

Louise Jones
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Selfie Preservation Society

Self-portraiture has long been a fixture of art. Since its rise in popularity in the mid-15th century, it has become a staple of every gallery, National Trust property and sketchbook. The portrait has given a frank and honest view of the self for hundreds of years, opening up an entirely new perspective on how the artist sees them self as subject, and how they wish to be seen by others. Self-portraits are a lasting legacy, and the means by which they are created have changed drastically over the years. Sketches, paintings, sculptures, and photography have been popular media, to name but a few. Recently, photography has taken over, and I aim to look at one very particular form of self-portraiture.

The last twelve months feel like they have been the year of self-photography, or rather selfies. Having earned its position in the Oxford English Dictionary last year, the selfie has appeared on almost everything. T-shirts in New Look have '#SELFIE' branded across the chest. The Chainsmokers' single, also called '#SELFIE,' charted at 11 on the official UK singles chart and reached 16 on the US Billboard Top 100. The word has gained so much significance that it has permeated into the vocabulary of parents everywhere. The question I would like to ask is, are these photos worth curating and archiving?

The culture of selfies has been around for a decade or more, even if not by any particular name. Surveys carried out by the psychology project Selfiecity found that out of five cities across the globe, the dominant age range of selfie-takers is 20-25 years old. I would posit that the worldwide popularity of selfie shots is a good deal due to the ageing of its perpetrators. I fondly remember the somewhat embarrassing head-and-shoulders photos I took of myself as a teenager, practising various smiles, pouts, and hairstyles. We've all been

there: as the children of the 80s and 90s hit puberty, we were surrounded by the first affordable camera phones to help us document our growth. The culture of taking photos on a regular basis therefore seemed reasonable as we aged, and as younger teenagers gained access to even better technology the fad turned into a craze.

The familiarity of selfie culture surely could not be the only factor toward our most recent wave of self-photography; we have social media to thank for this. Popular sites; Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, were all founded between 2004 and 2007. However, since entire social media sites have been invented solely for the purpose of sharing photos. Instagram's launch in 2010 meant the appreciation of selfies has never been easier to chart, especially with celebrities: Selena Gomez and Justin Bieber's own selfie gained 1.82 million likes. It's no surprise that celebrities aren't the only people indulging in selfies on a day to day basis, and sharing them with others: a survey taken by the Pew Research Centre revealed that 91% of American teenagers asked post photos of themselves online.

So what exactly appeals to thousands of selfie-takers, and why display these photos publicly? We know that as an artistic discipline, several artists will keep daily sketches privately- which are later displayed at various exhibitions across the world. John Ruskin kept sketches as his health deteriorated, to prevent him falling into severe bouts of depression. Could it be that with our current unemployment epidemic, the large number of people in their early twenties taking selfies is doing so as a coping mechanism? Are our teenagers no more bored than we were at that age, but with access to better technology?

There has been a lot of negativity toward the selfie culture, as one might expect from any artistic or social practise which works its way into the mainstream. The main prejudice against the wave of selfies is the criticism that the photos, and to an extent the photographers, are artificial. The way the culture is presented to the outside world (that is, the way people who take selfies are portrayed in marketing, or reported on in news stories) certainly suggests this. To return to '#SELFIE', the song revolves around a woman in her twenties, chatting inanely about some boy she may or may not want to sleep with, a good filter for her photo, girls she doesn't like. The entire feel of the song is one of a vapid young person who bitches because she's not the centre of attention at a club. Even the insults aimed at other people ("I bet she buys all her Instagram followers") imply that everyone there is fake. Studies taken to compare "millennial" and "boomer" generation show that millenials

care more about extrinsic values than their parents: money, image, popularity. Are selfies taken for the number of likes, the people we might attract as a result?

News coverage also presents selfies as an essentially frivolous and ignorant practise, in particular reports of teenagers taking photos with paintings at art galleries. Tiffany Jenkins criticised this trend, calling it an insult to 'the audience as well as the art'. It does seem a little unnecessary, as if done for the sake of showing other people what culture the photographer has seen that day. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic calls the craze of selfies ostentatious. His view can be taken very easily when considering the culture of photographing oneself for public display on an almost daily basis. The practise of posing with cultural monuments has been taken to extremes with several people smiling in front of war memorials, and blogs such as *Selfies at Serious Places* poke fun at how out of touch with the real world selfies make their generation look.

However, this damning look at selfie culture is a generalisation which does not look toward the people taking selfies themselves. If we were to turn a metaphorical lens on those who turn the literal lens on themselves, we might see a different intention entirely to the snapshots we see on the news and in articles bemoaning the youth of today. Within a world population of 7.125 billion (as of 2013) it can be hard to feel truly significant, especially with the insecurities faced by teenagers every day, and the anonymity of the internet leading to fear of cyber-bullying. Self-esteem can be boosted from taking the "perfect" photo, and the Dove project "Selfie" used the art form to highlight how insecurities can be accepted as part of the self at an American high school. The fact that the key to better understanding of the self can be such an everyday activity almost validates the frequency of selfies, improving self-worth across several countries.

There is also an artistic appreciation to be found in the art of taking a selfie. Typing "how to take a good selfie" into Google, I'm met with thousands of how-to guides, all with definite attention to the disciplines taken in self-portrait photography. Charissa Coulthard provides a simple guide to lighting, timing, and head angles in her article for the BBC magazine. There is a definite artistic pursuit in finding the "best" angle. Some would argue this feeds into the narcissism of selfie culture, but only as much as a photographer's model or muse could be called narcissistic in applying for that very role. Achieving a high quality of photo provides a sense of accomplishment, as well as providing a means of progress across several years of selfies. If I were to look back over my selfies, I'd see some faces pulled at high school, right through to a photo taken quickly in my graduation robes at university.

So why display the selfie publicly? The question is still prominent in society, as common as overhearing somebody on the bus exclaim “why did she put that online?” Perhaps this is not a case about the people uploading their selfies, but our public reaction to them. Surveys have shown that our public sense of altruism has decreased in the last decade, and we’ve lost patience with others’ posts about a holiday abroad or an evening in. Across the centuries, artists have tried to understand the self through replicating their own image. Selfies carry on this tradition of displaying the self as a way of explaining to others, and self-understanding in a public sphere. Maybe the problem here isn’t the selfies themselves, but our negative attitude toward them, as shaped by the media’s definition of selfies as a vain or ostentatious practise. They can be much more positively seen as a way of reaching out to those around you. In our fast paced world, anything over 6 seconds can lose our attention on social media. We don’t expect to read newsletters from each of our 500+ Facebook friends; a selfie tells us all we need to know. A picture paints a thousand words, as they say, and with our technology takes a split second to capture. I’d suggest the selfie culture is too important a movement for us not to curate. We just need to embrace it as the movement of photography it is.

Louise Jones

Louise Jones is a recent graduate from the University of York, with a 2:1 in English Literature and a fascination in the arts and modern culture. She reviews theatre for The York Press, as well as Theatrefullstop, and currently has a blog with A Younger Theatre. She has a natural sense of humour in her writing, and is fascinated by how youth culture permeates into the mainstream, particularly how once “low brow” activities can be used as a status symbol- even if they’re used as an object of derision.