

# The Selfie: A Reinvention of Identity in Visual Self-Depiction

by Fatiha Kamal

*I had always thought of myself as a good writer; however, I also had very little direction on how to write a proper, well-structured essay that was also engaging. My essays from high school were formulaic, the standard five-paragraph format divorced from my own voice and creativity. Editing and revision meant simply checking spelling and grammar. In short, my view of the essay form was an incredibly narrow one.*

*When I began at NYU Tandon in Fall 2019, the freshman expository writing course was something of a relief in the STEM-heavy schedule for the semester. However, it was also one of the most disorienting academic experiences I had up until then. During that first semester, I was completely forced out of my shell when it came to writing. I had to learn to stop censoring my voice, no longer putting every idea through a sterilizing filter to try and please whomever it was that was reading my paper. I had to be okay with completely scrapping everything for an essay over halfway through the progression to write something that turned out to be a far better body of work. I had to learn how it felt to subject fifteen other people at the unholy hour of 9 a.m. to eleven pages of a rambling essay so they could throw every one of their critiques at me in real time, because it was important for me to learn and to improve, not only in technical ability but also in terms of my confidence.*

*When I began working on my final essay for the second semester course, the one about an innovation of my choice, I had begun my essay proposal to my professor with an in-depth discussion about Kim Kardashian West. If I had been asked nine months prior to write the same essay, the idea of doing this would not have even popped into my mind, or at least, if it had, I wouldn't have actually written an entire page and a half trying to connect Kim Kardashian to an eighteenth century French art theorist. To create this essay, it took a constant and unending cycle of emails to my professor asking for feedback, multiple incongruous google docs with ideas and half-drafts that I have since lost track of, hours of rewriting and revising in response to my peers' suggestions, and most importantly, an unquestioned confidence in my choices and my ability as a writer.*

—Fatiha Kamal

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One of the earliest, best-known examples of a self-portrait is Jan Van Eyck's 1433 *Portrait of a Man*. The painting—showing the subject, against a black background, staring uncompromisingly at the viewer and wearing a red chaperon and a dark coat—has dubious status as a *self*-portrait, specifically. Much of the evidence in support of Van Eyck as the subject comes from the unique inscription on the painting's frame, "As I can." According to art historians Steven Zucker and Beth Harris, this is the first half of a phrase used by scribes at the end of a copied manuscript. The phrase typically ends with, "not as I would." Van Eyck, however, omitted this second half, hinting that his intentions were not to please a commissioning patron, but rather to depict himself in his purest form to a willing viewer (Zucker and Harris 00:00:48-00:01:08).

The artform of the self-portrait flourished in the Renaissance, with many artists applying the pre-existing practice of romanticizing the human form to their own likenesses. Later, self-portraiture would incorporate different styles of painting; Impressionists, Expressionists, and Pop artists, for example, experimented with more abstract forms and expressive color palettes that deviated from the norms of image depiction. The invention of photography in the nineteenth century marked a new turning point in self-portraiture, with the practice of self-depiction evolving to fit a brand-new medium that transcended the need for paint on canvas. In 1839, Robert Cornelius would take the first technologically produced self-portrait with a daguerreotype, an early model of a camera. In the image, Cornelius stands against a neutral background, wearing a sleek black jacket with his arms crossed over his chest. Although Cornelius is positioned off-center in the picture, his stare towards the camera—and the viewer—is as unflinchingly direct, similar to Van Eyck's in his self-portrait (Carbon 4). While Cornelius's image marked a new stage in the self-portrait's evolution, it also marked the beginnings of the self-portrait's digital successor: the selfie.

A twenty-first century selfie as defined by the Oxford Dictionary is "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, *esp.* one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media" (Oxford English Dictionary Online). The first documented use of the word was in 2002 on an online chat forum, where a drunk Australian man had added the English diminutive "-ie" to a shortened version of "self-photograph" for a picture's caption (Brumfield). Compared to the self-portrait, the selfie's name is not the only thing that's been significantly shortened. Post-Robert Cornelius, early self-portraiture technology underwent numerous changes that significantly reduced image production time. In the late nineteenth century, stereoscopic cameras would use photographic emulsions that were more light-sensitive, thus allowing the image taken to be produced faster than had been possible with daguerreotypes. CMOS active pixel sensor technology, developed in the late twentieth century, was instrumental in transferring the photographic self-portrait to a digital self-portrait: in the 1990s, displays appeared on digital cameras that allowed captured images to be viewed instantly, while in the twenty-first century, front-facing cameras on cellphones and smartphones made reliable selfie composition possible (Carbon 4).

The quick-to-produce nature of a selfie is at once a limiting and liberating factor. With a traditional self-portrait, the painter is able to do as they please, working with a blank canvas, choosing whatever colors and backgrounds they wish, in some cases completely deconstructing the structure of their face for artistic effect. However, the pre-planning, manual labor, and skill

required make this kind of self-portrait unattainable for most. A smartphone can produce an image essentially instantaneously, allowing for a massive quantity of selfies to be taken in an incredibly short amount of time, by anyone. Additionally, where traditional self-portraits vary in composition depending on the period and movement (abstract, realistic, surreal), selfies often only vary in terms of the environment in which the subject is placed: before a mirror, posing with food, with friends, etc. Filters, which often come built-in with a smartphone or as a feature on a social media app, can digitally alter the image in minor ways by shifting the colors and tone or in more extreme ways, such as altering the shape of the subject's eyes and face or even placing floppy dog ears on their head. However, even with various photo retouching apps, the subject is still limited by their immediate environment and the predetermined features of image distortion applications to provide more depth and character to the image. Essentially, where a self-portrait is limited by its *quantity* of production, a selfie appears to be limited in its *quality* of production. This idea raises the following questions: is the selfie more than a technological innovation in self-depiction? Has the trade-off of quality for quantity led to an entirely new perspective on the practice of self-depiction that is unique to the twenty-first century?

Before understanding the purpose behind self-depiction as it pertains to selfies, it is necessary to first investigate the purpose of self-depiction as it pertains to the original self-portrait. Eighteenth-century art theorist Roger de Piles was instrumental in helping to develop a contemporary understanding of painting, and many of his arguments still resonate with modern art concepts. Writing to an amateur audience, de Piles focuses on portraits in his work *The Principles of Painting* to demonstrate how technical skill is only a fraction of what makes an accomplished work of art. De Piles argues that through a careful understanding of how the choices in lighting, color, and scenery affect the mood of the painting, the artist will be able to control the "attitude," or pose, of the figure and have control over a "graceful expression of the *vices* as well as of the *virtues*" of the subject (de Piles 62). It is not enough for de Piles that a portrait artist create an accurate physical representation of the subject; they must also be able to assign an identity to the character in the portrait. The viewer must be able to access, through the artist's instruction, the subject's greater qualities (their "virtues") and their worse qualities (their "vices") and be able to relate to them in some way (62). The connection the artist fosters with the viewer through the medium of the painting is, for de Piles, the heart of portraiture; it gives purpose to the piece's existence. When it comes to depicting oneself, this task of representing what de Piles might call "knowledge of character" must be accomplished far more carefully (62). A sufficient reflection of a self-portrait's subject requires an examination of oneself in order to effectively create a visually-based dialogue with the viewer.

Regardless of which movement an artist is associated with, this conveyance of identity as described by de Piles can be identified in the self-portraits of some of the major artists in the genre. Take, for example, Rembrandt, a significant figure in seventeenth century self-portraiture. According to George Keyes, former curator of European paintings for the Detroit Institute of Arts, Rembrandt's choices demonstrate a "critical self-observation . . . a marvel of self estimation with no attempt to idealize," thus providing the viewer with an impression of Rembrandt's fascination with and acceptance of both his outward and inner self (5). Even more abstract-leaning painters, such as Vincent Van Gogh and Frida Kahlo, created self-portraits that represented an examination of their inner selves. Van Gogh's self-portraits were created in his distinct technique of short, flowing lines, which gave the viewer a sense of movement and

turbulence that may have represented Van Gogh's interiority. Frida Kahlo's self-portraits often contain vibrant colors and symbolism which references the most pivotal moments in her life and thus directly tell the viewer who she was beyond the canvas. They serve as a visual biography of Kahlo's emotions, often depicting allusions to her "health problems and stormy marriage" (Friis 1). These choices in color, symbolism, and technique serve a purpose beyond composition to generate a silent yet dynamic conversation between artist and viewer.

This conversation manifests very differently when it comes to selfies. Reality TV star and socialite Kim Kardashian West, the proclaimed "queen of selfies," is perhaps the closest thing to a 'selfie artist.' While some may argue that Kardashian West is, as MIT researcher Ethan Zuckerman describes, "a unit of unmerited fame," her photogenic features and carefully-composed selfies have made her a household name (qtd. in Garber). So influential is her image that in 2015, Kardashian West released a book called *Selfish*, which compiled in 448 pages nine years' worth of her selfies. In her *Atlantic* article "You Win, Kim Kardashian," Megan Garber argues that the book goes beyond just a vanity project. Garber explains that while Kardashian West's selfies "may be "harbingers of arrogance, or of insecurity, or a combination of the two," they are also "evidence of an insistent materialism, of the conviction that one's 'look' is not a fleeting thing, but rather a thing that can be made into media." Many of her critics might argue her "virtues" exist only in aesthetics and her "vices" are the materialistic and shallow characteristics she is assumed to possess. However, this identity as seen by the viewer of the selfie is not one that Kardashian West chooses to express, but rather one that the public has invented for her. Her selfies provide silent, passive visuals that the viewer takes responsibility for interpreting without consideration for the subject's intentions. Whether or not Kardashian West truly views herself as an ultra-gorgeous, unattainable human being remains unrevealed in the images alone. Her book flipped the script on what a self-portrait was initially—a mode of self-depiction—instead suggesting that the picture and the identity of the person in it belong as much to the viewer as to the author.

Former Associate Director of Digital Marketing at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Jia Jia Fei describes the selfie as an "art object" turned "social object" (00:02:55). In her Tedx Talk "Art in the Age of Instagram," Fei explains that with the transition of a piece from an art object to a social object, "the physical object" becomes "an object completely defined by the conversation happening around it rather than the experience itself" (00:03:01-00:03:15). As digital avenues of image production and distribution become more accessible, the ability to share art expands to potentially millions of viewers on the Internet. The scope of exposure to the work in such a short amount of time results in a shift in who dominates the conversation surrounding the art. No longer is the artist in control of the meaning of the piece, but rather the multitude of viewers in the comments section who collectively determine it, often disregarding the intention of the subject altogether.

While altering the artist-viewer dynamic that self-portraits had previously established, the status of selfies as "social objects" have also helped alter the purpose behind self-depiction in the technological age. A 2018 study conducted by Sarah Diefenbach and Lara Christoforakos at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich investigated the psychological effects of selfie-taking as a means of self-presentation. The study participants' reported feelings toward selfies—the

emotional and social impacts that taking and posting selfies may have—varied from person to person, correlated to their levels of self-promotion and self-disclosure. Diefenbach and Christoforakos offer the possibility that the appeal of selfies lies not in a singular effect which could be deemed positive or negative, but rather in the fact that selfies provide “a lightweight possibility for self-presentation.” The selfie provides an outlet for self-expression that the self-portrait had previously laid claim to. However, it does so in a way that “feels good for people, [and] does not reveal too much about deeper motivations,” essentially allowing the viewer to determine whatever the image’s underlying purpose is. With such a rapid process for image production, image posting, and social feedback that allows the subject to “strategically adjust and experiment with the impression they make on others,” the subject of a selfie retains an adaptable and inconsequential identity in the context of the single image, something that was difficult to accomplish with self-portraits given the medium’s own set of constraints. Thus, the selfie as a mode of self-depiction may have altered the previously established motivation of wanting to express a complex identity to a viewer to wanting to ‘please’ the viewer instead (Diefenbach and Christoforakos).

The selfie’s key innovation is not simply technological. While the technological advances of cameras, smartphones, and social media led to the birth of the selfie in the early twenty-first century, the selfie’s most significant effect as an innovation is its alteration of how we view the practice of self-depiction in the twenty-first century. Where traditional self-portraits have served as a vehicle for artists to communicate their identities to viewers for centuries, the selfie shifted the artist-viewer dynamic by relying on the viewer to help shape the photo’s—and the artist’s—identity. Whether the selfie is of oneself on vacation, with friends, or simply alone in a bathroom with their smartphone pointed at the mirror, there is always an audience willing to praise or ridicule the image. In a highly connected, social media-centric world, the selfie serves as a reminder that everything, including our own identities, are a matter of public opinion.

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