YOU AND ME:
MODELS OF SELF-REPRESENTATION IN
PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

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Abstract

This research project examines personal identity and its relationship to social media. The new genre of mass self-portraiture - the ‘Selfie’ – is a particular focus and how social media platforms encourage an increasingly standardised model of self-representation. The thesis also examines how participants in digital consumer culture become both the subject and object of the production cycle.

The thesis proposes that ideologies served to consumers through traditional and social media, empowered by advancing technologies and driven by market forces, become referents for new models of self-representation. Computer logic imposed on the participants of social media interfaces informs their behaviour, while the awareness of persistent observation also induces an ever-performing self.

Artists such as Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Barbara Krueger and Gustave Courbet - and their approach to identity, representation, and the interrelatedness of subject and object - are examined in the context of today’s participatory culture. The thesis observes identity’s new status as commodity in the data-driven information economy as participants engage in their cultural production.

The *Typecast* works presented in the exhibition examine the phenomenon of the ‘Selfie’ image, and how mediated ideologies and technological limitations inform a mirroring of the ‘real’ and the ideal on the shared online stage of social media.

The series of small-scale, square format, black and white digital prints mounted onto timber backing boards, each with a mirror mounted in the back, is installed (predominantly in profile) to the gallery wall. The text-based works describe, using the language of the screenplay, new emerging conventions of poses and gestures common to many ‘Selfie’ images.

Alongside these works is a neon sign mounted to the wall, which reads ‘YOU AND ME AND YOU AND ME.’ Its medium is listed as
‘Neon, an indeterminate number of viewers,’ indicating that the artwork is not complete until observed by one or more viewers. The work refers to the increasingly interdependent and ambiguous roles of consumer/producer, subject/object, performer/audience that are emerging in participatory culture.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the Preface*,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is <15,000> words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices OR the thesis is <11,468> as approved by the RHD Committee.

Kristin McIver
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INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Kittler noted in 1986 of a technologically evolving society that “The general digitisation of channels and information erases the differences among the individual media.”¹ In this essay, I propose that a further 20 years on - in Web 2.0’s hyper-mediated, socially networked, participatory culture - it also erases the differences between individuals.

Since the emergence and rapid uptake of social media, the identity of the individual has become increasingly complicated. The social and economic revolution brought about by digital Web 2.0 platforms and participatory culture has caused a destabilisation of traditional modes of self-representation. The interdependent operation of mass-media, social networks and the databases on which they are served, is resulting in increased standardisation and an amplified form of what Jean Baudrillard described as a system of “referendum, perpetual test, circular response, verification of the code.”² This essay shall argue that as post-industrial consumer societies become increasingly reliant on advancements in information technologies, and corporations encourage the use of participatory culture; citizens adapt their behaviour in response. The participants of social media and other Web 2.0 platforms increasingly become subject to the networks, databases, algorithms, markets, and media that comprise digital society - as it responds to them, and they respond to it.

Successive advancements in technologies (such as that of photographic devices) have encouraged behavioural changes in the individuals that operate them. This

¹ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, film, typewriter*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1
technological development is leading towards new conventions in self-representation, as shall be discussed in the chapter *Towards Standardisation*. The relentless development typical of free market capitalist democracies has led us to where we are today - a world empowered by technology, driven by capital, connected by digital networks; culture mediated through computers. With the digital revolution’s Web 2.0 driven information economy, the content creators (the users of social media) form a new model of “labour”, with the personal information they generate being transformed into data, then into commodity; as shall be approached in the *Data as Currency* chapter.

As we shall observe, participatory culture is a technological augmentation of what Guy Debord described of consumer culture at large; “a social relation among people, mediated by images.” The *Mediated Ideologies* chapter examines how fictionalised ideals instilled in the media inform the behaviour of those to whom they are addressed, by looking at how artists such as Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince placed into question the origin of such referents. This effect is posited within today’s context of participatory culture, where individuals on social media offer themselves as brands, using their online representations as a form of self-advertising, as demonstrated in the chapter *You, The Brand*. This essay shall argue that when this occurs, these representations become increasingly indistinguishable from the ideals which influence them. Under these circumstances, the selfie is emerging as an expression of popular culture that operates as a system of circular response that is inspired by, and fed back into advertisements, television shows, and music videos and social media profiles. ‘Selfie’ was declared the Oxford dictionary’s international word of the year in 2013, and as is demonstrated by this, the

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photographic genre is clearly establishing itself as an enduring cultural phenomenon.

Prior to the consumer version of the internet (Web 1.0), and most definitely prior to social media (Web 2.0), Guy Debord had referred to the rampant consumerist tendencies that defined advanced capitalist societies at the late 20th century, declaring 1969 “the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life” ⁵. This thesis will argue in later chapters that today, the commodity has completed its colonization of the individual; the participants of mass culture have themselves become commodities. Through its analysis of technology, new media, and perceptions of self, we shall examine how online identity – the representation of self in digitally connected communities - is becoming increasingly standardised, as it evolves alongside technology, markets and media.

Through an examination of the technological, economical and ideological conditions of late capitalism, I shall examine how new cultural phenomena are infiltrating the identities of participants of consumer culture, modifying behaviour, and blurring the lines between reality and media-constructed ideologies.

“But first, let me take a selfie.“⁶

**TOWARDS STANDARDISATION**

“Prior to the industrial revolution, humans were surrounded by tools, afterwards the machine was surrounded by human beings. Previously the tool was the

⁵ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. Th 42
⁶ The Chainsmokers, "#Selfie (Official Music Video)," (Youtube, 2014).
variable and the human being was the constant, subsequently the human being became the variable and the machine the constant.” Vilém Flusser noted the adaptation of human behaviour in response to the persistently changing technology of the machine. With the evolution of photography for example, we can observe how persistent adaptations in the mechanics of camera devices have impacted cultural and social relations. Flusser writes, “The meaning of the world in general and of life in the world transforms itself under the pressure of the revolution in communications.”

Successive advances in cameras over the years, such as the self-timer feature, the Kodak Brownie camera, the automatic 35mm camera, the digital camera and now the smart phone device, have led successively towards a democratisation of the photographic image. The transformation of cameras from professional image-making machine to consumer accessory accessible to the masses, has led photographic imagery to evolve from trained artistic photographs toward the amateur documentation of everyday life.

Perhaps the most significant technological revolution to influence the medium of photography in recent history came in the form of the smart phone, complete with networked camera. Particularly, as shall be observed in this thesis, its influence on the creation of a new genre of self-portraiture - the selfie. Alise Tifentale writes:

The selfie can be interpreted as an emerging sub-genre of self-portraiture, as an example of the digital (...) turn in vernacular photography as well as a side product of the recent technological

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8 Vilém Flusser and Andreas Ströhl, *Writings*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). 35
developments, which in their impact and scope are not unlike the revolution in photographic practice associated with the Kodak Brownie camera and its availability for the masses starting in the early 1900s.\(^9\)

Its accessibility, mobility, internet access, social media applications and, importantly, \textit{front facing-camera}, have contributed towards the rapid social evolution we approach in this essay. With this precise combination of technologies, social media is transforming self-portraiture, and as we shall see, transforming its participants.

The smart phone, readily at hand to document contemporary experience, becomes a form of prosthesis for its operator; it’s camera the eyes, its social platforms the voice, its microphone the ears. Flusser’s comments on the evolving camera/operator relationship described above could be applied to this subsequent technological development, in that “Human beings and apparatus merge into a unity.”\(^{10}\) He argued that as technology evolves, photographers become “nothing more than human factors built onto the apparatus.”\(^{11}\) This could not be truer of today’s state of technological advancement, where the network of software and devices is the constant, and its users are the variable.

The impact on culture is commensurate with this burgeoning relationship. The ability for operators of networked cameras to simultaneously experience, document and publish anything in the world at any time, along with the express knowledge that no great investment is required in the creation of each image,


\(^{10}\) Flusser, \textit{Towards a philosophy of photography}. 27

\(^{11}\) Flusser and Ströhl, \textit{Writings}. 130
has meant that the value of each image is decreased and the quantity of images is sure to increase. This has resulted in a democratisation of the photograph, and a proliferation of images on Web 2.0 platforms, with over 20 billion photos having been shared on Instagram alone.¹²

Hence, as we shall examine, identity and indeed culture at large, are affected by the ensuing image-obsessed, socially-networked, technology dependent society. Its participants are rendered subject to the technologies themselves; through the encoded database structures which underpin content sharing applications (as examined in the Data as Currency chapter), and the ideals which are served to them as content (see Mediated Ideologies chapter).

Culture and computers are inextricably linked, and as we have seen, increasingly co-dependent. Lev Manovich points out that new media (digital) images published on computer network platforms each possess two layers of communication - a “cultural layer” (the visual or textual cues that human viewers can interpret), and a “computer layer” (the coded language that software can interpret). Of the structure of a computer image, he notes “On the level of representation, it belongs on the side of human culture, automatically entering into a dialogue with other images (...) but on another level, it is a computer file that consists of a machine readable header, followed by a number representing the colour values of its pixels. On this level it enters into a dialogue with other computer files.”

This two-tiered structure pointed out by Manovich underlies every digital image, one example being the digital “Faceprint” used within Facial Recognition Technologies. The Faceprint is a unique coded identifier - similar to a fingerprint - that is used by computer software to identify individual faces within digital images that may be uploaded to Facebook, stored on computers, or captured on surveillance cameras. This aspect shall be explored further in the chapter on Surveillance and Auto-biography, with particular focus on my Selfie (in green) data-portrait which presents my Faceprint as its subject. This type of codified computer layer exists not only behind images, but also beneath every piece of information generated on computers, and indeed posted online (see Data as Currency). Each exists concurrently on one level as information interpretable by

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14 Ibid. 45
humans, and on another level, as a sequence of categorical data interpretable by computer software.

Manovich goes on to explain how, inevitably, “The computer layer and the cultural layer influence each other. To use another concept from new media, they are being composited together. The result of this composite is a new computer culture – a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways in which humans modelled the world and the computers’ own means of representing it.”  

In his appraisal of an ensuing interdependency, Manovich, like Flusser, proposes that humans and computers assimilate towards a shared system of logic, as one begins to influence the other and vice versa.

Because new media is created on computers, distributed via computers, and stored and archived on computers, the logic of a computer can be expected to significantly influence the traditional cultural logic of media; that is, we may expect that the computer layer will affect the cultural layer. The ways in which the computer models the world, represents data, and allows us to operate on it; the key operations behind all computer programs (such as search, match, sort and filter).....in short, what can be called the computer's ontology, epistemology, and pragmatics - influence the cultural layer of new media, it's organisation, it's emerging genres, its contents.

Manovich suggests that the logic of the computer inevitably influences the logic of the social experience of its users, and indeed culture at large, resulting in new genres (such as the selfie, as we shall observe in later chapters). His observations

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16 Manovich, *The language of new media*. 46
17 Ibid. 46
of new media were made in 2000, when the internet was in full swing but smart phones and social media had not yet taken firm hold of cultural operations. However 14 years on, his thesis is only strengthened when observed in the context of participatory culture, whose perpetuation would not be possible without the software interfaces that enable complex categorisation, searching, suggestive and predictive functions. The more humans become reliant on digital devices as a mode of self-expression, the more their behaviour and social relationships are forced to adapt to the logic of computer software programming. Just as factory workers were forced to adapt their behaviour to fit the machines they operated during the industrial revolution (becoming skilled at one small operation within the entire production process), the users of social media (its content creators – a new “labour” force) adapt to the computer database fields, software and algorithmic processes that serve these platforms.

Computer logic becomes part of the everyday experience, subsequently weaving its way into the cultural fabric of society. Some examples of this increasingly rationalised behaviour include; the short character limits of social media platforms leading to increased usage of acronyms in daily life, such as WTF, LOL, OMFG and YOLO; the increased use of hashtags applied to status posts in order to maximise reach, likes, friends and followers (and their subsequent appropriation in advertising and media); the use of a pre-defined set of emoticons to convey states of emotion; increasing camera storage capacities encouraging a proliferation of “studies” and “out-takes” in the quest to achieve the best image; and as we shall observe in the chapter on The Selfie as a Mask, the emergence of standardised poses and gestures within self-portraits.

Technology’s limitations end up shaping the conventional model of images posted online. For example, with selfie images, “The camera can only be held so
far away from the face by the human arm, and when a mirror is used proximity is still needed to make sense of the subject’s identity.” This places a limitation on the possible style and composition of selfies, and subsequently a new convention of self-portraiture begins to emerge. Similarly, the square format of Instagram images and its limited palette of filters begin to shape the approach to the photograph, from the moment of its taking: “All photos have the same square format 612 x 612 pixels. Users apply Instagram filters to a large proportion of photos that give them an overall defined and standardised appearance.” As traditional and new media merge, these standardised conventions from the computer layer eventually find their way back into popular culture, as they begin to be appropriated in mass-media images, as we shall see in the chapter You, the brand.

These new standardised practices oscillate between the hidden computer layer, into the culture of social relations, and back again; each time mediated across the controlled, networked interface separating these interdependent worlds – the screen.”We may debate whether our society is a society of the spectacle or simulation, but it is undoubtedly a society of the screen.” As Lev Manovich highlights of today’s digitally connected consumer societies, contemporary experience is increasingly mediated through the screen - the interface or “skin” that separates the computer layer from the culture layer. This skin is permeable, as we have seen, and allows the transmission of culture onto the digital world, and digital influence onto human behaviour.


19 Tifentale, “The Selfie: Making sense of the “Masturbation of Self-Image” and the “Virtual Mini-Me””.

20 Manovich, The language of new media. 94
Within the cultural layer, social media’s screen and software interface also enables the transmission of information between individual users, who can share information with one another from separate locations. However, this interface also provides a distancing effect, which according to Amelia Jones, provides its users “a gap between subject/viewer and the object/other (...). [T]his distancing allows the subject to treat the Other as object; in short it makes objectification possible.”21 The interface acts as a form of mediation - a window and a barrier - between author and reader, performer and audience, subject and beholder, and computer and cultural layers. This separation facilitates an emerging behavioural shift which shall be explored in later chapters; in the role of observer, the distancing effect of the interface allows the viewer to objectify the subject, and in the position of observed, it encourages an objectification of the self. Baudrillard notes “The screen defines the process through which we perform ourselves simultaneously as subjects and objects of looking.”22

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22 Ibid. 49
DATA AS CURRENCY

A form of objectification also occurs on social media through the transcoding of personal information into data, as it crosses from the cultural layer onto the computer layer; a process which also transforms it into a social and economical commodity. Manovich points out data’s burgeoning status within contemporary societies, stating, “A database, originally a computer technology to organise and access data, is becoming a new cultural form in its own right,”23 as its logic begins to influence mass-culture.

As the post-industrial, data-driven, information economy expands to become a dominant sector within capitalist democracies, the database (or rather the information it contains) is among the most valuable of commodities24, according to Douglas Rushkoff. The interests, political biases, shopping habits, and networks of individuals – have become a form of currency both to participants of social media, and to advertisers and the corporations who employ them, who seek advanced ways to connect to new audiences. The Web 2.0 has enabled this transformation, by providing unprecedented access to vast amounts of user-disseminated information and advanced means to capture, sort and categorise it. Today’s new participatory consumers provide the owners of these platforms with data, giving away their personal information in exchange for entertainment, convenience, and connectedness.

In 2000, Manovich described the internet as “one huge distributed media database” and an “overabundance of information of all kinds.”25 Today, with

23 Manovich, The language of new media. 47
24 Value is no longer based purely on profits, but on the number of likes brands can generate. A recent Oreo Cookies online campaign gained over 1 million likes. This information informs marketers of the preferences of over 1 million people who actively engaging with the product. Douglas Rushkoff, “Generation Like,” in Frontline (PBS: Public Broadcasting Service, 2014).
25 Manovich, The language of new media. 35
social media, its vast two-way information system relies on the categorisation of user-generated information into searchable segments to render its content even further “subject to algorithmic manipulation.”\(^{26}\) Kenneth C. Werbin notes of the ensuing commodification of personal identity, “The self-representational content I produce is transformed into highly parsed and indexed bits of data that are open to endless recursive trajectories of circulation, recombination, and commodification across indefinite sites and platforms.”\(^{27}\) Werbin’s observation highlights that once personal information (self-expression) is submitted into the computer layer to become data (a collection of keywords and phrases), it is subject to any manner of manipulation by potentially unlimited entities.

The database and its contents are the defining aspect of social media and enable personalised content delivery as well as exorbitant stock market evaluations (Facebook acquired Instagram - a company which sells nothing, and generates no revenue from advertising or subscription fees - for $1bn in 2012, and Whatsapp two years later for $16bn).\(^{28}\) The corporations who own this data and the networks upon which it flows effectively control the world’s new information economy.\(^{29}\) Every parcel of information posted online by those who engage with interconnected Web 2.0 platforms, including status updates, comments, likes, clicks, check-ins, Google searches, photos, emails, and messages are deposited in huge databanks. Author Charles Duhigg notes the “huge commercial push to collect as much data as possible,”\(^{30}\) referring to data’s elevated status in the

\(^{26}\) Ibid. 27


\(^{30}\) Rushkoff, “Generation Like.”
twenty first century as a prized commodity. Data is clearly the fuel behind an emerging and powerful economy. The very existence of the concept of data-mining only reiterates its commodifiable status as a market resource. In order to keep consumers engaging with social media (and producing its commodity), personal information is captured, categorised, and served back to users as predictive suggestions and recommended content. New, shiny, and seductive Web 2.0 enabled products such as Apple’s iPhone are continually developed, further encouraging users’ participation and dependence.

However these systems and devices increasingly coerce users to conform to the logic of the database as they engage in their cultural production. Database structures define the way participants generate and consume content on social media platforms, transforming traditional narrative structure.

As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world.31

Manovich describes how computer media forces these two opposing information structures to co-exist. Social media only amplifies this unlikely juxtaposition, with automatically personalised content presented to users under the guises of narrative and choice.

31 Manovich, *The language of new media*. 225
Cultural logic urges humans to make sense of information in the linear format of narrative, described by Manovich as "a series of connected events caused or experienced by actors."

Social media presents information to users in a linear way. However, the events and actors appearing in the feeds of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter are served to users from unconnected, non-hierarchical databases, according to algorithmic deductions. Participants are urged to accept this aggregation of information in the same way they would traditional narrative-based media such as news, film or literature. Comprehension of information must therefore be modified, as users become accustomed to a linear, chronological news feed of unconnected information. Within this new informational structure, each individual who shares their story becomes an actor in the incessant, aggregated, narrative. Algorithmic deductions (driven by corporate incentives) ensure those that engage more and generate more likes, become a bigger part of the story.

It makes sense, then, that the "heroes" of this new data-driven narrative become the actors who speak the loudest and attract the most praise.

Manovich suggests that the choice offered by such interactive, aggregated, narratives is intended to provide a unique experience for each user. However, he admits the limitations of such systems, stating that "in a post-industrial society, every citizen can construct her own custom lifestyle and 'select' her ideology from a large (but not infinite) number of choices."

With Web 2.0, these choices are not infinite, and are often predetermined. On social media platforms, a user may be presented with customised content, but the computer algorithms may only present those options it deems relevant to that user via its vast network of

32 Ibid. 227
34 Manovich, The language of new media. 42

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capital-driven, algorithmic calculations. The categorised experience of computer logic allows little room for the chance encounter or for the individual whose opinions and preferences may reside outside standardised conventions. As such social media does not necessary influence behaviour; rather it replicates it, and amplifies it. With both traditional and digital media mediated through database logic, social media's cycle of seduction, participation, selection and performance serves to render its users *more of what they already are*.

My recent work, *Thought Piece* (Fig. 1), examines *who I am* on social media, in my data-ised, commodified form. The sculptural installation consists of a series of neon sculptures in a darkened gallery space, reading “*What’s on your mind?*,” “*How are you feeling?*” and so on. These seemingly innocuous greetings are appropriated from Facebook status prompts (originally designed to seduce users into submitting their personal information). Removed from their online context, and facing toward the viewer en masse in imposing, cold, blue neon, the signs present a more pressing inquiry. Hundreds of concrete bricks, installed as a deconstructed wall around the base of the signs, are each inscribed with personal messages such as “*I will love you always*,” “*Is selling my art the same as selling my soul?*,” “*I want to be fucked*,” and “*Whatever*” (Fig. 2). These objects represent a physical objectification of my thoughts; ranging from intimate (sourced from private journals) to public (sourced from my Facebook archive). My public statements embody an idealised self-representation that presumably fits within the collective narrative of my customised news feed. My personal thoughts on the other hand, are those which I would have revealed only to myself, and could be seen as more truthful self-representation. The work merges both my public and private self, in the form of a deconstructed wall of emotional detritus.
Figure 1  Kristin McIver, Thought Piece, 2013, Neon, steel, concrete, vinyl, motion sensors, neurons, electrodes (Photograph: Tim Gresham)

Figure 2  Kristin McIver, Thought Piece, 2013, Neon, steel, concrete, vinyl, motion sensors, neurons, electrodes (Photograph: Tim Gresham)
In *Thought Piece*, all of my thoughts; ranging from intimate and insightful to throw-away reflections of mass-culture; are presented as objectified representations of self, transcoded into another form. Thought Piece highlights the operation described by Werbin earlier, of the potential for appropriation of personal information into endless new forms once it has been parsed into data. Each expression, when originally authored, was intended to present a particular self-expression to the public/private stage. However, when presented in this way the personal value of each thought is diminished. Any idealised representation is deconstructed, through the sheer number of object-thoughts presented in the installation. This mass of non-hierarchical objects reveals everything, and nothing, about my personal identity.

*Thought Piece* demonstrates how the identity of an individual *as a whole* is irrelevant to the computer algorithms (and their proprietors), who collect data from social media platforms such as Facebook to identify specific demographic groups. Instead, as observed earlier, software algorithms are designed to isolate only those keywords and phrases from a vast sea of data, which are relevant to the needs of the market. *Thought Piece* presents an objectified representation of my personality which, as implied by Werbin earlier, can now be broken down and subjected to endless appropriation, commodification and surveillance.
SURVEILLANCE AND AUTO-BIOGRAPHY

As an individual crafts their self-representation on the cultural layer of social media, a secondary representation is being composited automatically behind the screen on the computer layer. As Werbin points out, “The act of generating data can be seen as inseparable from being generated as data. Equally, the act of producing content is inseparable from being produced as content. Indeed, in the arrangements of auto-biography, to express is to be expressed, just as to self-represent is to be self-presented.”

This aggregation of a social media user’s information leads to the automated construction of a second, digital profile; a process Werbin defines as “auto-biography.” As introduced earlier, one aspect of this ephemeral background data collection which can be found on social media includes the involuntary biometric surveillance of Facial Recognition Technology. The ‘Faceprint’ generated by this technology is a data string, unique to each individual, contained within the computer layer of any image containing a face that is uploaded and ‘tagged’ on Facebook. Its code demarks identifiers such as the distance between facial features, weight of the brow and so on. This form of identification functions with similar efficiency to a fingerprint; software algorithms can identify an individual on Facebook with over 97% accuracy, close to that of human capacity. This encoded identifier, contained within the computer layer of digital portrait photographs, is a form of auto-biography; both authored and deciphered by computer algorithms.

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36 Ibid. 5
38 Chayka, "Somebody’s Watching."
Figure 3 Kristin McIver, Selfie (in green), 2013, Wildflowers, timber, soil, weeds, butterflies, bees, fireflies, sound, world wide web. (Photograph: Jeong-Bae Lee)

Figure 4 Kristin McIver, Thought Piece (detail), 2013, Wildflowers, timber, soil, weeds, butterflies, bees, fireflies, sound, world wide web
My temporary, site specific work *Selfie (in green)* (Fig. 3), completed whilst in residency at Omi International Arts Centre in New York, used my own Faceprint data as a formula to sequence the elements within the artwork. It was an auto-biographical portrait, and a futile attempt to regain authorship over my identity. It was the first of a series of works that I plan to implement using various media including painting, music and performance.

<table>
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<th>UNIQUE FACEPRINT DATA STRING:</th>
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<tr>
<td>3.668653011322 3.3560824394226 1.669526219368 85</td>
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<table>
<thead>
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<th>PLANTING SEQUENCE:</th>
<th></th>
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<tr>
<td>1 = Rough Blazingstar</td>
<td>6 = Orange Coneflower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = Silky Aster</td>
<td>7 = Seedbox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = Fireweed</td>
<td>8 = Calico aster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = Mist Flower</td>
<td>9 = wild sweet William</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = Prairie coreopsis</td>
<td>0 = False Dragonhead</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5* Formula for sequencing of planting for Selfie (in green)

*Selfie (in green)* used living media to represent my Faceprint data string in physical form. At OMI, my Faceprint was represented in physical form as a site-specific installation using wildflowers sourced from the local area. Ten species of wildflower seedlings were assigned to correspond with the 10 digit data spectrum within my Faceprint (Fig. 5). The categorised seedlings were sewn into the soil of the raised garden installation, using my Faceprint data as a formula to sequence the order of the plants (Fig. 4). The work grew into a hybrid of nature and data; a living flowerbed underpinned by an auto-biographical data sequence. The abstract, encoded flowerbed, while unrecognisable to the human eye as a portrait, or indeed as data, could potentially be de-coded by a
computer to reveal its digital origins. The work existed for one year as a physical manifestation of my Faceprint data; a merging of computer and cultural layers.

Accompanying the flower garden was a soundtrack, which also used my Faceprint data as a formula to sequence the sounds within the track. Thirty-six ambient sound bites of various length (including bird calls, crickets, thunder, rain etc) were sampled from the field and forest surrounding the artwork during my residency. The ambient soundtrack played on a sequenced loop via speakers hidden underneath the flowerbed, creating a heightened (yet somewhat unnatural) sense of the environment. At points, the subtle sound of amplified bird calls – perhaps not immediately perceptible to the viewer - would make way to the sequenced sound of a thunder clap (while blue sky remained). At times, the work interacted with its surrounding environment, with real-life birds responding to the call of their digitised counterparts within the soundtrack. At such moments, reality and artifice, computer and cultural layers, became further ambiguous.

*Selfie* (*in green*) existed as a post-internet artwork that could be seen as an attempt at liberation from the constraints of computer logic; traversing from the cultural layer, to the computer layer, and back again. While it may have appeared to the viewer at first glance as simply a garden, it possessed the five properties which, according to Manovich, constitute a new media object:

1. Numerical representation (the underlying data string)

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2. Modularity (the division of the interface into separate parts; flowers, soil, garden bed)
3. Automation (the planting formula could be implemented by a human or machine)
4. Variability (the data could be appropriated and replicated using different media)
5. Transcoding (the existence of computer and cultural layer)

Artie Vierkant’s *Image Objects* series (Fig. 6) involves a similar process of mediation, upon mediation, upon mediation. His works transcode digital image files into sculptures, the photographic documentation of which form the basis for future works that appear online in digital form. These digital representations are in turn transformed into physical sculptures, and the process continues. *Selfie (in green)* and *Image Objects* interrupt any clear distinction between computer and cultural layer. They highlight the multifarious nature of online representation, and the interdependence - even interchangeability - of the cultural and computer layers.

*Selfie (in green)* functions in a similar manner to the work of Sol Lewitt, in particular *Lines in Four Directions in Flowers* (Fig. 7). The artwork itself exists as a specific set of instructions, to be executed (or not) into a physical installation – in this case a flower garden. Lewitt’s instructions leave room for the installers to select the final varieties and colours of flowers that will constitute the final artwork. Lewitt spoke of the artists’ idea as simply “the machine which makes the work,”\(^40\) the human operator executes the artist’s instructions in the manner of computer logic, according to a pre-determined formula.

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Figure 6 Artie Vierkant, Image Objects, 2011, (Photograph: Artie Vierkant)
Figure 7 Sol Lewitt, Lines in Four Directions in Flowers, 1981, Flower plantings, hedges, gravel paths (Photograph: Philadelphia Museum of Art)
Figure 8 Kristin McIver, Selfie (in green), 2013, Wildflowers, timber, soil, weeds, butterflies, bees, fireflies, sound, world wide web. (Photograph: Nicole Hayes)

Figure 9 Song Dong, Doing Nothing, 2012 (Photograph: Art In America)
Lewitt’s flower garden is highly maintained to retain the integrity of the original instructions. *Selfie (in green)* however, was left to the devices of nature (Fig. 8). After the initial formulaic planting process, my work continued to grow into an ever changing artwork of its own volition. In this way, *Selfie (in green)* behaved more like Song Dong’s *Doing Nothing* garden, (Fig. 9) which allowed nature to dictate how the garden thrived (or declined) during its time installed at Documenta 13 in Kassel. Left untended in the field, *Selfie (in green)* became subject to the natural elements and the artist no longer retained control over its success or failure (Figure 5). The flowers bloomed and receded with the passing seasons, subject to intervention from weeds, bugs, disease, and weather events. Anything that entered the flowerbed, living or otherwise, became subsumed by the artwork (the listed media being *Wildflowers, timber, soil, weeds, butterflies, bees, fireflies, sound, world wide web*).

*Selfie (in green)*’s surrender to nature demonstrates what Vierkant describes of post-internet culture and its “lack of representational fixity;”

41 due to its potential to change over time, as well as its potential to extend to different media. He describes,

> Nothing is in a fixed state: i.e., everything is anything else, whether because any object is capable of becoming another type of object or because an object already exists in flux between multiple instantiations.42

This lack of a single, fixed mode of representation is a symptom of Web 2.0, and is becoming applicable to self-design, as much as to any form of online representation.

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41 Vierkant, "The Image Object Post-Internet".
42 Ibid.
SOCIAL MEDIA’S PANOPTIC GAZE

The Web 2.0’s advanced system of networks, databases and interfaces enables an observational capacity that influences the representational behaviour of its participants; in a similar manner to the panopticon. The architectural surveillance structure devised by Jeremy Bentham, features a periphery, annular building divided into cells, around a central tower with darkened windows. Every cell is visible at all times from the tower, meaning that the cell’s inhabitants are aware that at any time they may be observed; an economy of power that posits one observer for many observed. Inmates exist in “small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible.” As Michel Foucault observes, this knowledge of potential visibility “induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility,” pointing out that within this design “surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in action.”44

The panopticon is designed to rehabilitate its subjects, and to *modify their behaviour*.

Social media functions similarly for its participants, who are aware of the omnipresence of entities who may wish to observe, analyse, or aggregate their data; be that for entertainment, capitalisation or security. Social media users exist under a permanent state of potential observation, which *modifies their behaviour* in the same manner. The interface that separates the user from the software that observes him ensures that, like a prisoner in a panopticon, “He is seen, but does not see.” At all times, any participant can be observed, and the knowledge that this is so induces a state of an *ever-performing self*. Foucault observed of the panopticon,

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44 Ibid. 200
45 Ibid. 200
He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power, he makes them play spontaneously upon himself (...) he becomes the principle in his own subjection.46

The same is true for the subjects of participatory culture. The sheer quantity of data generated by social media’s billions of users, means that there is no way humans could ever observe every individual at all times. However participants are aware that with the interconnectedness of Web 2.0 systems, every piece of information recorded online is observable by an indeterminate number of viewers. These could include other users (audiences known and unknown), corporations, and governments (as exposed with the leaked NSA documents.)47

Any type of mass surveillance such as this induces an efficient “power of mind over mind;”48 influencing behaviour without the need for enforcement. On the highly visible stage of participatory culture’s information economy, communication moves towards conscious performance. Kenneth C. Werbin highlights how “commodified forms of biographies and auto-biography participate in the unsettling of ‘freedom of expression.’”49 He cites Raymond Wacks’ observation on privacy in Web 2.0 arrangements, that “in digital culture the awareness that one might be watched at anytime and anywhere challenges peoples’ subjective and emotional autonomy, altering what they are (or not)

46 Ibid. 202-203
48 Foucault, Discipline and punish : the birth of the prison. 206
willing to say."\textsuperscript{50} Social media, while providing the tools to communicate anything to anyone at any time, actually induces in its participants a modification (or suppression) of exactly what they may feel confident to express upon its networks.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. 10
MEDIATED IDEOLOGIES

In earlier chapters we have observed the influence of computer logic on modes of self-expression, as the computer layer affects the cultural layer and vice versa. This chapter examines the parallel effects of traditional media and new media, and how the former proposes the model for an archetypal self-representation. Vilém Flusser observes of new media photographs, that “technical images absorb the whole of history and form a collective memory going endlessly round in circles.” By this he suggests that photographs do not introduce traditional images back into life, rather they “replace them with reproductions,” causing a displacement of the image; towards a pictorial representation of mass culture that refers not to real life, or to history, but to itself. As we have observed, the collective experience of participatory culture only amplifies what Flusser described. Omar Kholeif points out that in participatory culture, “Authorship is synonymous with viewership.” In the act of consuming and producing content on social media, it is logical that the notion of internal self becomes increasingly intertwined with the other.

Slavoj Zizek highlights that for individuals living in consumer society, “our predominant, spontaneous idea of identification ...(is) that of imitating role models, ideals, image makers.” Now that celebrity role models and image-makers appear in the same media space as consumer image makers, imitation becomes almost inevitable. Today’s consumers, when performing the self on the stage of networked, mediated platforms, become what Boris Groys describes as

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51 Flusser, Towards a philosophy of photography. 19-20
52 Omar Kholeif, “You Are Here - Art After the Internet,” ed. Stephanie Bailey (United Kingdom: Cornerhouse, Space, 2014). 37
“prisoners of total design;” 54 conscious at all time of persistent observation, and subject at all times to advertised ideals. He states, “The ultimate problem of design concerns not how I design the world outside, but how I design myself – or, rather, how do I deal with the way the world designs me.” 55 The world that models today’s citizens, is one that serves them a constant stream of idealised stereotypes; through the media, advertising, television, film and now streamed through the Instagram accounts of high profile celebrities. These readily accessible ideals form the basis upon which today’s consumers model their appearance and behaviour.

This process of simulative representation is nothing new, and was highlighted by the appropriation artists of the 1970s such as Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman. These artists have suggested through their work that there exists not one self, but many possible representations of self, often modelled on fictional ideals. Through their photographic works, Prince and Sherman highlighted the complexities of identity in the mediated consumer societies of the 70s and 80s. Zizek’s study of Prince’s work observes how it addresses the complications of media stereotypes, and their role in the formation both of individual identity, and in the construction of the idealised image of America. He suggests the active participants of consumer culture are interpellated 56 by such established ideals, by recognising themselves as the subject whom the messages address.


55 Ibid.

In reference to Prince’s *Cowboy* series (Fig. 10), Zizek questions whether the concept of the adventurous cowboy pictured in the original, famous Marlborough advertisement simply depicts an ideal which already exists, or whether this advertisement actually assists in the formation of that ideal:

The picture of the bronzed cowboy, the wide prairie plains, and so on - all this "connotes", of course, a certain image of America (the land of hard, honest people, of limitless horizons...) but the effect of 'quilting' occurs only when a certain inversion takes place; it does not occur until 'real' Americans start to identify themselves (in their ideological self-experience) with the image created by the Marlboro advertisement - until America itself is experienced as 'Marlboro country.57

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57 Zizek, *The sublime object of ideology*. 106
Richard Prince’s appropriated photographs, removed from their original context as an advertisement, demonstrate the power of the media in constructing ideals. For consumers, a process of identification occurs between the viewer and the image presented in the advertisement. Would-be consumers recognise themselves – or how they would like to see themselves - in the portrayal of idealised stereotypes. The ideals are further perpetuated by (or perhaps originated from) the western films that inundated Hollywood cinemas in the middle of the twentieth century. Such mediated ideals evolved as a result of technology driven mass-dissemination of information, via the printing press, photography, cinema, television, advertising; and now social media. With this most recent evolution, ‘real’ people are also provided a platform on which to re-enact these stereotypes.

Cindy Sherman’s 1970s series *Untitled Film Stills* (Fig. 11) depict media engendered stereotypes in the style of promotional film stills. Her heroine subjects represent archetypal figures such as the femme fatale, the damsel in distress, the young, starry-eyed actress arriving in New York City. Sherman’s subjects present Baudrillard’s “third order of simulation,”58 that is, the simulacrum precedes the original. “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map which precedes the territory.”59 In each *Film Still*, Sherman’s subject is pure simulacrum; a copy with no discernible, ‘real’ original, other than a fictionalised character.

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59 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*. 1
But we all know these characters. This is because Hollywood constructs certain archetypes, the public begins to embody them through their clothing, gestures and behaviour, and in doing so make them real; the simulacrum precedes the original. Amelia Jones points out that “postmodernism is defined as the loss of the referent (signified, original) but also insists that this includes the loss of the body as such.”\textsuperscript{60} By this she means, as is demonstrated by Sherman who presents herself in the role of these archetypes, the “individual” subject becomes arbitrary. The body is simply a canvas on which to present these representations. These are not self-portraits. They are a signifier without a determined signified.

\textsuperscript{60} Jones, \textit{Self/image : technology, representation, and the contemporary subject / Amelia Jones.}
It is precisely this type of cliché that begins to find its way onto the profiles of individuals on social media. As the new authors of mediated consumer culture, social media users not only recognise such archetypes, they begin to embody such ideals through their online representations; particularly with selfies.

Within the collective narrative of social media, today's ideals refer increasingly to the images of celebrity role models in their "personal lives" as performed on Twitter and Instagram, rather than to their fictionalised representations in film, advertising and glossy magazines. Elizabeth Losh highlights the influence of celebrity culture on selfie images within mass-culture,

From princes to popes, even august authority figures with long historical lineages have appeared in selfies, although youthful celebrities active on social media – such as Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, Kim Kardashian and James Franco – clearly have shaped many of the conventions of the genre and the selfies of these high profile performers have inspired particular forms of imitation, appropriated satire as well.61

Many selfie poses appear similar to the gestures of such celebrities, who slip into their most flattering *practiced pose* whenever a camera appears, as part of their job. Craig Owens highlights the mechanism behind the pose, as a means to "present oneself to the gaze of the other as if it were already frozen, immobilised – that is, already a picture."62 In the act of taking a Selfie (aided by the front-facing camera), the subject sees the picture at very same the moment of their

61 Losh, "Beyond Biometrics: Feminist Media Theory Looks at Selfiecity”.
taking it, which explains why we might observe more self-conscious poses occurring through this medium.

As the self-representations of celebrities to which mass culture aspires become more accessible, they also appear more attainable, and therefore easier to replicate. Jean Baudrillard noted of mediated experience; that the media “looks at you, you look at yourself in it, it is a mirror.” With today’s media and networked technology combined on a single, shared platform, Baudrillard’s mirroring effect is greatly increased.

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63 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*. 76
YOU, THE BRAND

Within democratised, globalised information economies, brands increasingly embed themselves within the realm of personal experience. The popularity of social media is forcing marketers to rethink their strategies away from traditional media, towards the devices of participatory culture. Douglas Rushkoff notes that today, “your consumer is your marketer,” becoming both subject and object in the production strategy.

A campaign by YouTube in 2014 (Fig. 12) covered entire trains, bus stops and billboards throughout New York City in advertisements depicting regular goofy teenagers, such as one with home-cooking ‘star’ Rosanna Pansino, overlayed with taglines such as “YOU make it sweet to be yourself.” Each ad demonstrated how a ‘real’ person like Pansino was able to gain over 1.4 million YouTube subscribers simply being herself. The campaign implied to audiences that by being “you” (on Youtube), it is possible to become a celebrity. The word “You”, extracted from the company’s name, became the campaign’s primary marketing

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64 Rushkoff, "Generation Like."
65 “YouTube to run TV ads promoting video creators in big 2014 push,” Tim Peterson, Advertising Age, 3rd April, 2014.
device. Observing the language of this advertisement begs the question - whom exactly does this advertisement address? Does “you” refer to the subject of the campaign (Pansino)? Or does it address the passive viewers on the subway who are interpellated by this message, recognising that perhaps they too could be famous, and feature in their own YouTube channel and advertisement. The creators of this campaign have achieved the seemingly preposterous - they are selling “you” back to you.

Likewise, the *I am Nikon* campaign of 2010 presented “real-life scenarios in which people show who they are with a Nikon camera.” Taglines such as “*I am Cinderella*” would overlay a photograph of a bride preparing for her wedding day, for example. These individualised advertisements were interspersed with others showing photographs of the products themselves, with taglines such as “*I am sexy*”. In this overall campaign the individual is presented as indistinguishable from the product. Other marketing strategies have eschewed the polished aesthetic of professional photo shoots, presenting the low lighting and awkward framing popularised by the selfie - such as GoPro, Axe Deodorant and Bauble Bar. Other brands, realising the capital value in the self, sponsor popular Instagrammers such as Indy Clinton (who has over 50,000 followers), with clothing, products and cash in exchange for product placement. These types of strategies begin to erase the identifiable distinctions between consumer and marketer to create a new convention of ideological representation; where ‘real life’ is the ideal. Campaigns such as these demonstrate how cultural ideologies no longer originate in the aspirational stereotypes of Prince’s day. The ‘Image of America’ now appears to lie in the everyday individual.

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Today, personal identity is a commodity. Its promotion via traditional and social media assists in the proliferation of a society that becomes *more of what it already is*. Within this new cultural system, reality and ideals are interchangeable. With the available technologies at hand, they are also easily replicable. Flusser attributed photographic portraiture’s popularity to “a general desire to be endlessly remembered and endlessly repeatable.”⁶⁸ Now, the networked camera has placed the tools of self-design, public relations, reproduction and distribution into the hands of the masses; in effect democratising celebrity.

Andy Warhol’s commentary of celebrity and its reproducibility through films, performances and celebrity portraits, were a possible precursor to how we could approach (and partially explain) the emerging selfie genre. Arthur C. Danto noted that Warhol’s subjects clamoured to commission a portrait by the artist, as if this would make them “part of the common consciousness of the time.”⁶⁹ Today’s subjects need not commission an artist to validate their existence. Individuals are woven into the fabric of contemporary culture through their participation in social media. Today, empowered by Instagram, everyone can be a celebrity - or *micro*-celebrity as the case may be. Warhol’s famous *15 minutes of fame* proposition could be re-contextualised in the twenty first century, to *every person will be famous to 1500 followers*.

The savvier subjects of participatory culture use the technology to generate their own internet fame, turning their online profiles into personal “brands” with social and economic value.⁷⁰ Karen Nelson-Field notes:

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⁶⁸ Flusser, *Towards a philosophy of photography*. 20
⁷⁰ Teenager Tyler Oakley, who blogs simply about “things he likes”, has a Youtube channel with over 3.5 million subscribers, over 800,000 Facebook followers, 1.3 million Instagram followers.
In the age of social media where consumer brands seek deep consumer engagement, the human race is following suit. We now all behave as brands and the selfie is simply brand advertising. Selfies provide an opportunity to position ourselves (often against our competitors) to gain recognition, support and ultimately interaction from the targeted social circle. This is no different from consumer brand promotion.71

Alice Tifentale agrees, acknowledging that “most of the selfies posted to Instagram can appear to be attempts at self-branding, trying to “sell” the best version of #me.” Social media enables participants to advertise the self, and offer themselves to their audience as brands, like those of their celebrity role models (even if the latter are in fact often publicity devices contrived by marketing companies such as Global Media.73)

As we can see, participatory culture is changing the behaviour not only of individuals, but of celebrities, brands, and their marketing strategies which are erasing distinctions between the ‘real’ and the ‘ideal’. Every comment or image posted online, by celebrities or otherwise, is an attempt to establish the ideal self as a part of the common consciousness. Tifentale describes of the act of taking and sharing a selfie,

He is a “millionaire in the currency of likes” and has numerous sponsorship deals. Rushkoff, “Generation Like.”


72 Tifentale, "The Selfie: Making sense of the “Masturbation of Self-Image” and the “Virtual Mini-Me””.

73 Rushkoff, "Generation Like."
The performance of the selfie is at once a private and individual and communal and public activity. The individual and unique #me becomes part of #us, a virtual community via means of a common platform.74

"Me" and “You” are isolated entities no longer.

74 Tifentale, "The Selfie: Making sense of the “Masturbation of Self-Image” and the “Virtual Mini-Me”".
THE SUBJECT/OBJECT RELATIONSHIP

As we have observed, social media creates a complex relationship between subject and object, as participants write their story into the collective narrative. This relationship is observed in my work, *You and me (and you and me)* (Fig. 13). The sign reads, in bold neon lettering mounted to the wall, the words “YOU AND ME AND YOU AND ME”. The listed medium for the work is Neon, *an indeterminate number of viewers*. The sculpture does not function as an artwork until observed in relation to one or more viewers. In this work, viewer subjectivity and objectivity are called into question (in the same manner as the Youtube campaign, and the author/beholder relationship on social media).

*Figure 13* Kristin McIver, *You and me (and you and me)*, 2014, Neon, an indeterminate number of viewers. (Photograph: Tim Gresham)

Does this statement address a single viewer directly, as both *you* and *me*? A viewer could interpret it as either. Or is it a conversation between the viewer and the artist, or the artist and an anonymous other/s? Or perhaps it is a dialogue
between two or more viewers who observe the work together? Althusser notes our inherent role as the subjects of ideologies through our identification with them, stating “he who is writing these lines and the reader who reads them are themselves subjects, and therefore ideological subjects.”75 *You and me (and you and me)* urges the viewer to question, who exactly is *you*, and who is *me*?

![Figure 14](image)

*Figure 14* Barbara Kruger, Untitled (We are not what we seem), 1988, Photograph and type on paper (Photograph: Skarstedt Gallery)

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75 Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays*. 171
Barbara Kruger poses similar inquiries, by appropriating advertising’s language and imagery to comment on its marketing tactics in works such as *Untitled (We are not what we seem)* (Fig. 14). By employing personal pronouns such as “you”, “I”, “we”, “your” or “they,” Kruger addresses the viewer in aggressive, declarative statements. Works such as these apply Louis Althusser’s notion of interpellation, which suggests that individuals are “always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition.”76 The engaged consumer recognises themself as the individual being addressed, or hailed by a given message; in seeing the message they respond, “yes, it really is me.”77 Roland Barthes highlights that this type of personal address is used frequently in advertising, to “make every utterance a direct challenge, not directed at the entire mass of readers, but at each reader in particular.”78 Douglas Ekland observes that Kruger’s use of language, like that of *You and Me (and you and me)*, opens up “a space of critical reflection between the viewer and the work of art.”79 It urges the viewer to question their role within the relationship of artwork/viewer, subject/object, individual/collective and consumer/consumed.

Craig Owens suggests that Kruger’s language works oscillate between the personal and the impersonal, stating that the artist “appears to address me, this body, at this particular point in space,” much like an advertisement. He continues, “But as soon as I identify myself as the addressee of the work, it seems to withdraw from me to speak impersonally, imperiously to the world at

76 Ibid. 172
77 Ibid. 178
large.\textsuperscript{80} Owens suggests that when a viewer recognises themselves as the addressee of a message, such as within these works, their identification shifts between that of the individual and the collective; the personal and the impersonal. He explains that the word \textit{we} for example, can be interpreted both as both \textit{me} and \textit{you}, or \textit{me} and \textit{them}. “Kruger’s ‘we,’ then, forces its audience to shift uncomfortably between inclusion and exclusion.” \textsuperscript{81}

These language works entwine the viewer, the artwork and the artist into a complex social relationship. Placed within the context of participatory culture, \textit{You and me (and you and me)} intimates the notion of an ever-performing self to an omnipresent invisible audience. The work breaks down the confident roles of self and other, viewer and subject and, like Kruger’s work, the individual and the collective. Amelia Jones suggests that emerging contemporary societies increasingly rely on “an insistence on the interrelatedness of subjects and objects, our inevitable simultaneous existence as subject and object, and our interdependence with our environments;”\textsuperscript{82} a statement that is especially pertinent to the function of participatory culture, as we have observed. This complex relationship is surely a significant catalyst for the emerging forms of representation and imitation addressed in this essay – such as the selfie.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{80} Owens and Bryson, \textit{Beyond recognition : representation, power, and culture}. 193
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid. 193
\textsuperscript{82} Amelia Jones, \textit{Body art/performing the subject}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). 18
\end{footnotesize}
THE SELFIE AS A MASK

The self-portrait of the digital age - the selfie - is emerging as one of the key signifiers of identity on social networks. By 2013 over 57 million images had been tagged as #selfie on Instagram, since the hashtag first appeared in January 2011.\(^{83}\) (my search in October 2014 revealed over 181 million results). The selfie phenomenon is rapidly becoming a part of the cultural fabric, one that is often parodied in popular culture. Some examples include The Chainsmoker’s music video #Selfie,\(^{84}\) which makes fun of youth’s preoccupation with photographing themselves, and ABC’s Selfie series, which uses the central character’s obsessive selfie-taking as a device to reveal her character to the audience.\(^{85}\) The amateur genre of self-portraiture is clearly establishing itself as a popular and enduring mode of self-representation.

But just how accurate a portrayal of an individual’s identity is the selfie portrait? Amelia Jones provides some insight in her analysis of self-portraiture at large. She speaks of multiple interfaces within the photographic image, which separate the subject from the audience: 1) the screen 2) the photograph itself, and 3) the performative self; the pose or gesture which shields the inner subject from direct exposure to the gaze of the beholder. Jones describes of this third interface, ‘Through the pose, then, and this is where the productive tension of self-portraiture resides, the embodied subject is exposed to being also and at the same time a mask or screen, a site of self-projection and identification (themselves dynamics that are embodied). It is through the pose, via the screen, that the subject opens into performativity and becomes animated.’ The pose

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83 “This Is The First Recorded Use Of #Selfie On Instagram,” Jessica Testa, Buzzfeed, November 19, 2013, http://www.buzzfeed.com/jtes/this-is-the-first-recorded-use-of-selfie-on-instagram#2jk6apj.

84 Chainsmokers, "#Selfie (Official Music Video)."

itself becomes a mask which inspires the subject, and protects the self from the other. In the selfies, the pose perhaps acts as a protective mechanism from the highly public stage of social media. As Jones surmises, "Beneath this mask...there is always another mask."  

Jones points out that Sherman, when performing the role of the subject within her *Film Stills*, "is or was those she performs, at least in the moment of posing." Similarly, the creators of selfie images *become* the ideal in that moment, as a way to conceal their *true* identity. Boris Groys affirms that through their embodiment of ideals, the subject loses themselves behind the mask of popular culture, explaining how "Every kind of design, including self-design – is primarily regarded by the spectator not as a way to reveal things, but to hide them."  

The combined cultural conditions described in this essay of advancing technologies, adaptation to computer logic, persistent observation, capitalisation, and self-reference, create a situation where the designed self represents less of an individual and more of an ideal. In Groys’ words,

> Design has been interpreted repeatedly as an epiphany of the omnipresent market, of exchange value, of fetishism and the commodity, of the society of the spectacle – as the creation of a seductive surface behind which things themselves not only become invisible, but disappear entirely.

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86 Jones, *Self/image: technology, representation, and the contemporary subject / Amelia Jones*. 42
87 Ibid. 50
88 Groys, "Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility".
Selfie images performed in this way operate less as signifiers of self, and more as signifiers of popular culture.

A study in 2013 led by Lev Manovich titled *Selfiecity*\(^{90}\) analysed the demographics, poses and expressions within a sample of 650,600 selfie images shared from Berlin, Moscow, New York, and Sao Paulo. The study, which was limited to gender, body pose, smile and gaze direction, revealed patterns occurring within the different cities. The majority of sitters were revealed as young, with an average age of 23.7, and more often female. Women were found to exhibit more extreme poses, tilting their head 50% more than men, and subjects in Moscow rarely smiled. Mannerisms within the sample selfies appeared to imitate the gestures and poses of fashion magazines, advertisements, films and celebrity Instagram feeds. Although limited, the *Selfiecity* study clearly demonstrated representational conventions emerging within the selfie genre.

*My Typecast* series, presented in the exhibition, appropriates the gestures and poses of thirteen selfie images, sourced from Instagram using hashtag searches such as “#me”, “#selfie”, “#babe” and “#handsome”. The small-scale black and white digital prints, mounted onto timber backing boards, describe stereotypical characteristics common to many selfie images, using only text. They include a selection of female and male subjects, indoor and outdoor settings, *regular selfies* (arms-length self-portraits taken using a front-facing camera), and *mirror selfies* (a sub-genre of the selfie, taken in a mirror with the camera device visible).

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The Typecast works evoke archetypal personas such as the seductress, the sexy intellect, the cute, fun-loving teenager, and the "player"; as proliferated by social media users, and replicated in perpetuity as self-imposed signifiers of popular culture. The series includes works such as; #ComingHome (Fig. 15), a celebrity selfie (Kim Kardashian's famous white swimsuit selfie\textsuperscript{91} which became a “symbol of the whole phenomenon”\textsuperscript{92}), #NeverForget (Fig. 16), a gratuitous selfie taken at the 9/11 memorial, and a series of selfies taken in bedrooms, bathrooms, fitting rooms and car interiors.

These archetypal self-portraits recall the mediated stereotypes of Sherman's Film Stills, adapted for the twenty-first century. The text descriptions read as instructive, cinematic prose, using the language, font and format of the screenplay to imply that they are actions to be performed (or not). One example, #Bombshell (Fig. 17), reads:

\textbf{EXTREME CLOSE-UP, female.}

\textit{Mirror view, the face cropped mid-way. Framed at right by a shock of platinum blond waves.}

\textit{Cheeks bronzed, blushed.}

\textit{Painted lips (Bombshell) opened just a touch.}


\textsuperscript{92} Tifentale, "The Selfie: Making sense of the “Masturbation of Self-Image” and the “Virtual Mini-Me”".
Both hands caress mobile device, index finger on shutter button.

EARLYBIRD FILTER, SOFT BLUR.

Works such as #Bombshell are both observational and instructive, in the manner of a screenplay. The text describes the specific conditions of an ideal; the subject is defined by their cliché gestures, pose, expression, lighting and filters.

Figure 15 Kristin McIver, #ComingHome, 2014, Digital print on archival paper, timber, acrylic. (Photograph: Tim Gresham)
Figure 16 Kristin McIver, #NeverForget, 2014, Digital print on archival paper, timber, acrylic. (Photograph: Tim Gresham)

Figure 17 Kristin McIver, #Bombshell, 2014, Digital print on archival paper, timber, acrylic. (Photograph: Tim Gresham)
But this is an ideal situated in real life – with the staging devices and
demarcations of class demographics clearly visible. These selfie images function
in the manner of ideological identification; as Althusser describes, “men
represent their real conditions to themselves in an imaginary form.”\(^93\) As
described by Elizabeth Losh of the samples in the *Selfiecity* study, “in the
peripheral space around each subject’s head we might see an unmade bed, a
display wall of cosmetics, a luxury car, a Starbucks coffee drink, a sign indicating
a specific geographical location, a well-known landmark or a bathroom stall,”\(^94\)
indicating the genre’s incidental merging of real-life circumstances, with media
instilled ideals. Despite efforts to present an ideal existence, it is difficult for
sitters to hide the inherent realism of these imitations (aside from what can be
cropped out of the square format photograph). For example, with a mirror selfie
the camera is inevitably visible, which as Losh explains, “when the equipment
that captures the digital file is shown simultaneously to the viewer, the reveal
draws attention to the ethics of disclosure that admit the moment is staged”\(^95\) -
unlike traditional mediated ideals, which attempted to maintain the illusion.

In the back of each of the *Typecast* works is a small, face-sized mirror, visible
when the artwork is installed in profile to the wall. When an inquisitive viewer
discovers the mirror, they often engage with the work; taking a mirror selfie with
their networked camera and often posting their mirror selfie back onto
Instagram. Importantly, the work contains no prompt to perform this action; the
mirror’s presence seems enough to evoke this response in the viewer, indicating
an inherent desire to document the self.

\(^{93}\) Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays*.163

\(^{94}\) Losh, "Beyond Biometrics: Feminist Media Theory Looks at Selfiecity".

\(^{95}\) Ibid.
Figure 18 Kristin McIver, Typecast series (installation view from front), 2014. (Photograph: Tim Gresham)

Figure 19 Kristin McIver, Typecast series (installation view from back), 2014. (Photograph: Tim Gresham)
This cycle of multiple mediations between digital and physical experience recalls Artie Vierkant’s *Object Image* series, described earlier. With *Typecast*, the artwork’s selfie subject originates on Instagram, is transposed into text, assumes physical form in a gallery space, prompts a performative response from a new subject, which then appears back on Instagram in the form of a selfie.

The *Typecast* works (along with the Selfie images they assume as their subject) support Groys’ theory, whereby the human subject inhabits the mask of the ideal. The standardised gestures performed in the photograph conceal personal faults behind a standardised ideal of beauty. In selfies and indeed the *Typecast* works the individual subject is arbitrary (as with the *Film Stills*); any person could inhabit this mask.

Michael Fried examines the self-portraits of Gustave Courbet, which, like the *Film Stills*, exhibit similar characteristics to the selfie. Courbet painted himself in various constructed representations, not in the romantic style, but with the deliberate reveal of the painting’s "staged" elements – simulations that would not be possible in nature. For example, Fried notes that in *The Sculptor*, the thin twig supporting the subject’s heavyset arm, the unnaturally twisted torso, the awkward, curtseyed nature of his pose; render the portrait as clearly fabricated - much as the selfie appears *over-fabricated*, unable to hide its realism despite efforts toward perfection. Courbet’s highly designed self-inventions represent, as Fried posits, “his own embodiedness.” He explains that Courbet’s self-representations in works such as *The Desperate Man, Man Mad with Fear* and *The Wounded Man*, do not portray a character or personality, rather Courbet uses his own body as subject to highlight the difference between himself, and the

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96 Vierkant, "The Image Object Post-Internet".
representation of himself. Self-representation is fluid, permeable and interchangeable.

This mode of representational interchangeability is what also makes the selfie so complex. Rather than conveying distinct personalities, selfies present human bodies as performative subjects embodying various guises. But, unlike the trained artist who employs established, idealised representational conventions to convey a personality, the creator of the selfie is largely untrained, and so adopts the approved representational gestures of those they seek to imitate.

**SELFIE-EVALUATION**

Alise Tifentale proposes a reason for this self-design and selfie-obsession, noting,

> Scholars so far have proposed that the selfie among all else can function as a means of self expression, a construction of a positive image, a tool of self promotion, a cry for attention and love, a way to express belonging to a certain community (even if it is as vague as ‘all the young and beautiful ones’).  

The technological and economical conditions that have enabled participatory culture to prosper also require the constant evaluation (and self-evaluation) of participants. It is now possible to establish a numerical, relational value between individuals; in fact as Douglas Rushkoff notes, “Likes, follows, friends, retweets are the social currency of this generation.” Psychologist Andrea Letamendi

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98 Tifentale, “The Selfie: Making sense of the “Masturbation of Self-Image” and the “Virtual Mini-Me.””

99 Rushkoff, "Generation Like."
argues that evaluation of self through the eyes of others is nothing new; the psychological concept of the looking glass self suggests that,

We develop our sense of self based on the perceptions of those we interact with (...) Now that we can interact with hundreds — no, thousands — of people simultaneously, we've strengthened the impact that others have on our self-value.100

Social media networks are an ideal platform on which to perform this social evaluation. But it also imposes pressure to present the perfect image to the audience. A recent study revealed that Instagram photographs with faces attract 38% more likes and 32% more comments than those without.101 If faces attract more favour, this could explain why self-portraits have flourished on these platforms. In addition, many Selfie images are altered in some way prior to publishing. Research conducted by Opinium in 2013 shows that in a quest to look their best, 36% of 18-24 year olds admitted to having digitally enhanced their selfies. Apps such as Perfect365 (which reached over 5 million downloads by 2013),102 enables its users to digitally enhance their self-portraits prior to upload; such as slimming the face, raising the cheekbones, smoothing the skin, removing blemishes, altering skin tone, whitening teeth, enlarging the eyes, and applying "make-up" from a palette of styles. These available enhancements directly correlate to conventional beauty ideals found in the photoshopped images of magazines, television and advertisements.

101 Saeideh Bakhshi, David A. Shamma, and Eric Gilbert, "Faces Engage Us: Photos with Faces Attract More Likes and Comments on Instagram " (Georgia2013).
As is demonstrated by these highly fabricated selfies, the online representation of self aims to advertise to its audience one of perfect physical attributes, performing in a perfect life (albeit one that conforms to mediated ideals). The quest to achieve a standardised ideal leaves little room for individualism; quirky smiles and individual characteristics are edited out by the subject/creator, in favour of the fashionable angles, gestures and compositions popularised by magazine editorials and advertisements (an example being the prolific and exaggerated simulation of the pout referred to as duckface). However, the closer the subject comes to achieving the image ideal, the further they depart from The Self. *The perfect self portrait erases the individual Self. As Alexander Galloway highlights, “At the moment when something is perfected it is dead.”* With the selfie, the individual is subsumed by the ideal.

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CONCLUSION

As technology, media and markets change to meet (and shape) the demands of consumer societies, humankind evolves with it. Just as humans adapted to the logic of machines in the industrial revolution, they are adapting to the logic of computers in the digital revolution. Mediated imagery served across digital and social networks has resulted in a cultural revolution that is informing a new, standardised model for online self-representation. As these mediated ideals propagate and replicate across the internet, the original referent becomes subsumed by a vast sea of simulations; which precede the original and themselves become referents. The map precedes the territory. Authorship of identity in the age of participatory culture becomes ambiguous, as the image of self becomes a mirror of cultural ideologies.

Personal identity reduced to data is becoming a commodity, boosting the market valuations of the corporations who control the flow of content. Through their encouraged exchange of personal information for entertainment, the user becomes both the target and the product of the production cycle. As the increasingly sophisticated and monopolised networks of databases and algorithms that drive participatory culture impose their computerised logic upon users, they mould behaviour into pre-defined categories and inevitably define the new public model for representation; resulting in cultural phenomena such as the selfie image.

Increased emphasis on the individual as “brand” (encouraged by the market), creates in its users a requirement to “perform” on social media’s stage, as the new content producers become subject to persistent evaluation through likes, follows and retweets. The currency of the self leads to increased pressure to present the “perfect self” to the world. And the model for the ideal self is fed to
its users on the very same stage. The consumer becomes the consumed, the producer the product. Robert Hassan notes of cultural materialism in late capitalism’s rapid development,

> The future of culture is now tied almost wholly to the trajectory of capitalism – and the ‘primacy of the exchange processes condemns it to commodification without limit or end. There are few ‘organic spaces of culture where the market has not already intruded.\(^\text{105}\)

As consumer society evolves alongside changing technologies, online modes of self-representation appear to be increasingly masked behind a veil of mediated ideologies. As technology and the media move towards increased standardisation, so do their participants. With online modes of representation, as Prince’s *Untitled (Cowboy)* (Fig. 10) demonstrates, the ideal becomes the individual, which becomes the ideal – in an endless process of reproduction and simulation that could be compared to a hall of mirrors. In post-internet societies, image becomes subject to perpetual standardisation, reproduction and proliferation. This results in ambiguity between the traditional roles of consumer/producer, subject/object, performer/ audience. The market becomes a mirror of the individual, and the individual becomes a reflection of the market. Today, not only has the commodity become embedded within most aspects of social life, this social life and the individuals within it manifest as a commodity; the commodity’s colonization of the individual has been achieved.

The combined effects of late-capitalism, technology and mediated ideologies are creating a consumer society that, like the revolutionary networked camera does of its subject, turns the lens on itself. Individuals are increasingly becoming

a reflection of a digitally mediated society, and of each other. For the
participants of social media, the new models of representation mark the demise
of individuality, as the perfect self-representation erases the Self.

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