-fashioning, and propaganda that were key to sustaining royal power.

THE PORTRAIT AND THE HERO

When the old monarchies collapsed during what can be seen as the long age of revolution (1776–1917), a new “frenzy of the visible” accompanied and was part of the social transformation (Comolli 1980). Across this era, dramatic inventions of new media like lithography, and especially the various processes we call photography, portraits, and self-portraits, seemed to revolutionize the visible. Visual media were democratized. Until this time, the ordinary person might have seen visual images in church, on coins, at parades, or in carnivals. By the mid-nineteenth century, there were new museums of art; illustrated newspapers and magazines were being published; and visiting-card photographs could be bought cheaply. New ways of being came to be imagined and visually represented, including the modern artistic “genius,” nearly always male, but also the woman artist. The heroic artist took some of the aura of the king (or queen) and transferred it to him- or herself. Brought down to Earth, the self-portrait became the picture of a hero.

In the last years of absolutism, the new order was already emerging. Royal artist Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun painted portraits of the French queen Marie Antoinette. She also painted a number of self-portraits. To borrow a cue from John Berger, can you see which is which? (See figures 10–11.)

Both women look out at the viewer directly from the painting, against a scumbled background of loosely handled nonrepresentational paint. Both are dressed as fashionable, modern women in the loose style of the period, with their finely handled sashes showing the skill of the artist. Perhaps the informality of the pose with her child allows us to see Vigée-Lebrun in her self-portrait *Madame Vigée-Lebrun and Her Daughter Julie* (1789). The portrait of Marie Antoinette (1783) became the subject of a scandal precisely because of its informality. At the same time, by so blurring the difference between the queen and the artist, Vigée-Lebrun claimed a new level of equivalence between the two.

In their classic study *Old Mistresses*—the title is a pun on the phrase “Old Masters,” used to mean distinguished artists of the past with the implication that such artists would be men—Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock studied the history of women artists (1981). The self-portrait with her daughter raised particular issues because women were not even supposed to be artists, according to the received prejudice, so a painting by a woman showing a woman artist was doubly defiant. Parker and Pollock described how in Vigée-Lebrun’s *Self-Portrait*:

The novelty [of the painting] lies in the secular and familial emphasis, the Madonna and Child of traditional iconography replaced by mother and *female* child locked in an affectionate embrace. This portrait of the artist and her daughter elaborates that notion of woman, emphasizing that she is a mother.⁴



Figure 10. Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie Antoinette*

Vigée-Lebrun had taken the Christian image of the Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus and given it a secular and contemporary spin. Notably, both the artist and her daughter look out at us confidently, unlike the traditional downcast glance of the Madonna in paintings by artists like Raphael. Still, as Parker and Pollock pointed out, there



Figure 11. Vigée-Lebrun, *Madame Vigée-Lebrun and Her Daughter Julie*

was a Catch-22 here. In celebrating her role as a mother, unusual in the period when women would often leave their children with wet nurses, Vigée-Lebrun's picture seems from our perspective like a cliché. The restrictive doctrine

of the woman as the domestic angel by the hearth, caring for children but not active professionally, was actually a creation of the nineteenth century. For modern feminists, trying to escape what Betty Friedan famously called “the feminine mystique” (1963), Vigée-Lebrun at first looked like more of the same. It took Parker and Pollock’s close attention to context and detail to see her work differently.

If the nineteenth century visualized women as domestic helpmates, their counterpart was the idealized great man, or Hero, as imagined by the historian Thomas Carlyle. For Carlyle, writing in 1840, “great men make history” (1840). Artists also conceived of themselves as heroes in different ways. What did the modern artist hero look like? In 1839, Louis Daguerre in France and William Henry Fox Talbot in Great Britain finally produced photographs that “fixed,” meaning that the light-sensitive surface stayed as a visible image, rather than blacking out. Another French practitioner, Hippolyte Bayard, also invented a photographic process at this time. Doomed to the margins of photographic history because his colleague Daguerre was credited with the invention, Bayard nonetheless might be credited with inventing the selfie in his *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man* (1839–40). He also invented the photographic fake because he was not, of course, actually dead.

Like many a Romantic hero before him, following the example of the poet Werther who committed suicide in Goethe’s enormously successful 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Bayard pretended to prefer death over



Figure 12. Bayard, *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man*

dishonor. His photograph is what the writer Ariella Azoulay has called an “event” (2008). It presupposes that the community watching it can imagine the heroic narrative of the author’s suicide and understand his disappointment. Some people even thought that Bayard really was dead and discussed how the dark skin on his hands and face was the consequence of drowning, rather than of exposure to the sun.

The painter Gustave Courbet appropriated the idea of the artist’s suicide for his own self-portrait *The Wounded Man* (1845–54). As he, too, was living in Paris at the time, it is quite possible that he saw or heard about Bayard’s photograph.



Figure 13. Courbet, *The Wounded Man*

Here the artist has apparently stabbed himself but found time to put the sword back up against the tree behind him. Of course, we are no more supposed to think of this painting in this realistic way than we are the photograph. Marshall McLuhan later suggested that new media take the content of old media, such as television adapting theatrical plays to create TV drama (1964). Here, though, the new medium seems to have influenced the old. Courbet had moved from rural France to Paris just in time for the multiple revolutions of 1848, which he supported. By 1855, the revolution had failed and suicide was perhaps the only option left to the true revolutionary. Courbet issued a manifesto at his one-man exhibition that year, declaring:

“To know in order to be able to do, that was my idea.” In this view, painting, like photography, depicts knowledge and leads to action, or the event. For Bayard and Courbet alike, the artist was the hero, the person capable of creating an event, even at the (fictional) cost of their own life.

It’s a seductive idea. Writing in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1968, the art historian T. J. Clark used Courbet as his example of “a time when political art and popular art seemed feasible.” He stressed both Courbet’s involvement with politics and the influence of popular media on his painting, arguing that popular art shows “the essentials of a social situation.” As with Parker and Pollock’s work, his ideas are so accepted now that it is hard to appreciate how innovative the approach was in 1973 when his book *The Image of the People* was first published. Art historians began to look at popular prints, photographs, and other mass-produced visual material alongside painting and sculpture, a means of research known as social art history. For two decades afterward, social art history and visual culture studies worked closely together before visual culture became a separate area of study around 1990, largely due to the rise of digital media.

Another reason that division occurred was the increasing difficulty of deciding what was essential, to use Clark’s term, in a given moment. The transformation of the arts and humanities since 1968 has been the result of a succession of groups pointing out that they have been overlooked and that their interests need to be taken into account. And then people look back into the historical record and discover that



Figure 14. Toulouse-Lautrec, *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*

this group was there all along. One example is a self-portrait by the French Impressionist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, usually remembered for his depictions of Paris nightlife. Another way to understand his work would be as an artist with disabilities. His *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror* (1882) challenges the conventions of the genre and its interpretation.

Toulouse-Lautrec deliberately painted his reflection in a mirror, rather than just using a mirror to make a self-portrait as was traditional. The reflected candlestick removes any doubt as to whether the frame indicates a mirror or a window, as in the Velázquez, for Toulouse-Lautrec clearly wanted us to recognize it as such.

At the same time, the painting both conceals and reveals the artist. By using a mirror standing on a mantelpiece, he shows us only his head and shoulders. He might have used this device to conceal his disability. For, either as a result of childhood accidents or a congenital condition, Toulouse-Lautrec had an adult upper body but the legs of a child. He depicted himself in the *Self-Portrait* as just protruding into the mirror, leaving the top half of the mirror empty, indicating to the observant viewer that he was very short. He might have chosen to adjust what he saw, so as to fill the “screen,” like a present-day actor or politician standing on a riser to seem taller. Whereas for dominant groups the mirror is often a site (and sight) of affirmation, for people who look or feel different, the mirror can be a site of trauma. Toulouse-Lautrec’s self-portrait confronts that sight without making himself the object of a freak show. I use the term deliberately because in the period people with disabilities were literally exhibited as “freaks” to paying audiences (Adams 2001). Toulouse-Lautrec refuses to cater to this voyeuristic desire to see, but does not distort the reality of his difference. It’s a different kind of heroism and one that is not immediately recognizable as such to others.

THE MANY SELVES OF POSTMODERNISM

In the late 1970s, a new idea began to circulate in European and North American intellectual and artistic circles. The modern period, defined by its heroic artists, radical political divides and the dramatic expansion of the industrial economy, seemed to be over. Beginning with thinkers like the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, artists and writers started to think about a “postmodern condition” (1979). At the time, there were two ways of understanding postmodernism. One view saw it as a break with the modern that could be given a specific date. Another more widespread view held that there had always been a postmodern side to modernism, which questioned its certainties. The prime example of a postmodern modern artist was Marcel Duchamp. He took manufactured objects like a bicycle wheel or a urinal, installed them in an art gallery or exhibition, and declared the result to be art. In other words, art was whatever someone who wanted to be an artist called art. Whether it was the product of individual skill or talent was beside the point. Duchamp called the results “readymades,” perhaps the best known of which is *Fountain* (1917). It was made from a urinal, stood on its end and signed “R. Mutt.” The artist was no longer a hero.

When Duchamp made *Fountain*, the First World War had devastated Europe, with millions dead. The Russian Empire had collapsed into the Revolution that would create the Soviet Union. No wonder Duchamp and other artists thought things had changed. The war had even created a new set of mental illnesses, for which the term *shell*



Figure 15. Duchamp, *Self-Portrait in a Five-Way Mirror*

shock was coined, in which sufferers seemed to experience a traumatic moment over and over again, or became blind despite there being no injury to their eyes, and so on. The “self” no longer seemed so secure. Perhaps there was more than one self in each person. In 1917, Duchamp developed this idea to create a new readymade self-portrait at a store on Broadway in New York City. Using a hinged mirror, the photo booth created a five-way portrait in three copies.

It was a perfect outlet for him. It was visually amusing but had a serious point—Duchamp did not see himself as one but as many selves. Whereas heroic modern artists simply depicted their own image, postmodern artists made themselves their primary project. Nor is this a once-and-for-all remake but it can be done over and over. It is not an event but a performance.

Duchamp continued to experiment with his self-image. He collaborated with his friend Man Ray to create a



Figure 16. Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy

self-portrait as his alter ego Rose Sélavy. In order to get the pun, you need to read this name with a French accent, when it will become “*Eros, c’est la vie*” meaning “Love is life.”

As if intent on making the point that Rose Sélavy was not his “real” identity, Duchamp made several notably

different versions of this self-portrait. The one shown here is perhaps the most feminized, in the style of a society portrait or fashion illustration. The implication of the portrait, like all drag, is that gender is a performance. Like seeing, it is something we do, rather than something that is inherent and unchangeable. Rose Sélavy seems feminine because of her clothes, makeup, and jewelry, as well as the way she holds her body. In her classic study *The Second Sex* (1947), French writer Simone de Beauvoir put it pithily: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”⁵

Such public claims to feminist and queer identities as something we do, and can therefore change, combined with the rise of mass personal image-making technologies and personal computing, were central to the creation of the field of visual culture. It is important to recognize how transformative these interfaces were in what has become known as the postmodern period (1977–2001). Far from being simply negative critiques, they inspired some remarkable creative accomplishments, such as the work of the New York artist Cindy Sherman, whose awareness of feminism, combined with her DIY photographic aesthetics, influenced a new generation of artists, writers, and academics. In the art world, she was known as part of the Picture Generation. Her work was also key for the study of visual culture.

From her time as a graduate student in Buffalo, New York, Sherman has repeatedly photographed herself in an ever-changing variety of poses and attitudes to explore how we make ourselves and make our gender. In her

classic early series called *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), now owned by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Sherman set out to counter the construction of women as passive objects of male desire. In the heyday of Hollywood cinema, film stills were used as a form of publicity for new movies. They would be displayed outside cinemas or used in print, whether as advertising or to illustrate a review. Cinema fans used to collect these stills, in the way that baseball fans collected baseball cards. In 1977, the classic Hollywood studio film already felt dated, so Sherman's work was really about how the then-present wanted to distinguish itself from the time in which women were only to be "looked at" (Berger 1973). She created a long series of black-and-white photographs of herself in different costumes, makeup, and situations, exploring the ways in which cinema looks at women.

Sherman began her project just two years after film critic Laura Mulvey had coined the expression "the male gaze" in a study of classic Hollywood cinema (1975). Mulvey saw that a gaze (that is, a dominant way of seeing) is built into cinema, which can be that of the actors but is also part of the medium itself. The man's role in the film, Mulvey says, is "the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen." She adds that the man in the story "controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator."⁶ Men look at the action through the eyes of the male hero and women are obliged to do the same, a form of compulsory gender manipulation. The cinematic gaze also



Figure 17. Sherman, *Untitled Film Still*

performs the action in which "I see myself seeing myself," that sense that we sometimes have of being looked at, even if we can't actually see the person doing the looking. For Mulvey and other feminists, women experience this condition all the time in relation to how they look and act. By freezing the film and making us think precisely about how and why we are looking or being looked at, Sherman made this performance visible.

If we look at this example from 1978, it is clear how skillfully Sherman has put the image together. The low camera angle makes it seem that we see the woman in the picture (who is always Cindy Sherman herself), but that she does not see us. She appears isolated and trapped in the

cityscape that hems her in. Using sharp side-lighting and close focus, Sherman makes her body stand out from its surroundings. While this might have been a confident pose if she were looking directly at the camera, she is instead looking away to the side at something we cannot see, her lips slightly parted, creating a sense of threat and anxiety. In the classic Hollywood *mise-en-scène* (the creation of both the individual shot and the overall feel of the film), the victim is always isolated like this before being subjected to violence. At first we can't help but feel anxious on the woman's behalf. Then we realize that it is Sherman herself who has created the scene and that she is using it not to present herself as a victim but to make us aware of the ways in which cinema depicts women as objects to be played with. By manipulating back, Sherman and many other artists of her generation, such as Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine, claimed the right to be the selves they wanted to be. Her photographs re-perform the way women are represented to say something important about the actual experience of women in daily life.

Photographic self-portraits can also be a diary and a record of what has happened. In a counterexample to Sherman's role-playing, the New York photographer Nan Goldin kept such a diary over many years. It recorded her radical and alternative counterculture circle in 1980s New York. Goldin would show her photographs in a darkened room as a slide show, using a carousel slide projector in those pre-PowerPoint days. Accompanied by a soundtrack of music from the Velvet Underground and other downtown



Figure 18. Goldin, *Nan One Month After Being Battered*

classics, the performances would last for about an hour, immersing the audience in a visual narrative of Goldin's life. Viewers would come to recognize her friends and her boyfriend. So, it was a visual shock in 1984 when she created a photograph of herself with visible bruising on her face. A second shock was found in its title: *Nan One Month After Being Battered*.

As damaged as her face appears to be in the photograph, we then realize that she has had a month to recover, so the initial violence must have been dreadful. Goldin warns that we can depict ourselves but it does not always mean we can protect ourselves.

While one strand of postmodern art and thought highlighted the illusions of modern consumer society, work like Goldin's inspired a new generation of artists and writers

to concentrate on how gender, race, and sexuality were experienced in everyday life. In a word: performance. Performance, in the classic definition of scholar Richard Schechner, is “twice-performed behavior.”⁷ Schechner claimed that all forms of human activity are a performance, assembled from other actions we have taken in the past to create a new whole. A performance might be an artwork, it might be a chef cooking a dish or a barber cutting hair. Or then again it might be anyone whatever giving a performance of their gender, race, and sexuality in everyday life.

PUTTING THE OTHER IN SHADE

It was in 1990 that this visual culture of performance became visible in the United States, extending from the avant-garde to academia and the mainstream. First, Jennie Livingston’s remarkable documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990) made the subculture of the queer voguing trend in Harlem available to art cinema audiences. When the pop star Madonna adopted the style for her hit “Vogue” that same year, especially in its compelling video, the global media audience saw what it meant to “strike a pose.” In a related vein, the philosopher Judith Butler published her classic book *Gender Trouble*, which showed how drag reveals gender itself to be a performance (1990). And in both the United States and United Kingdom, degrees in visual culture were offered at the University of Rochester and Middlesex University for the first time.

Voguing was a dance form created at the balls organized by gay African American and Latino men in Harlem. These balls are a mixture of dance and performance in which participants “walk” in competition for prizes. According to the narrative offered in *Paris Is Burning* by the performer Dorian Corey, balls initially featured only drag queens and later expanded to categories like film and television stars and all manner of categories taken from “real life.” These last included military personnel, executives, and students. All these categories were felt to be ways of being or careers that were desirable but not open to gay men of color. (*Queer* had yet to become an affirmative term, but it was also in 1990 that the Queer Nation activist group was formed.) The goal was to present “realness,” meaning that if you were out in public away from the ball, you could pass as really being whatever category you were representing. The ball was a mirror to the real world in the sense that it was reversed: here gay African American and Latino men were in the ascendant, becoming legendary in their houses.

The 1980s saw the rise of voguing at the balls. Voguing is a competitive form of dance, using frozen and exaggerated positions in time to the house music of the period. In the earlier styles, walkers looked to find a “read” on their rivals, meaning a flaw in their costume or appearance. One read in the film involved a debate as to whether a walker in an upscale male category was using a woman’s coat and was therefore disqualified. In the ballroom, to be read was to fail. It is to be seen by the other as they wish to

see you, rather than as you see yourself. You wanted to simply appear to be what you appeared to be. In short, for your performance to succeed so well that it becomes invisible as a performance. The read reveals otherwise.

By contrast, a vogue makes you see yourself differently. As voguer Willie Ninja demonstrates in the film, it might involve a mime in which the dancers check their appearance in a “mirror” and then hold that (nonexistent) mirror up to opponents to show them how deficient they are by comparison. Ninja’s vogue created what was called a shade, making you see yourself seeing yourself in the pretend mirror. It is therefore a more devastating move because you are convinced of its truth, whereas you could—and people can be seen in the film doing just this—deny the “read.” The read and the shade are operations of the gaze but with a difference—or queered, as we might say now. Unlike the male gaze, where maleness was assumed because of genital difference, the assumption of gender here is taken on voluntarily and then performed. Some of the men assume female roles, others male, some vogue. In *Paris Is Burning*, we see what happens when the gaze is both queered and used by people of color. Like her or not, Madonna’s hit song and video “Vogue” brought the ballroom subculture and the possibilities of performing yourself to global public attention.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler held such drag performances to demonstrate that “gender is the cultural meaning that the sexed body assumes.” By this she meant that we cannot draw a direct equivalency between people’s gender and

their body’s sexual organs. Further, she emphasized that bodies do not fall neatly into two sexes. People of intersex constitute some 1.7 percent of live births (in 2013, Germany legislated that people could be designated as “indeterminate gender” at birth). Butler’s point is that even if this is rare, it shows that there is not an absolute equivalency between types of body and gender. Intersex people can make a choice or have one made for them. Drag performers and transgender people can do so in other ways. Judith Halberstam called one such option “female masculinity,” the way that some women deploy masculinity as the cultural meaning of their bodies (1998). If we decide a person’s gender by their hair, clothes, and style, it is a visual analysis rather than a scientific deduction. As Butler put it, the question becomes: “What are the categories through which one sees?” Even seeing a naked body might not be enough to decide “whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman,”⁸ and what those decisions mean. Although it is a difficult and serious book, *Gender Trouble* was a crossover hit, as likely to be read in nightclubs as in seminars. It has been part of a transformation of attitudes to gender and sexuality. In so doing, it also helped shape the study of what has come to be called visual culture.

Using the self as a performance that can be photographed has had a variety of dramatic effects. In 1977, in the Central African Republic, a young African photographer named Samuel Fosso was beginning to use leftover film in the photographic studio where he worked to make posed self-portraits. In the same way that Sherman and

others have explored how gender is imposed on our bodies from outside, Fosso has visualized how his body is Africanized and racialized.

This process had been analyzed by Frantz Fanon, the Caribbean writer and activist. Sometime in the early 1950s, Fanon was traveling in a French train, headed for his psychiatric training. He described the experience in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). A child saw him and cried out: "Look, a Negro! Mama! Look, a Negro! I'm scared." Fanon recalled how "the Other fixes you with his gaze, gestures and attitude." This is a form of photograph, a colonizing power of looking, or, in terms of the ballroom a "read." Fanon felt forced to "cast an objective gaze over myself, [I] discovered my blackness." He finds himself seeing himself as the white other sees him—a "shade." He feels fixed, as if photographed by what he calls "the white gaze."⁹ Under that gaze, he cannot be seen for himself but only as a set of clichés and stereotypes.

Fosso set out to undo the white gaze by making fun of it in his self-portraits. He has described this particular self-portrait as follows:

I am an African chief, in a western chair with a leopard-skin cover, and a bouquet of sunflowers. I am all the African chiefs who have sold their continent to the white men. I am saying: we had our own systems, our own rulers, before you came. It's about the history of the white man and the black man in Africa.¹⁰



Figure 19. Fosso, *The Chief (the one who sold Africa to the colonists)*

Fosso alluded to the fact that the tribal system, dominated by chiefs, was a creation of colonial powers, rather than being "traditionally" African. As we can still see today, colonial powers have preferred to rule through intermediaries. Often, these people had no legitimacy of their own and so they relied on the colonizer's authority and armies. Mobutu Sese Soko, dictator of Zaire from 1965 to 1997, made the leopard skin that we see in Fosso's

photograph into a visual cliché of this kind. “Zaire” was the name Mobuto gave to the former Belgian Congo, but his supposedly authentic leopard-skin caps were actually made in France. For all his rhetoric of authenticity, Mobuto’s regime was really enabled by the Cold War. The United States tolerated his abuses because he was anticommunist at a time when Africa was far more sympathetic to socialism than capitalism. Fosso wants us to see that even after the end of the formal colonial regimes, Africa is still shaped by them, even as he ridicules such puppet leaders.

SELFIES AND THE PLANETARY MAJORITY

In the present moment of transformation, these categories of identity are being remade and reshaped. Today, claims queer theorist Jack Halberstam, “the building blocks of human identity imagined and cemented in the last century—what we call gender, sex, race and class—have changed so radically that new life can be glimpsed ahead.”¹¹ One place where we can catch sight of these glimpses is the selfie. When ordinary people pose themselves in the most flattering way they can, they take over the role of artist-as-hero. Each selfie is a performance of a person as they hope to be seen by others. The selfie adopted the machine-made aesthetic of postmodernism and then adapted it for the worldwide Internet audience. It is both online and in our real-world interactions with technology that we experience today’s new visual culture. Our bodies are now in the network and in the world at the same time.

Some see the new digital performance culture as self-obsessed and tacky. It is more important to recognize that it is new. The only thing that we know for sure about the young urban global network is that it will change frequently and unpredictably, using formats that may make no sense to older generations. The selfie is a new form of predominantly visual digital conversation at one level. At another level, it is the first format of the new global majority and that is its true importance.

The selfie took off following the placement of a good-quality front camera on the iPhone 4 in 2010, with other phones rapidly following suit. Selfies could now be taken outside or using a flash without the resulting burst of light dominating the picture, as it did in pictures taken in a mirror, which were a staple on the social networking website MySpace in its heyday from 2003 to 2008. A *selfie* is now understood as a picture of yourself (or including yourself) that you take yourself by holding the camera at arm’s length. A set visual vocabulary for the standard selfie has emerged. A selfie looks better taken from above with the subject looking up at the camera. The picture usually concentrates on the face, with the risk of making a duck face, which involves a prominent pout of the lips. If you overdo it and suck in your cheeks too far, *voilà*, the duck face. These poses are remaking the global self-portrait.

Despite the name, the selfie is really about social groups and communications within those groups. The majority of these pictures are taken by young women, mostly teenagers, and are largely intended to be seen by their friends. In

an analysis for the website SelfieCity, media scholar Lev Manovich has shown that—worldwide—women take the majority of selfies, sometimes by overwhelming margins, as in Moscow, where women take 82 percent of all selfies (SelfieCity). They are then shared in social circles that are likely to be mostly women, regardless of sexual orientation. As fashion critics have long asserted, (straight) women dress as much for each other as for men and the same can be said of the selfie. Some have suggested that the premium on attractiveness indicates that the selfie is still subject to the male gaze. Sociology professor Ben Agger has claimed in media interviews that the selfie is the male gaze gone viral, part of what he calls “the dating and mating game.” But trends for #uglyselfies and to show nonconventional selfies are equally apparent. By the nature of the medium, any one person can only see a very limited number of the total selfie production, and even then needs a good deal of extra information to be confident as to what is being seen.

As the format rose to prominence, there was certainly a moral panic in the media about selfies (Agger 2012). A typical comment by CNN commentator Roy Peter Clark declared: “Maybe the connotation of selfie should be selfish: self-absorbed, narcissistic, the center of our own universe, a hall of mirrors in which each reflection is our own.”¹² In *Esquire*, novelist Stephen Marche went a step further, claiming: “The selfie is the masturbation of self-image, and I mean that entirely as a compliment. It gives control. It gives release.”¹³ These metaphors are slightly convoluted. Narcissus spent his life looking at himself, but

he did not release a copy of his image for others to look at. Selfies are, like them or not, all about sharing. Many celebrity selfies, like the naked photograph sent out by journalist Geraldo Rivera, have been greeted with scorn. At a private level, a selfie might be liked by some friends but disliked or even satirized by others. This is not masturbation. It’s an invitation to others to like or dislike what you have made and to participate in a visual conversation.

Something is happening here, as the numbers suggest. In Great Britain alone, 35 million selfies were being posted to the Internet each month by 2013. By mid-2014, Google claimed that 93 million selfies were being posted worldwide every day, over 30 billion a year. In her analysis of the photographs on SelfieCity, media scholar Elizabeth Losh found four technical commonalities. First, these pictures are all taken from close distance. You could use a remote but people choose not to do so: the close-up is part of what makes a selfie. The selfie shows that our bodies have become incorporated into the digital network and are interacting with it. To use a remote or timer would be to introduce a distance between the body and the network. As a result, the device that takes the selfie is often visible in the picture. Such mirroring is relatively rare in painting and traditional photography but is not felt to be intrusive in a selfie. By the same token, selfies often use filters like those provided by Instagram that are not designed by the photographer.

Losh sees this “authoring” by preformed tools as taking over from traditional authorship, in which taking decisions

as to how an image would be rendered was central. This leads her to conclude that machines are starting to do our seeing for us, using their defaults that we may not understand to shape our perception.¹⁴ It's not altogether new, as we have seen with the Duchamp example. Even in professional contexts, the settings on the Leica camera determined the appearance of classic photojournalism, generating a sharp focus in the foreground and a blurry background. By the same token, the rich color and depth of field of the current Canon G series has set the visual terms for "prosumer" photography. The selfie is different by virtue of scale. When Duchamp played with machine vision, it was known to a tiny circle of his associates. The machine vision of the iPhone was used by 500 million people as of March 2014, according to Apple, with a million new phones being sold every three days.

There are really two kinds of selfie, in terms of content. One is a performance for your digital circle. A celebrity selfie, like those of Kim Kardashian, is intended to maintain and extend the celebrity of its subject. The celebrity selfie is a continuation of the film still and advertising shot that pretends to be the work of its star. Just as no one who receives a mass e-mail from "Barack Obama" assumes that the president actually wrote it, the celebrity has not posed at random. Both have undoubtedly some oversight role in the product but it is a controlled form of performance. Far more common, although invisible to those not directly involved, is the selfie as digital conversation, shared via apps like Snapchat.

There are many warnings that the Internet archives material for ever and so a silly, stoned or sexual photograph posted to Facebook could cost you a scholarship or a job. Although the few documented instances seem to show that people are mostly fired for writing disparaging things about their current job, one poll in 2013 reported that 10 percent of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds claimed to have lost a job because of things they posted online. As a result, many have shifted to using apps like Snapchat for photographs so that Internet users cannot find them once they have been deleted. Once you open a snap, you have ten seconds to look at it before it automatically deletes itself. Snap use rose from 200 million a day in June 2013 to 700 million a day by May 2014. That's over 250 billion snaps a year, seen only by the recipients. Users can send snaps to friends of their choice and, unlike e-mail or Facebook, Snapchat also tells you if your friends have looked at the snap or if they have taken a screenshot image. Snapchat's self-image ad (Figure 20) reflects its target audience of young women (perhaps unsurprisingly, they are conventionally attractive, white, and blond, in this case). The snap they are making is of both of them, presumably intended for their friends.

Snapchats can also convey messages, share information and are designed to sustain conversations. The snap has taken over for many young people from the Facebook status update, just as Facebook pushed out MySpace. The interest for us is not in the specific platform but the development of a new visual conversation medium, usually relayed by phones that are used less and less for verbal



Figure 20. Snapchat ad

exchange. The selfie and the snap are digital performances of learned visual vocabularies that have built-in possibilities for improvisation and for failure. Networked cultures are intensifying the visual component and moving past speech.

Together with Snapchat has come the Vine, the six-second video message. Vine seems to be the logical outcome of people wanting to get straight to the “good part” on YouTube. In six seconds, there’s not much time to get bored, you would think. After a while, though, many Vines seem the same—sporting feats, pet and animal tricks, accidents that are supposed to be funny. There are also people using them very creatively as short movies and inevitably corporations have started making ads. Vine has been bought by Twitter, which makes sense. The 140-character message is now supplemented by the six-second video.

Now we see the digital performance of the self becoming a conversation. Visual images are dense with information, allowing successful performances to convey much more than the basic text message, whether in a single image or short video. The selfie and its other forms like Snapchat have given the first visual form to the new global majority’s conversation with itself. This conversation is fast, intense, and visual. Because it draws on the long history of the self-portrait, it’s likely that the selfie in one form or another will continue to play a role in shaping how to see people for a long time to come. The selfie shows how a global visual culture is now a standard part of everyday life for millions that takes the performance of our own “image” as its point of departure.