PIXEL PERFECT: PERFORMATIVITY AND SELF-PORTRAITURE

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In the context of social media, a 'profile picture' calls for the production of a thumbnail-sized self. The individual may act as both subject and photographer while building and tending to an online identity in moments of seclusion. Exploring self-portraiture and visual narrative, this research offers a study of the web-based project *At Arm's Length,* and works to provoke discussion around performativity and the construction of identity.

Fig 1. Wide-shot in apartment from At Arm's Length, Erin Ashenhurst, 2010

Fig 2. Wide-shot on beach from At Arm's Length, Erin Ashenhurst, 2010

Fig 3. Portrait on beach from At Arm's Length, Erin Ashenhurst, 2010

INTRODUCTION

The photograph is the advent of myself as other, a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.
– Roland Barthes [1]

On busy city sidewalks, an emerging hazard may be observed – the digitally engaged pedestrian. Easily identified by their down-turned gazes, they are those for whom the act of walking has been compromised in order to accommodate their absorption in the screens of Smartphones. Leisurely-paced steps act to lessen the likelihood of blind collision while they read emails, compose texts, select music, or post images. The increasing number of mobile devices outfitted with camera technology suggests that more and more individuals hold the potential to create and share photographs almost spontaneously. Digital images are used as evidence to construct identity and illustrate personal histories on blogs, photo-sharing and social networking sites. While these images are framed as representations of lived experience, they are fraught with fabricated cues. Vamping for the lens, or gazing off towards fictional distractions to suggest 'candid' shots, subjects use performativity to compose their preferred visual narratives. In the operating room of programs such as Adobe Photoshop, remaining flaws may be smoothed, filtered, nipped and tucked.

Offering irreverent commentary on the practice of self-portraiture, *At Arm's Length* begins with a set of images resembling those commonly used in online profiles. This set is matched by a series of wide-shots exposing the contrasting environments existing beyond the boundaries of the subject's framing.

PERFORMATIVITY AND THE IMAGE

Although the process of staging a photograph is far from that of Robert Cornelius' first daguerreotype self-portrait in 1839, there remains a moment of arrested movement in which the subject, aware of the camera, surrenders to a pose. During the course of creating this pose, the subject anticipates how he or she may appear in the future photograph. Of his role as the subject of a photograph, Roland Bathes wrote, "once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes, I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', and I instantly make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image." [2] This transformation, the styling of the body into a deliberate, static self, can be examined as a performance. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1952), sociologist Erving Goffman examined human interaction and how subjects use performance to construct social identities. Exploiting the language of dramaturgy, Goffman describes the subject as a social actor using various contexts as theatrical stages. [3] Assisted by props and costumes, an actor may learn to navigate a breadth of social environments by recognizing the codes of behaviour expected in each, and adjusting his or her performance to fit.

In order to communicate qualities and character in the static performance of a photograph, subjects must depend solely on visual cues devised from cultural archetypes and social norms. Visual anthropologist Richard Chalfen proposed that when photographed, "the individual can choose and select among many codes, each of which may have its own standard of 'correctness.'" [4] Framing gender as a matter of performativity, Judith Butler noted that constructs such as femininity "cannot be understood outside a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms." [5] In this sense, the performance of the subject is not purely voluntary. In order to be understood, behavior is constrained by a specific set of conventions that are built through collective repetition. Each culture can be said to provide "a tool kit of habits, skills, styles, perspectives, norms, roles, and values out of which each individual can construct a potentially unique strategy of action." [6] It is with these tools that a subject builds an identity and a visual narrative as the subject of an image. In her photographic series, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980), artist Cindy Sherman manipulated the tools of cinematic culture to fashion herself into archetypal female characters surrounded by narrative clues. In artist JK Keller's experiments in self-documentary, props, costuming, and grooming, are treated as playful trappings. Over the course of 12 years, Keller took headshots of himself posed with an expression reminiscent of those required for government-issued identification. Edited in rapid succession, the portraits taken from 1998–2006 make up the video project *Living My Life Faster*. In the space of two minutes, the video shows a quick moment of each image – creating an effect that holds Keller's face as a constant while tendrils of hair, beards, moustaches, glasses and clothing thrash in a frenzy across him. Behind the variations in styling, Keller presents a starkly coherent self, face broadening slightly as it ages by the second.

In the research for the project *At Arm's Length*, I considered a selection of profile pictures posted on Facebook and noted consistencies in the compositions of the portraits. Some subjects made eye contact with mischievous grins, or glanced to one side of the camera, chins tilted down coyly. The observable similarities of expression used for self-portraits shared online point to this repetitive use of cultural norms to inform a subject's performance and aid in his or her transformation into a perfected, readable document. As Chalfen wrote, "the fact that people sharing the same culture will independently agree so well on their patterned choices of appropriate imagery and associated conventions makes many collections of personal pictures 'look' so much alike." [7]

Although camera phones have extended the role of photography in creating and maintaining social relationships, researcher Lisa Gye found, "the typical photo taken with a phone is often reinforcing the user's identity more than their ties to a group." [8] The pursuit of identity as described by anthropologist Marcel Mauss is based on the "universal desire to master consciousness and project a social presence."

[9] Sites such as Facebook have developed systems with which individuals can articulate their social identities through text and images, while the designs of many camera phones favour subjects ranging from 2–5 feet in distance from the lens. This facilitates the production of self-portraits taken by holding the camera at arm's length.

AT ARM'S LENGTH

Presented in a web browser, *At Arm's Length* begins with three close-cropped headshots arranged in horizontal alignment against a white background. The minimalist design can be seen as a nod to the supposed 'neutrality' of the white-walled gallery or the interface of many photo-sharing sites such as Flickr.com. The series of images feature the same woman. In each, she appears distinctly styled in a new setting. Without interaction, the brightness of the images gently dwindles. If a cursor moves over an image, it changes to a quick frame featuring the animated shutter of iPhone's camera application before revealing the portrait at full opacity. Lines of text commenting on the image appear in sequence below. A click of the mouse transitions the frame to a wide shot revealing the environment surrounding the woman at the moment the selected portrait was taken. In these wide shots, the subject can be seen acting as her own photographer, camera phone obstructing her face. With the woman setting up for the portrait, the viewer is privy to the cues of the setting existing beyond the portrait's framing.

In the first portrait, the subject is sporting dark sunglasses, which obscure her eyes. A necklace and the straps of a halter-top are all that is seen of her attire. In the background, the stretch of sand and sliver of water suggest a beach under a bright sky. Mousing over the image reveals several lines of text below including the words, "OMG, you live in such a beautiful city! I would kill for a decent beach day!" The style of writing mimics comments made by users of online photo-sharing sites. Positioned below the image, it acts as captioning and plants suggestion.

Transitioning to the wide-shot, the subject can be viewed posing in a small section of beach. The landscape is unpopulated by other visitors with the exception of two figures sitting on a log far in the background. A large portion of sky is grey and cloudy while thin, bare trees appear in the foreground. The subject is seated on a log with her fall coat pushed off her shoulders and shirt pulled down to accommodate only bikini straps in the frame of the portrait. On a stump beside her rests an umbrella along with her assorted belongings. The culmination of cues points away from the portrait's sunny scheme towards a moment of fantasy created by an individual in the solitary hours of an autumn day.

Clicking on the wide shot of the beach brings the viewer back to the series of portraits. In the second image, the woman smiles radiantly into the camera. With a bright feather in her hair, the straps of a red satin dress frame the necklaces adorning her collarbone. Resting the mouse over the image, text materializing below comments "Holy hot dress! Looks like I missed another crazy night…"

The wide shot reveals the woman taking her own picture while seated in a room. The room is yellow with recessed archways framing the wall above a marble floor. The subject sits cross-legged in a party dress. Around the corner, another woman in a red coat can be seen walking by a wall of elevators. The space appears to be a lobby. The viewer may speculate that the two women are connected. Perhaps the subject is waiting for a friend and taking pictures to pass time in the sterile surroundings. Or perhaps the

red-coated woman is a stranger about to come around the corner and trigger momentary embarrassment with a glance towards the vamping photographer. The subject may be on the cusp of a glamourous social event, but in the flash of her portrait, she is alone.

The third portrait features the woman, hair sleek, looking intently into the camera. The subject's wide eyes and the subtle downward tilt of her chin verge on seductive. Hovering the mouse over the image, the text, "Hey sexy, we still on for Tuesday?" appears among the comments below. The background is flat beige with an edge of wooden furniture peeking out on one side. With only the neck of a white sweater featured in the portrait, the viewer may be surprised by the wide shot's colorful display: the subject stands to one side of a cluttered apartment, framing her picture so that an overhead light is hitting half of her face. While her hair appears to have been freshly groomed, the portion of her body cropped out of the portrait is dressed in a casual sweatshirt and red flannel pajama pants patterned comically with moose silhouettes. The wide shot reads as a private instance, where subject and setting are unprepared for public presentation beyond the tight framing of her camera phone.

Online, the activity of people watching translates into trolling through profiles. The portraits of A*t Arm's Length* are revealed as charades. In the wide shots, the woman's environment is dressed with ample signs while the viewer is positioned as a voyeur, a passer-by. In the act of creating the portrait, the woman's performance is for her own camera. The viewer watches as the subject constructs herself as an object, seemingly oblivious to the viewer's omnipotent gaze.

The images can be seen to culminate as a character study of an individual constructing a socially engaging self through photography, while her daily life consists of time spent alone. Taken as a general comment, *At Arm's Length* points to questions around the disconnection between the lived experiences of subjects and the constructed self they choose to project in their online identities. Photographic activity becomes about imitation, trickery, and assembling a tableau of ciphers.

LITTLE NARRATIVES

In the mid-1990's, Mark Poster described the World Wide Web as a host for "little narratives". Poster wrote, "the internet seems to encourage the proliferation of stories, local narratives without any totalizing gestures and it places senders and addressees in symmetrical relations." [10] Over a decade later, social media has made the development and maintenance of personal narratives a daily activity for many. While consumer culture emphasizes the importance of the individual through services and products geared towards self-advancement, the Internet provides the ability for a person to act as a brand. The beliefs and values of the brand are enforced through the constant generation of words and images. Researcher of visual culture Liz Wells, writes of the modernization of society since the Industrial Revolution, commenting, "The twentieth-century consumer-led economy has shifted these new individuals away from a culture based on work and self-discipline to one based on libidinous gratification which encourages us all to identify our pleasures in order to develop and refine them." [11] Online profiles ask users to list their 'likes' and 'interests', integrating these factors into the concept of a user's identity.

Much like a traditional marketing campaign or the building of a cult, a poorly managed Twitter feed may result in decreased 'followers'. Sites such as Facebook or MySpace act as contemporary promenades with conventions mirroring those of late eighteenth century Parisian bourgeoisie. Historian Richard Sennett described the lively city centres of Europe as stages upon which individuals continuously practised

being "somebody." [12] In contemporary society, the offering of virtual gifts, acknowledgements or salutations written on each other's pages, allow individuals to publicly enforce social connections within the larger group. Online 'friendship' is obtained through a standardized click-through process that may simply result in the viewing of another's page (comparable to 'people watching'), rather than any written exchange.

In *At Arm's Length*, the performativity involved in the process of creating self-portraits is inspected through irreverent fabrications. The narrative of a subject's headshot is seen in a new light when matched with a wide-shot revealing the moment of capture. However, one may question if any image can really be measured as 'truthful'? In an interview American photographer Richard Avedon has commented, "a portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is truth." [13] In *At Arm's Length*, narrative folds in on itself: an actress plays a character, performing as a subject, parading as her idealized self. In the performances of social actors, Goffman warned, "A single note out of key can disrupt the tone of an entire performance." [14]

References and Notes:

[1] Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, trans. Richard Howard (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1982), 49.
[2] Ibid., 48.
[3] Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1959).
[4] Richard Chalfen, Snapshot Versions of Life (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).
[5] Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 95.
[6] Harry Triandis, Culture and Social Behavior (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 443.
[7] Richard Chalfen, 148.
[8] Lisa Gye, "Picture This", Continuum 21, no. 2 (June 2007): 279–288.
[9] Marcel Mauss, "A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; The Notion of Self," The Category of the Person: Anthropology, philosophy, history, ed. Michael Carrithers (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1–25.
[10] Mark Poster, "Postmodern Virtualities," in Postmodern Presence, ed. A. A. Berger (US: Rowman AltaMira Press, 1998), 254–273.
[11] Liz Wells, Photography: A Critical Introduction (London: Routledge, 2010), 123.
[12] Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man (London: W.W. Norton, 1996), 161.
[13] Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London: Routledge, 1993), 35.
[14] Erving Goffman, 52.