



## Recent Zones of Portraiture: The Selfie

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*It never occurred to me how many faces there are. There are multitudes of people, but many more faces, because each person has several of them.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

*A Portrait! What could be more simple and more complex, more obvious and more profound.*

Charles Baudelaire

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### ABSTRACT

In the “age of the selfie” (Jerry Saltz), we gauge the self as active. This paper proposes to engage the selfie as a dominant and enlarging practice of assertion and performance of lived existence. I align the selfie with the snapshot, making a point about their extraordinary cultural force and productivity determined by their distinctive economies and technical bases as well as cultural statuses. An expression of our desire to be visible in the social world, the selfie, I argue, is a sub-genre of portraiture which exposes and “proliferates” our face as an activity promising interaction. In the “post-face” phase of our culture this performative face is a surface of the visual present, always in the making.

### ABSTRACT IN POLISH

“Epoka selfie” (Jerry Saltz), traktuje tożsamość jako przekraczającą jednostkowość. W artykule rozpatruję selfie jako dominującą i ekspansywną praktykę potwierdzania subiektywności, jako praktykę odwołującą do performatywnego charakteru współczesnej egzystencji. Nakreślone dynamiki przem-

ian w rozwoju fotografii amatorskiej ukazują jak za sprawą nowych mediów twarz, która w artykule stanowi główny obraz zainteresowania, wprawiana jest w ruch. Selfie jako rodzaj autoportretu zmienia znaczenie kulturowe twarzy. W fazie „post-face” naszej kultury staje się powierzchnią wizualną odnajdywaną ciągle na nowo.

**Keywords:** digital image, face, frontality, performative functions, selfie, self-portraiture, snapshot

A twenty-first century producer of photographic images participates in an intersubjective space where showing, sharing and visual conversing create a promising arena for self-enactment and extension of subjectivity. Media convergence in the digital realm provides makers and consumers of images with diverse stimuli for new forms of cultural and social practices. In this dynamically evolving context a close attention to selfies seems necessary. In terms of purely visual aspects, selfies are not new image species. These recent digital snapshots, a range of practices within personal photography, mark not the dismantling but the “culmination of a long democratization of a self-portrait” (Mirzoeff). However, propositional content and technical bases of selfies, so strongly connected to the growing range of individual’s daily life lived with advanced electronic technologies, catalyze new interactive features. Selfies kindle our involvement with the human face. With selfies we gauge the self as active. In this paper I will address the dynamics of the face in the selfies to show how they accelerate the colonization of the face enhancing its changeable, performative functions.

### YOU PRESS THE BUTTON, WE DO THE REST

Despite changes in technology, in patterns of dissemination and consumption, as David Bate succinctly notes, such genres of photography as portraiture, though in digital age assimilated by the computer, have maintained their identity and their promiscuity (203). In public and private spheres, portraits, self-portraits, also self-images (presenting parts of the body) continue to be produced and used in individual ways as visual practices of identification, recognition and inscription.

Considering meanings of selfies, I bring to attention a mode of vernacular photography which in the past became both a form of personal agency and a cultural ritual. The snapshot – “an intensely private and personal



Artur Urbanowski

form of photographic representation ... also one of the most public", (Zuromskis 8) – like the selfie, "is driven by the social (and socially manufactured) impulses of individual photographers" (Zuromskis 14). In the digital age sociability and immediacy have radically intensified. By aligning visual styles and cultural conventions of the snapshot and the selfie with the important role technology has played in their development, I will begin by making a point about their distinctive economies and technical bases as well as their distinctive cultural statuses.

As a self-representational image, the most frequent type of image taken today, the selfie makes visible where and how we are and what we look like. Taken to certify that the subject was present in a particular place and time, the selfie shows that being continues to be dependent on self-movement and visibility which more than ever require confirmation by many gazes. Pursuing the desire to secure those gazes, we focus indefatigably on registration of our faces. It is, after all, the face that "acts as an ambassador, on the job whenever out in the world" (Kazloff 7). We focus not on the experience but on capturing our face and its openness to the experience. In a series of photographs under the title *Live View* the Polish photographer Artur Urbanowski alludes to the invigorating power of photography to extend our experience. Yet, his large print images seem to visualize interruption of experience, interference with structures of

experience. Addition of takes, serialization of images in this case does not amount to consolidation. In the compulsive practice of recording and sharing our self-movements, many theorists sense growing challenges. The cultural critic Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska, for example, argues that recent personal images clearly show that we want to be everywhere and everything, be the beautiful aestheticized mask and the authentic lively face, be the actors and audience (167). The vast web space clearly resonates with images of rapid seeing fixing always changing surfaces of the face. Selfie takers share globally its fluid possibilities. The face, like a mask, is supported by movement; its source is the body. Every next selfie posted on the web annuls the one taken before it.

Dynamic and evolving uses of unremarkably banal, formulaic, and pervasive images affirm and disperse at the same time, testifying to perpetuation of our fascination with what we all share – the body. “As is evident to any thinking mind, and as photography now proves”, laments Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, portraits “belong to that class of facts wanted by numbers who know and care nothing about their value as works of art” (67). Eastlake regrets the nature of the changes in popular tastes of the late nineteenth century public, “the mere portrait want” (67) defining the intensions and fascinations of her contemporaries so eager to embrace a new mode of cultural expression. For Charles Baudelaire, famously, the activity of projecting oneself with the help of the camera incited “a form of lunacy, an extraordinary fanaticism” (87–8). Early condemnation of personal portraiture was “wholesale and normative” (Tagg 18), reflecting on specific cultural and historical relations. Popular photography began to develop in 1888 when the first simple roll film box cameras were made available and when the desire to inscribe images of people, the principal subject of the snapshot, was becoming possible. Non-normative, spontaneous, and various, snap taking offered transforming resources for those who felt excluded from a culture of texts and from other privileged strata of cultural practices. Over the decades, affective investment in vernacular photography has only increased, for many people shifting the parameters of their personal life.

A term of abuse but also of humor and praise, the “instant”, *instantané* or “snapshot” was already around when Eastlake wrote her incisive essay. From its first appearances, this direct type of image was defined in connection with the automated apparatus used by a non-expert to produce an instantaneous shot. Snapshots were not made but taken with little or even “without deliberate aim” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), with little prearrangement. Casual frames, fragmented takes, and bold distortions typified their form. Such aesthetic shortcomings as “stiff frontal poses ... lens flare, a misplaced thumb, an improper exposure, or crude lightning” (Zuromskis

8) have been used to reinforce the personal appeal and the denial of the claims to any depth. Presence of dynamic circumstances of mostly seasonal family occasions characterized amateur portraiture celebrated in the nineteenth century and twentieth century for its power to preserve for posterity the memories and values of community and family life.

For digital citizens this function has changed. Recent snapshots have become more pluralistic and expansive. Bates argues that the digital snapshot is not taken to memorize the family or group events but to measure and record “the pulse of the individual’s daily life”; digital snapshots are “used as a live currency and testament to lived existence” (42). Indeed, in the vast archives of images on the social media activated in the daily workshops of identity, the selfie dominates. It is “a photograph that one has taken of oneself” (Oxford Dictionaries Online). Selfie-takers speak of its many enlarging functions: the selfie acts as an expression of our desire to be visible in the social world; as a trace authenticating and even giving our presence; as a vehicle to maintain mastery over one’s recognition. The London-based photographer Roshini Kempadoo, creator of the show *About Face* (2015) presented in Lethaby Gallery in London, says that on personal level the selfie is an image with a “more intense form of self-validation and visual confirmation.” Commerce and culture industry also learn to love selfies. Sophie Gilbert writes about the London Design Museum which in 2015 used hidden cameras to take pictures of people looking at art works and then displayed their “portraits” back to the visitors to marvel at the traces they have left. Through such new downloadable applications museums produce “a more dynamic and richer image of the twenty-first century for future visitors to marvel at” (33). With cell-phones and cameras omnipresent in our culture, selfies are increasing connected and connecting images.

Ours is a moment of a crystallization of a new technology, of new forms of photographic explorations, the era William J. Mitchell writes when “the computer-processed digital image began to supersede the image fixed on silver-based photographic emulsion.” Our moment “provides the nucleus for new forms of social and cultural practice” (20). Speaking of such changes in visualizing technologies Mark Hansen also notices emerging new interactions and their roles in conveying subjectivity. Digital media “alter the very basis of our sensory experience and drastically affect what it means to live as *embodied* human agents” (Lenoir). Looking at the viewfinder, early camera users pressed the button, hoping to capture traces of their own motions and performances. With the latest visualization technologies registration of self-movement has become modified. We ourselves capture experiences already mediated as images, looking not at a viewfinder but the screen we see – “the event is *already mediated* into an

image even before it is perceived" (Bate 37). We produce more snapshots and connect and network these action-images not just with proximate others but globally. Only in 2010, figures showed 2.5 billion photos uploaded each month (Gunthert). Google estimated that 30 billion selfies were taken in 2014 (Mirzoeff). The production and circulation of these digital images by the new snapchat generation has become much less standardized than actions produced by amateur photographers in the past. Our "frenzies of the visible" (Mirzoeff) result in constructions of new ranges of images, new sub-genres of selfies, sustaining creative online conversations and enhanced modes of interaction with other media.

Pocketable cameras like the Brownie (introduced in 1900), the Auto-graphic Kodak (1914), and No2 Portrait Brownie cameras (available since 1929) made snapping into a fascinating, easy and affordable pleasure. It became an integral activity of the everyday life of untrained amateurs. The cameras attracted a large number of women but also children, despite the fact that, as Coe and Gates notice, in the nineteenth century photography continued to be a male pursuit (28). Observing the "real" world and recording the experience of looking could be done "by anybody, man, woman, or child, who has sufficient intelligence to point a box straight and press the button" (17). New apparatuses were unquestionably a key determining phenomena referring to the position of the observer. A system proposed by George Eastman in the last decades of the nineteenth century simplified the processing of the recorded reality. As Coe and Gates explain, Eastman separated the activities of taking photographs from developing and printing them. The user needed to perform three haptic motions only (pulling the cord, turning the key, and pressing the button). After taking hundreds of exposures, anonymous specialists worked on the film in distant laboratories for ten days or so and then the user of the camera received his printed snaps (17). The active and uncomplicated experience of taking images became a shared pleasure acknowledged and celebrated during shows and public exhibitions of snapshot photography (21). Unlike formal, rhetorically emphasized studio portraits, snapping ensured freedom of self-expression and freedom to feature and amplify aspects of mostly familial private life in the public realm. It is not an exaggeration to say that such shared snapping contributed, in the apt and oft quoted words of the modern Catalan photographer Joan Fontcuberta, to "exclamations of vitality" (27), unrestrained seductive impulses.

Unrestrained, the snapshot, as Coe and Gates assert, "made possible a new kind of informal portraits" with "extraneous and 'irrelevant' detail" absent in the formal portraiture (11). Familiar settings and most often familial company provided more direct, and unquestionably, more

congenial environments for the *portrahere*, the act of reaching out, drawing out that portraying in its conventional meanings entailed. Serial, funny often banal, such informal portraits did not purport to reveal aesthetically composed conclusive essences. Snapshots framed incidentals postulating the fact, producing a sense of certainty about the possibility of exposing the identity related to people, places and situations. Intimate images of self-depiction gestured towards an actual subject not as a pre-text but as an “I” recognized not only in the most honorific posture but also from multiplicity of proximate angles and close-ups, foregrounding this active subject, asserting both the state of availability of subjectivity and its contact with the world.

Yet, out of the multiplicity of angles, it is the face on which prevails as the most common posture. What are the faces in the most recent vernacular images? Selfies, like snapshots, exhibit unchanging desire for frontality. Its burden, to use John Tagg’s term, though much more relaxed than in the past centuries, continues to be carried most frequently, and most surprisingly perhaps, with choreographed smiles and in conventional compositions. The selfie face hardly ever appears smudged, deformed, fragmented or violated. It is not its negation, defacement, devaluation or degradation, but the contrary, its surface consolidation, assertion and multiplied exposition that call our attention. It seems that the dismantling strategies affecting the use and presentation of the face in visual arts do not impact the selfie. In the selfie, the cultural logo of our identity, the face, presents itself as an activity promising interaction. The domain of the face we meet in the selfie is both available and fugitive.

Szyjewska-Piotrowska addressing changing conceptualizations of the face defines a performative face which “happens in the social encounter,” which is about acting on the stage, which inscribes identity acting in the socio-political sphere rather than in the inner world of the individual (149–150). Intuiting from etymological associations, she reminds us that in English, the conceptualization of the face as making, as acting is rendered in the noun “face,” and the verb “to face,” both derived from the Latin *facere*, meaning to do, and to make. Searching for answers to the question if in our recent visualizing practices we can speak of a community of faces the way we think of communities of the bodies, Szyjewska-Piotrowska reminds us of Aristotle for whom acting, looking, and speaking were prerequisites of being on the stage (150). That being engages not role playing, but forming. Public interaction presupposes, “modelling of the face” (150), or “scenic effect” (151). The performative aesthetics animates our everyday activities. Because we have rejected patterns and standards of stylization of the face proposed in the past by religion and metaphysics, now we draw on typologies of performance where



the dichotomy body/face no longer operates (157), where performance may lead to an emergence of new senses of the body and the face. As sense and meaning belong to abandoned metaphysical dictionaries, we are left to observe the performance and to act (157). In this “post-face” phase of our culture the performative face is a surface of the visual present, it is always in the making.

The scenic aspect of face making is very clear in the experience of viewing multitudes of imaged faces. In his blog, Andrzej Karpathy, a Stanford computer science PhD student, provides a set of revealing answers to the question of the forms of “good” faces in selfies. Having analyzed with the help of the convolutional neural networks 2 million images that have received viewers’ likes, Karpathy concluded that a visually interesting, good selfie presents a female, shows a head occupying about 1/3 of the image, and presents the forehead cut off. His respondents have determined that the selfie is also an image with long hair which is said to add value. The face in the image should be oversaturated which produces the desired quality of uniformity and fadedness. Application of filter enhances the image. Additionally, viewers emphasized that a border around the image makes it look better. Selfies deemed not good were group selfies, selfies taken in low lighting, with heads too big. Karpathy’s pioneering study shows that producers and consumers of selfies are able to recognize and classify portrait types which trigger defined attitudes of viewers. Their responses to selfies, however, betray no claims to artistic aptitude. These responses do not reveal concerns about changes in the perception of the face and its character. They do not map new face-scapes. On the contrary, needs of viewers are typified rather by conventional codes of description of portraiture. Viewers in Karpathy’s study isolated codes of framing, lightning, and posing – elements which do not depart from established and acclaimed rhetoric of the conventional portrait.

Pierre Bourdieu argues that “one’s forehead held high and one’s head straight” placement in a portrait are connected with cultural values. Contact with others is one of them; it is the expectation of the contact which calls for the presentation of the most “honourable” or “ceremonial” air which in turn effects objectification of the regulated self-image and which, “imposing the rules of one’s own perception,” summons reciprocity. This orientation is the reason why Bourdieu considers the portrait “an extreme form of one’s relationship to others” (81–82). The portrait thus gestures beyond the boundaries of privacy. For Bourdieu adherence to the principle of frontality entails the exposition of “the body as a spectacle” (81). In the nakedness and proximity of the face in the selfie close-up



we detect what Jean Luc Nancy identifies as the seductive impetus which promises increase of erotic availability and pleasure; “first offered and given to be taken ... touched by eyes, the hands, the belly, or by reason, and penetrated” (10). The latest snapchatting and sexting messaging are revealing of how irresistible, impermanent and visible such relationships are. How they are performed to form a new idea of relations in a private life.

The status and use of snapshots have evolved over the decades impregnating the visual field with new forms to penetrate. As random visual surfaces or as signs mobilizing communication and self-knowledge, snapshots and selfies connect with the increase in the more instant procedures of identification. Because the meaning of snapshots has been attached to nonprofessional camera operators, these images have acquired associations with erasure of the distinction between the subject and the camera operator. Activity and participation have been located on both sides. Taken to transcribe experience, to assert, and amplify oneself in relation to others and to some material exteriority, snapshots are believed to assign and assert the value of a life lived. Selfies feature as a signification of life (Bates 42). By privileging indeterminacy, immediacy and transcription recent snapshots have enticed a change in the individuating modes of the subject performing their experience.

### I TOUCH THE SCREEN AND DO THE REST

The desire to be an active framer of the image, to self-generate images in the early stages of photography went hand in hand with the necessity to have the film physically processed by specialists. Digital imaging, as Mitchell argues, is based on processes free from “institutional policing of uniformity.” These processes equip the individual with more options to control complex operations which are rich in their “range of possible representational commitments.” Additionally, digital images stand in a “wider variety of intentional relationships to the objects that they depict.” More can be done with them and, significant, what is these images can easily subvert all kinds of communication rules. Mitchell has no doubt that “digital imaging technology can provide openings for principled resistance to established social and cultural practices” (222–223). Used and misused, digital images alter positions of observers and referents. They alter communicative and viewing practices.

Under digitality, Tim Lenoir explaining Mark B.N. Hansen’s Bergson-based approach to new media art shows, the body “takes on a more prominent function as selective processor in the creation of images.” The new

regime theorists like Hansen propose to change the hierarchy of senses relocating the abstracted vision to privilege the senses of touch and self-movement: “vision becomes ‘haptic’.” There are many applications to this observation. “Snapping and sharing” (Knight) selfies, we do more than just press the button, we perform a host of other operations “through sensorimotor actions – actions that are semi-conscious yet habitual to the degree that we might even call them ‘reflex’: fingers swiping and tapping apps on touchscreens, or scrolling, moving and clicking a mouse attached to a desktop computer” (Frosh 260). Swiping, dragging, pinch-zooming, double tapping all belong to this new visual realm of “kinaesthetic sociability” (Frosh).

Vernacular images like the selfie make the body visible and accessible. They point to a changing paradigm in the body/face dichotomy. Showing the face, we expose and activate the body. Selfies, offspring of digital networks, “show a self, enacting itself ... fluctuating between the self as an image and as a body, as a constructed effect of representation and as an object and agent of representation” (Frosh 259). Unlike the snapshot, the selfie also makes visible “its own construction as an act and product of mediation” (Frosh 259). Captured in the image, the extended arm of the selfie maker holding the smart camera next to the face points to the increasing importance of this heptic register for the depiction of the self. The arm captured in the image enhances the interlinking role of the body, its form-giving potential (Bruś 121). This symbolic binding of the apparatus to our bodies is further augmented through the employment of reflecting surfaces like mirrors. Their doubling function animates the desire for the achievement of self-consciousness and recognition. Performed widely, processes of reflected inscription mark not just a change in technical bases but also a change in visual practices.

The digital image, unlike an analog image is open to the user’s interactivity. It is capable of always being modified and capable of being connected with other texts. Printed on paper, analog and digital images are indistinguishable. Viewed with attention to uses and practices of production and circulation the two paradigms disclose radically different operations. The alliance with the present moment as well as availability and accessibility of digital images turn them into transparent surfaces. The analog belongs to the past but we do continue to trust an old analog portrait of a person. We expect that it “certifies” a connection we can no longer claim in digital photography. The physical imprint of the analog image testifies to the presence of the subject in front of the camera. The person acted on the light which, passing it, burned into a photographic plate or negative producing a change in the form of the image. This spiritual effect is felt when copies are made and when images are enlarged. The



fragility of the analog photograph becomes apparent when we start handling it thus threatening its integrity. Multiple copying of digital images is not connected with degradation, as is the case with analog images where the information stored chemically is indefinite. In the digital technology, as Mitchell explains, a copy “is not a debased descendent but is absolutely indistinguishable from the original” (4). The digital image emerges as a result of a new order of vision, a new way of functioning of photography. We no longer operate within the aesthetics of imprints and traces. A recent information format is the realm of aesthetics of sketching and adding. A digitally-produced snapshot presents a new manner of existence: “the snapshot photographer perceives an event through the screen of the camera rather than through a viewfinder. Thus for the photographers

today, and often those around them, the event is *already mediated* into an image even before it is perceived" (Bate 37). Where the analog image is "continuous," the digital is "discrete" (Mitchell 4). Now a matrix of numbers – with no negative and often with no referent – it can become a fragment of a new image, a matrix for another image. This radical turn from the dark box to the darkroom of the electronic computer releases endless possibilities of inter-media convergence and the extensive dissemination of images, the extensive mediated dissemination of experience of seeing the faces.

In the post-photographic era, the digital image is no longer associated with the truth or even a signifier. Without a real observer, it is an infinitely fragmented hybrid form. Freed from a relation with the real, the digital image has become "an interactive techno-sensorimotor hybrid" (Hansen) which can be "part scanned photograph, part computer-synthesized shaded perspective, and part electronic "painting" – all smoothly melded into an apparently coherent whole" (Mitchell 7). With the availability of complex processual and interactive features, we have moved away into affective and haptic registers. Mitchell suggests that through acts of "appropriation, transformation, reprocessing, and recombination" image makers engage in production processes but above all in diverse projects of performance, and of electrobricollage (7). The consequences of these are that they can be used in ways not anticipated by their makers to render new meanings and new languages. According to André Gunthert, after the first period of the "static web" characterized by "society of authors," the second revolution after the web 2.0 coincided with the developments in the technology of the smart mobile phone enabling the alliance of the phone camera with other communication tools. Gunthert enriches the discussion on selfies as new modes of communication by proposing to think of the selfies as conversational images in new fields of conversations in action. The web is where we talk about the photos and where we talk with the photos. Such an approach merits a separate study.

Paradigms of the face support cultures of identity. Like identity mechanism these paradigms change. In selfies, the most recent types of self-portraits we see faces which are elements of action. Its distressing mechanical appeal was evoked in a recent installation *#selfie* by Tom Stayte in Wrocław at the *Photography Never Dies* exhibition. Stayte connected his computer to Instagram API to appropriate images tagged "selfie" immediately after they have been posted. Every 12 seconds a thermal receipt printer attached to the computer issued a selfie in black and white without any visible background. The floor of the exhibition room where the installation

was placed within first few days was covered with thousands of selfies exhibition viewers walked on, interested more in the technical aspect of the image production than in facing the faces. Colorful constellations of stamp-size selfies on the walls, like the black and white paper selfies on the floor did not engage expressive functions. A multitude of these imaged faces neutralized successfully what in the past aimed to consolidate identity and its aura – the traditional portrait.

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