The Varieties of Self-Portrait Experiences

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What could be more intrinsically human than self-portraits? They represent what makes us unique among all creatures on this planet: our highly developed self-awareness. While other animals, such as chimpanzees, might at times demonstrate a consciousness of themselves, none have reached the level where they use tools to capture the process of self-reflection in something external to themselves so that they can later reflect on that process of self-reflection. At a deep philosophical and psychological level of analysis, the phenomenon is wondrously introspective, paradoxical, and even mystical. In this article I'd like to explore these fascinating dimensions of self-portrait photography.

Let's start with a simple definition of the term. The Latin roots of "portray" tell us that a self-portrait is to "draw forth" and "represent" one's self. When you take your own picture, you are attempting to extract and depict who you are. You might do this for two basic reasons. To explore and better understand yourself. To express your self to others. In both cases you are doing something very interesting. You are creating an objective representation of the subjective you. The self-portrait allows you to see yourself as others might see you. It allows others to see you as you see yourself or as you wish to been seen. These are all the fancy footsteps of self-awareness that make us human.

Of course there might be some very practical reasons why photographers create self-portraits. They might need the shot for promotional reasons. They might want to expand their range of skills by attempting this genre of photography. Sometimes people don't have any models at hand, or are reluctant to ask someone to serve as one, so they use themselves. If you want to practice and experiment at creating portraits, you will probably be your most willing guinea pig. Some people start with self-portraits before venturing into portraits of other people. Others report that learning what to do with themselves during self-portrait work improves their ability to instruct other people when photographing them. If you can talk yourself through good poses you can probably do it with others. Learning how to represent yourself might even teach you how to represent anything.

This article, however, will focus less on the practical aspects of self-portraiture and more on the psychological aspects of that desire to draw forth and represent the self. Such a psychological exploration will lead us into the marvelous variety of self-portrait experiences. Like many scientists, psychologists like myself will try to classify those experiences into categories. This process helps us understand the range of factors that contribute to those experiences. However, it's always good to keep in mind that some categories will overlap while some items just don't seem to fit any of the categories. We'll surely run into these dilemmas when investigating something as complex as self-portraits.

In fact, let's consider the first dilemma. We could make the argument that any photo you take is a self-portrait. It says something about your family, friends, occupation, interests, lifestyle – all of which reflect important aspects of who you are as a person. Does anyone ever take a picture of something that isn't in some way personally meaningful? We could also argue that when someone else takes a picture of you it qualifies as a self-portrait as long as the person follows your instructions. Unfortunately, these definitions make the process of categorizing self-portraits a bit complex, as it includes almost every type of photography. So for now, let's say that a self-portrait is a photo you take of your physical self.

Objective and Subjective Self-Portraits

Often we can't tell for sure if a photo is a self-portrait unless the photographer tells us so. A number of factors contribute to the illusion that someone else might have taken the shot. First of all, some part of our mind assumes a person can't be in two places at the same time – both behind and in front of the camera – even though another part of our mind, the part that is familiar with photography, knows better. The illusion is magnified when people place the camera on a surface or tripod to take a shot of themselves from a distance. The further away the camera, the less likely the viewer will assume that subject is the photographer. If people have their eyes closed or are not looking at the camera, it might appear as if they don't know they are being photographed, which also leads the viewer to assume someone else took the shot. A subject looking outside the frame of the image, towards someone or something, suggests a presence external to the image that distracts the viewer's attention from the subject's presence

as the creator of the image. Even looking into the camera can suggest the illusion of someone else being the photographer because the mind more easily accepts the reality of someone taking a shot of someone else, rather than the counterintuitive situation of a people looking at themselves taking a picture of themselves.

These kinds of self-portraits create the illusion of objectivity, as if pretending, playfully or quite deliberately, "this is how someone else captured me." If we assume photographers were not posing for their own shots, we might attribute more authenticity, impartiality, or spontaneity to such depictions of their personality, which might be the photographer's intentions. By creating the illusion of someone else's presence, the objective self-portrait also suggests a relationship between the photographer and that imaginary person who took the shot. Consciously or unconsciously, the photographer might be referring to and posing for someone in particular. But who is that person, and what is the photographer thinking and feeling about that person? Photographers might invite the viewers to be that presence, encouraging them to experience, sometimes voyeuristically, the qualities of their personality they intended in the photo.

At the very least, objective self-portraits keep us guessing as to whether that particular portrayal of the subject was created by the subject or someone else. The reality of self-reflection is uncertain. Is it me seeing me, or someone else seeing me?

In the subjective type of self-portrait, the viewer feels more certain that photographers took the shots of themselves, as when we see their outstretched arms pointing the camera towards their bodies. We're aware of the presence of the camera as a tool in helping them capture themselves. When photographers look into the outstretched camera, the sensation of self capturing self is magnified even more. The subjective or objective quality of the shot seems more ambiguous - even contradictory, deceptive, or comical - when the photographer is clearly holding the camera but looking away from it.

The presence of the camera becomes obvious, along with the fact that the shot is a subjective self-portrait, when people shoot themselves in reflective surfaces – especially mirrors, because we all quickly recognize the mirror as a tool for observing oneself. In a curious fashion of infinite regression, the photo captures the process of the photographer photographing the photographer photographing the photographer.

The subjective nature of the self-portrait might be more ambiguous when shooting into glass or metal reflections that distort the image of oneself or make it difficult to determine the viewpoint. Playful and sometimes perplexing paradoxes of self-reflection can be magnified by the use of unusual camera angles, or more than one camera, that keeps us guessing where exactly the equipment and photographer are located in the reflections, or even what is a reflection and what isn't. As a simple example, imagine holding the camera at arms length to take a shot of yourself looking into a mirror. In the photo we see you gazing at yourself, but if we know this is a self-portrait, there's also the you taking the shot of you looking at yourself. In these complex reflection shots, layers of self-awareness blend and embed into each other, sometimes to such a degree that we lose a sense of the objective or subjective nature of the picture.

We might also lose track of the subjective/objective distinction when photographers include a printed self-portrait photo, or one displayed on a computer screen, into the new self-portrait. For example, imagine taking a shot of a photo in which you took a shot of yourself looking into the camera. You, and we, are looking at a picture that you took of a picture that you took of yourself looking at yourself taking the picture. The subjective or objective quality of the image takes a back seat to these paradoxes of self-reflection.

When photographers do many self-portraits, some people might call them narcissistic. The photographers themselves might even worry about that (although truly narcissistic people don't think of themselves as narcissistic). Tasteful objective self-portraits might help ease that impression of self-absorption, while subjective ones that emphasize oneself viewing oneself, like the mythical Narcissus staring into his reflection in a pond, might amplify that sense of self-preoccupation. On the other hand, viewers do sometimes consider objective self-portraits as a fake attempt to hide narcissism, while they might enjoy unpretentious and playful subjective self-portraits.

Inclusion and Exclusion

Self-portraits differ in how much photographers reveal in them. In the exclusive types, they use a narrow field of view or intentionally hide something. The shot may focus on just a particular part of the person's body. Eyes and mouths are often the first choice due to the prominent

psychological role they play in human life as the highly sensitive vehicles of personal expression and sensuality. Being windows into the soul, eyes looking into the close-up camera emphasize that powerful connection between the subject and viewer, so much so that the viewer may forget that the image is a self-portrait (it becomes more "objective"). In some images the photographer might hide the eyes with dark glasses or cover some part of the body, perhaps as a way to protect the psychological vulnerability the person associates with these areas. If there's anything about yourself, physical or psychological, that you would like to remove, but in reality can't, you might succeed in imaginatively discarding it in a self-portrait.

Photographers reveal or hide particular parts of themselves often because they feel positive or negative about that aspect of their identity. Whether it's their eyes, mouth, nose, ears, hair, legs, hands, or whatever body part, people associate it with some positive or negative psychological attribute about themselves. It is a source of self-confidence and self-esteem, or self-consciousness and self-criticism. Often there is a history to these feelings. Even though photographers may think that a particular part of their body captures something very important or essential about their identity, any image that focuses on a part of the self tends to be limited in revealing the whole self. For example, a head shot can very powerfully express a person's emotions and character, yet the inclusion of the body, which reveals clothing and body language, will almost always enrich the psychological meanings of the photo.

Self-portraits also differ in how much photographers reveal of the environment where the shot was taken. The location and objects in it almost always reflect important aspects of their identity, relationships, interests, and lifestyle, whether they consciously realize this or not. As with showing part or all of one's body, what photographers include or exclude in these environmental self-portraits reflects the aspects of their lives they wish to reveal or hide.

The expanded self-portrait might even include people or animals. Their presence surely points to how the photographer's sense of self pivots on his or her relationship to them. Injecting loved ones, pets, or anyone into the self-portrait might also be a way to avoid focusing on oneself. However, there is a long tradition in art of painters placing themselves with people and within groups, in ways that suggest reality, role-playing, fiction, and fantasy. Environmental self-portraits also lend themselves easily to narratives about the artist's life and evolution of identity, either

real or imagined. The story might be about who they are and how they came to be.

All self-portraits are compromise formations in the level of intimacy the photographer offers. Some things about oneself are disclosed, others are concealed. When people embark on a series of self-portraits, they often play with the balance of this compromise formation, shifting what is revealed and what is hidden, usually with a gradual movement towards more self-disclosure and less inhibition. Photographers working on their very first self-portraits might show only parts of their body and face, or no face at all, with little or no inclusion of the environment. Later on, as they gain more confidence in their photography and themselves, they depict more of their body and location as well as experiment with different combinations of the various elements of body and location. When photographers become psychologically invested in ongoing self-portraits, they usually push towards a more holistic expression of who they are, both in any one image and in the series of photos that fit together like puzzle pieces to form a complete image of self.

Some basic questions can help us understand the inclusive and exclusive qualities of our self-portraits and what they might mean to us. It's not always easy to notice things that aren't there, so we might ask ourselves what's missing in our self-portraits, and why. If we expanded the field of view of the shot, what would we see and why might that be important? It might be obvious what the photo says about us, but what does it NOT reveal about us? Are there secrets within or about the self-portrait that only you understand? Conversely, why did you include what you did in the photo? If you cropped any self-portrait down to its most essential part that best expresses what the image says about you, what would that part be?

Spontaneous and Planned Self-Portraits

On the spur of the moment, you hold the camera out at arms length to quickly snap a shot of yourself. It was a split second decision. You weren't even sure why you did it. The "good" or "bad" of how it turned out doesn't enter your mind. You like it and show it to others.

That's about as spontaneous as a self-portrait gets. After all, unless you're suffering from some kind of dissociative disorder, you can't take a shot of yourself without knowing you're being photographed, as when

someone else takes a picture of you. But if you do hold out the camera to quickly shoot yourself in that impromptu fashion, you yourself are, most likely, a spontaneous kind of person. You accept and feel free to express yourself - at least under the right conditions.

Such seemingly random shots might produce interesting results that we would never get when taking pictures with more conscious and deliberate control. We need spontaneity to break free of our routine patterns of shooting, to see things in a new way. We learn about both photography and ourselves when we create self-portraits using unplanned and novel methods. As the renown psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott concluded from his observations of children, spontaneous play is important in the experimentation with identity and formation of self.

Even if you don't like how a spur-of-the-moment self-portrait turned out, you can learn a lot by asking yourself how it's "not right" and how you wanted it to turn out. You might be asking these questions not just about your photography techniques, but also about yourself as a person. Perhaps the self-portrait did not turn out as desired, but that's the way it turned out. That's the way you looked at that moment through that camera. Accepting this fact might be an education in learning to accept something about yourself.

Some people will tell you that they don't have specific techniques in creating their self-portraits, nor do they have any idea of what the final product will be. They just place themselves in front of the camera and move. Although such shots seem spontaneous, if we examined a series of them we would probably notice consistent patterns in how the shot was taken, it's composition, and the person's psychological expression. People usually do have specific techniques and intentions for the final product, although they might not be able to verbalize or consciously recognize them.

Care-free spontaneity can be a wonderfully revealing process of discovery, but the process of consciously understanding, planning, and controlling how one creates self-portraits is important too. Whether we know it or not, we are always shaping the self-portrait in some particular way. If we can identify this trend, we can improve, modify, and stretch beyond it.

Some photographers say that while they are working on a self-portrait, they think about why they want it to look a certain way. They have an opportunity to decide how they want to express themselves in that particular picture, how they want "to be" in that moment. By taking this

opportunity to reflect on themselves in the creation of the image, they attain a better understanding and mastery of the feelings and personality traits being depicted. The process of controlling the shoot might even help them manage problematic aspects of themselves rather than act them out. Sometimes deliberately exaggerating a feeling or personality trait enhances this feeling of mastery. For all these reasons, the process of creating the image – including the thoughts, feelings and expectations that run through the person's mind – are as important as the image itself.

Issues about spontaneity and planned design don't end when the shoot is over. They extend into the post-processing of the image, using such programs as Photoshop. Here again people have the opportunity to experiment with off-the-cuff as well as carefully intended manipulations of the picture, which can be spontaneous as well as carefully designed expressions of themselves. In addition to adding, deleting, or altering objects in the scene, people can use post-processing to change colors, tones, and focus as ways to express their personalities. They can crop the image for a more precise representation of self. How photographers represent and even create themselves using image-editing programs is limited only by their imagination and willingness to explore their actual and potential identities.

In the final analysis, spontaneity and planning are not antagonistic or mutually exclusive elements of self-portrait work. People who become skilled in this type of photography learn how to balance the two. They come to realize that while new insights spring from spontaneous actions, thoughtful design helps improve them. Spontaneity and controlled design synergistically enrich each other. This is true not just of self-portraits, but also of oneself.

Symbolic Self-Portraits

At the beginning of this article I mentioned how, to keep things simple, we'll define self-portraits as a photo you take of your physical self. Now let's broaden that idea to include what some people call symbolic self-portraits – i.e., shots that people take of objects, places, or even other people that capture something important about the identity of the photographer. Psychoanalytic theory tells us that these things are "self-objects" for the person. They sustain the cohesion and continuity of the person's sense of self. In symbolic self-portraits, photographers visually

project their feelings, ideas, interests, memories or personality traits into these objects. They see those objects as visually representing something important about themselves.

At the very least, what separates photographers who do symbolic self-portraits from those who don't is their ability to think about themselves abstractly, conceptually, or by association. They create an image in which "this object, scene, or person is related to or stands for something about me." They have the ability to identify with the other, to psychologically invest the self in the other.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this article, some psychologists would say that every photo that means something to a person is a self-portrait. If the image is significant to them in any way, then the odds are that whatever the photo portrays, it is most likely a self-object. It is an essential part of their own sense of self. If we prefer a more refined definition of self-portrait, we might say that photographers create the symbolic type on purpose. The act of visual symbolism is deliberate. They are consciously aware of the fact that an object, place, or person will visually represent something about their own identities. A photo is a symbolic self-portrait when the photographer can say, "This is me."

The Selves Revealed, and Why

Our definition of self-portraits in the introduction to article left out one important ingredient. What do we mean by "self?" Many volumes in psychology and philosophy have addressed that question, because there is no easy answer. We might think of the self as some holistic entity, greater than the sum of its parts, but we also know that it does indeed contain many different components that aren't necessarily aware of, or even cooperate with, each other. Any self-portrait can only capture some facets of your personality and life. So when you create one, ask yourself if it's about…

- my past, present, or future self
- my emotions, negative or positive
- my strengths or weaknesses
- the me as seen by family, friends, and neighbors
- the memories and experiences that make me who I am
- myself as I wish others would see me
- my relationships, interests and roles in life that define who I am
- my goals, dreams, changes, potentials, hopes, and ideal self I strive to be

- the beliefs I hold true or false
- the me I dislike, fear, try to deny, or hide from others
- the me no one knows, the secret or less obvious me
- the parts of myself that oppose or are in conflict with each other
- the polarities in my personality (adult/child, shy/extroverted, intelligent/dumb)
- the aspects of my identity that are weak, confused, outdated, unexplored, or misunderstood

In their self-portraits, people deliberately might be attempting to illustrate one of these aspects of self, although photographers often are not consciously aware of everything that their image reveals about their personalities. The more they study their photos, the more they might understand what it says about them. In fact, the process of creating the self-portrait might be an unconscious attempt to draw that underlying aspect of self to a higher level of awareness.

Self-portraits enable photographers to express themselves in ways that might not be possible with words. They may sense the thoughts, memories, and emotions of their identities during the process of creating the photo, as well as afterwards when viewing it. The personal significance of the shot may never be truly accessible by verbal analysis, or via the reactions of other people. It is something that can only be *experienced* by the photographer. While some people are "verbalizers" who rely on words to understand themselves, others are "visualizers" who experience themselves better via images. Perhaps the self that they project into the self-portrait even bypasses some of the usual perceptions they have of their identity – perceptions that might in fact block a deeper and more beneficial understanding of who they are.

There are photographers who experience the self-portrait as freedom in self-expression. The judgment is of and by oneself. They decide how to create the image. Although there might be unconscious elements to the self-portrait, and it is sometimes hard to look closely at oneself in it, people often do report feeling in control over what is expressed about their personalities. Some notice a distinct feeling of openness to themselves. They express emotions and ideas that they wouldn't ordinarily reveal in a public environment. What they think of themselves is in the photo, regardless of how others might react to them, or to the photo. In life, family, friends, or other people might force their own perceptions onto the photographer, but in the self-portrait the photographer can discover, reveal, and create his or her own self-perception. If the self-

portrait succeeds in helping you better understand yourself, you will be less susceptible to a dependency on how others perceive and react to you.

The self-portrait is an attempt to place oneself into a more objective position towards oneself. It stimulates the "observing self" – that part of you that can step back to look at your identity objectively. It might serve as an experiment in understanding how others see you, or as a bridge between their perceptions and your own self-concept. It might be an attempt to correlate your inner perceptions with outer documentation. In all cases, creating a self-portrait is the construction of a tangible, external representation of you. It gives concrete shape to feelings and experiences of self that previously seemed ambiguous, inaccessible, or unknown to the photographer.

The self-portraiture process can generate a sense of mastery over formerly vague or even threatening aspects of self. By representing such things as depression, anxiety, helplessness, disability, loss of meaning, and death, the self-portrait helps objectify emotions so the person can more clearly witness and control them, rather than be controlled BY them. So too a hope, goal, or ideal self in the potential future feels more real and possible when it takes a clear visible form in the self-portrait, just as an old self-portrait serves as a concrete reminder who you were in the past.

Photographers sometimes talk about a self-portrait as if the subject is someone else. They might even experience that subject as another person. This objectification of self might be a byproduct of spending a lot of time working on the photo. Rather than that image being "you," it gradually turns into an image of some subject. This external self can be a useful stepping stone in owning what you think and feel. People find it easier to talk about the thoughts and emotions of the person in their self-portrait as a transition to talking directly about themselves. As an example, many people are quick with criticism when they see a shot of themselves – reactions that often stem from how people in the past treated them. Even if they notice positive aspects of how they appear in the photo, they might minimize it. "I SEEM confident," they might say, as if the person in the shot is a pretender or some alien version of themselves. This can be an important first step to saying, "I AM confident."

For all these reasons, self-portraits can be therapeutic – a fact that has been documented in a branch of psychotherapy known as "phototherapy," which was pioneered by such people as Judy Weiser. In her work she explores these growth-promoting qualities of self-portraits. She also suggests some interesting questions for the photographer to

consider. They may seem simple. Some people might even think they are silly. But if you give them some thought, the therapeutic aspects of self-portraits begin to unfold.

- What is obvious to you about this self-portrait?
- How would you describe the photo to someone who can't see it?
- What would this person like to say or do?
- What would you like to say to this person?
- What memories do you associate with this photo?
- What feelings do you associate with this photo?
- Does this self-portrait remind you of someone?
- What title for this photo best captures its essence?
- What would you like to change about the self-portrait? Why?
- How do pictures that others take of you compare to your self-portraits? - - Do they miss something or focus too much on something in their shots?

Some people will tell you that a good self-portrait is one that captures the whole of who you are as a person, because the whole of your identity transcends the sum of your parts. Given the psychological complexity of our human psyches, I think that's a tall order. A really good self-portrait might capture some essential aspect of who you are. It might enhance, oppose, or balance something inside your personality. It might show us how you are completing your identity. Whatever it reveals, you have the power to change that self-portrait, or throw it away.

Sharing Self-Portraits

On your own, you can learn a lot about yourself from self-portraits. You can create them just for yourself, as an experiment in personal expression and identity exploration, but how might that endeavor change if you showed the portrait to other people? How would it change if you specifically created the photo for someone else?

There's a good chance you'll learn more when you share your self-portrait with others. In psychology the concept of the "looking glass self" suggests that our identities evolve from the perceptions other people have of us. We need feedback from them to affirm who we are, to know that what we do matters, and to discover new things about our personalities. Sometimes they see us as we see ourselves. Sometimes they see us according to their own needs and expectations, while missing what

we believe is true. And sometimes we accept their perceptions as valid even though they are not.

By discussing your self-portraits with others you can detect these consistencies and discrepancies between your self-concept and the ideas others have about you. Sharing your photos can help you understand who you are in relation to other people, as well as who you are in and of yourself. In doing so you might become more comfortable in revealing yourself to others. Ideally, you learn how to accept yourself.

Another article in *Photographic Psychology* describes "Johari's Window." It's a visual diagram that depicts the four possible combinations of what is known and unknown to self and other in an interpersonal situation. In the case of self-portrait photography, it's an especially useful concept. For a self-portrait that you share with another person: (1) there are things about you that both you and the other person know from looking at the photo, (2) there are things about you that you know from looking at the photo, while the other person does not, (3) there are things about you that the other person knows from looking at the photo, while you do not, and, (4) there are things revealed about you in the photo that neither you nor the other person know.

The first situation helps confirm who you are. In the second, you would need to self-disclose your "secret" for the other person to understand you better. In third scenario, you would learn more about your "blind spots" if the person shared what they see about you in the self-portrait. The forth situation reminds us that not everything about us is noticeable, to ourselves or others. By discussing the self-portrait with other people, by proposing hypotheses with them, we might discover that hidden aspect of our identity, which proves how useful it can be to invite other people's interpretations of our self-portraits.

In the past, people mostly showed their printed photos to family, friends, and relatives. Now, in our age of digital photography and cyberspace, people have unprecedented opportunities to share their photos with people around the world, including complete strangers. Posting photos has become a staple of many social network systems and is the cornerstone of photosharing communities like *Flickr*. Because social networks are all about letting people know "this is me and what I'm doing," self-portraits frequently appear. In *Flickr*, several groups devote themselves specifically to this type of photography, including the well-known 365 Group, in which members post self-portraits once a day for a year.

What's it like to put self-portraits online, especially when many viewers are complete strangers or people you barely know? Some photographers say they feel amazingly free when reactions from other people are not based on what those people already know about you. They enjoy showing their true colors, just being themselves, without need for approval. People online don't know who you "really" are, so go ahead and create whatever image of yourself you want. Even if people rarely or never comment on your self-portraits, going public with them can nevertheless make what they express about you seem more real and valid. Some people might feel inspired to continue experimenting with their self-expressions simply because they see the view counts indicating that people are looking at their work, even if they aren't commenting. A silent but hopefully nodding audience of strangers can be rewarding.

Anonymity places an important role in feeling free to do whatever you'd like to do. It's an important component of what cyberpsychologists call "the online disinhibition effect." On the Internet, with people who don't know you, you have a chance to experiment with your identity in the self-portrait, to express things that you wouldn't ordinarily reveal in your offline life. You don't feel restricted by what the people in your offline life expect you to be. In some cases the disinhibition effect also might be the result of photographers imagining their online self-portrait work as an extension of their own mind, as a kind of visual space in which they experiment and think out loud. You can picture yourself anyway you want inside your own head, without concern for other's opinions.

Whether its anonymity, thinking of their online images as extensions of their own thought-space, or just being uninhibited types of people, some photographers in online photosharing communities do seem incredibly candid in their self-portraits, without worrying about how people are reacting to their work. They appear to be baring their souls to strangers, so much so that visitors may feel uncomfortable leaving a comment that might intrude on the photographer's seemingly vulnerable self-reflective space.

Although some people say that they aren't very concerned about what others online think, or even pay attention to their comments, we might wonder, then, why they put their self-portraits online at all. In *Flickr*, people tend to be generally supportive in the feedback they give to each other. Surely that positive response reinforces a person's efforts. Some people might even dwell on specific kinds of self-portraits due to the

acclaim they receive for them, while ignoring or avoiding other types of self-portraits.

But what if a person receives mostly negative comments, or no comments or views at all? Would they continue posting self-portraits? Probably not. It would seem perfectly normal for a person to feel at least a little bit upset, disappointed, ignored, or misunderstood when they receive criticism or little attention. Some people minimize or even deny what they are actually hoping for when they upload their self-portraits.

Of course, it's also possible that some people really do take in stride whatever reactions their visitors offer. Some photographers say that they're mostly interested in developing their skills at self-portraits. If viewers offer positive comments, that's a pleasant bonus but not the primary objective. It's icing on the cake. It let's them know they're doing something right, at least in the eyes of some people. If viewers' comments are negative, the photographer considers their feedback as possible constructive criticism, but doesn't feel hurt, offended, ignored, or misunderstood. If they receive no comments at all, well, that's just the way it goes. They simply enjoy the challenge of creating self-portraits and the opportunity to make them public, without worrying about whether people appreciate or understand them. They're just letting people know who they are, come what may, without any expectations. If it's genuine, this attitude indicates quite a bit of maturity and self-confidence. We might then ask an interesting question: what's the difference between the self-portrait work of these photographers and those who have high expectations as well as a vulnerability to the feedback they receive?

When sharing self-portraits online, there will be as many different experiences as there are people, which is a product of how you, with your unique personality style, respond to the particular visitors who comment on your work. You might intend the photo for family and friends from your offline life, for online friends, or for anyone in cyberspace who wants to take a look. Sometimes you might design the self-portrait for particular people, but not others. Awkward, embarrassing, annoying, or otherwise problematic situations might arise when someone for whom you didn't intend the photo sees or comments on it. Photosharing communities do offer features for restricting access to selected images. Nevertheless, some photographers, with a dash of hesitation and anxiety, take the risk of posting their sensitive self-portraits for the whole world to see.

Much of the time we want people to notice, understand, and appreciate something in particular about our personalities or lifestyles.

Maybe we want our accomplishments and creativity as photographers to be acknowledged. Maybe we are letting others see who we are in order to connect more deeply with people we already know, like family and friends - or perhaps as a way to meet new and like-minded people who are out there somewhere in cyberspace. Sometimes maybe all we're hoping for is an implicit "thank you" from others who appreciate the fact that we shared ourselves via the self-portrait. When these expectations are met, we feel our sense of self affirmed and our confidence boosted.

In her book *Phototherapy Techniques,* Judy Weiser poses very interesting questions to consider about the sharing of self-portraits. They point to memories, needs, and feelings that they photographer might not fully realize. They uncover meanings in the self-portrait that can help photographers understand their motivations in creating it.

- If the picture was seen by your parents, siblings, children, relatives, friends, coworkers, boss, and strangers, how might they react differently to it? What could they tell about you from the photo?

- For whom did you intentionally and perhaps unconsciously create this photo? To whom would you like or be willing to show it? What reactions do you imagine they would have? What reactions would you like them to have? What does this say about the trust you feel in that relationship, or about what you might want and need from that relationship?

- Who would you NOT want to see this photo? Why? Are you concerned about being vulnerable, the power they have over you, or how they might reject you, criticize you, or feel uncomfortable around you? What would need to change in order to feel OK about giving the photo to that person?

- Is there something in the self-portrait that very few people or only you understand? What motivated you to include it? What would it be like if others knew this "secret" about you?

THE SUPERFICIALLY NARCISSITIC SELFIE

Sharing self-portraits online eventually became so popular that a nickname was invented for it – *the selfie.* Why did it become so ubiquitous, so quickly? The invention of digital photography and the internet had already recruited millions of people to the joy of taking, editing, and sharing photos with everyone around the world. Then the emphasis in social media on narrating one's life led to the self-portrait as an essential feature of that

storytelling. When very portable mobile phones included cameras with dual-view screens, the ongoing visual autobiographies catapulted to new heights. People could take selfies whenever and wherever they wanted, simply by holding out their hands to aim the camera at themselves, staring into the screen as if it were mirror, a feat much more difficult to accomplish with traditional cameras. Aficionados professing an expertise on creating selfies convinced so many people about the "right" way to take them that those styles proliferated like viruses, such as holding the camera slightly above one's head to shoot down towards the face. As one of my students said, "Everyone posts the same types of photos to the point where the only thing different is the actual face in the photo."

Critics claimed that the blossoming of selfies in the early 2010s unveiled an age of shallow exhibitionism. Yielding to the pressure of cultural ideals, people wanted to perform in a reality show of their own making, where they were the stars. It was pure narcissism, the critics claimed – an act of self-indulgence, a competitive comparing of oneself to others, a needy quest for attention, an obsession with validation, a product of social dependence, and a desperate crusade to counteract low self-esteem. If people are not supposed to brag about themselves, according to traditional social norms, then the proliferation of selfies was a thumbing of one's nose at such conventions. Staring at oneself in the LCD screen, like the mythical Narcissus staring at his reflection in a pond, amplified the loop of self-absorption. Nude or otherwise sexually provocative selfies, a sure-fire way to attract an online audience, especially for females seeking male attention, sprouted as a source of empowerment, even if people realized the superficial nature of what they were revealing about themselves. "Social media is a shared delusion of grandeur," Michael Naughton said.

The word "selfie," constructed in a diminutive form, suggests affectionate familiarity for a small bit of oneself that is being expressed in an immediate, impermanent, and insignificant way. People are just playing with it, having fun, perhaps making light of themselves. It simply documents oneself at that moment in time, idle proof of having been in some situation, without offering anything else of real substance. Ironically, when people are more concerned with presenting to the world how they look at that moment in that particular locale, making multiple attempts to get the shot perfect, they actually take themselves out of that moment, experiencing the situation only superficially or simply as a stage for performing.

Many people are tempted to post only idealized versions of themselves in social media. They take many versions of the same picture in a careful attempt to capture the Perfect Me. When Instagam introduced post-processing filters for phone cameras that made it easy to cover up flaws and otherwise glamorize a self-portrait, people adopted them with great enthusiasm, especially those who used photosharing as a way to invite sexual and romantic partners. Because everyone was doing it, everyone recognized that highly attractive self-portraits were not realistic, or only realistic in a very contrived way. Enlightened people began to see that friends and family responded as favorably, or even more favorably, when you upload shots that show the real you, flaws and all.

We often appreciate someone who shows honesty and vulnerability. On the other hand, when people truthfully reveal the upsetting problems in their lives, especially when such self-disclosures are an ongoing feature of their social media posts, others might respond with mixed reactions: pity, sympathy, the desire to be supportive, feeling distressed, or a sense of relief that their lives are going OK by comparison.

Ongoing Self-Portraits

When people first create self-portraits, which of the many aspects of their identities do they depict first? Which ones do they express later on as they continue to create more? What aspects of themselves do they often portray and which ones do they neglect? These questions can help us understand their concept of themselves, including what they value about their personalities, as well as what they might find problematic.

When photographers first create and share a self-portrait, they often feel somewhat apprehensive. They might worry about appearing narcissistic, feel uncomfortably self-conscious about their appearance, or fear negative feedback. If they receive generally positive reactions from others, or if they aren't particularly concerned about criticism, they tend to become more creative, spontaneous, and even carefree about their self-portraits, which might reflect increasing self-acceptance and confidence. While predominant themes about their identity appear continuously or recurrently in their work, they start to experiment with revealing different and perhaps more vulnerable aspects of their psyche. Literally and figuratively, they show different angles on themselves. They take a closer look at what they like and dislike about their personality and lives. In one

self-portrait they might reveal a particular side to their personality, while in later one they depict something quite the opposite, as if recognizing their internal conflicts and polarities. Patterns surface that point to underlying and perhaps unconscious dimensions of personal identity that are not clearly evident in any one photo.

The collection of self-portraits eventually becomes a kaleidoscope of beliefs, emotions, and behaviors that reveal a more complete, multifaceted design of who the photographer is. The more people do self-portraits, the more they might think, "How much should I and am I revealing about myself?" As the person grapples with this question and continues doing this type of work, the self-reflection process and the camera itself might become more apparent to viewers.

For photographers who create self-portraits on a regular basis, like those who participate in such online groups as Flickr's 365, the process becomes a day-to-day visual journal that identifies changes in one's moods, thoughts, and activities. It's a way to "take one's temperature" on a daily basis. It enhances one's sense of self continuity and cohesion. Some people say that it gives them a chance to decide who they want to be on a particular day, even if they cannot express that directly in their actual life. When asked about their motivations to create and post online a self-portrait everyday for a year, people often remark that it's a "challenge" – a challenge of asking oneself, everyday, "How am I feeling today? Who am I today? How will others react to me today?" It's an ongoing quest in understanding what about oneself changes, as well as what stays the same – because some things about us never change.

In some respects self-portraits become easier to do the more you do them. But in other respects they might become harder. Photographers block and run out of ideas. Or they may get stuck on particular types of self-portraits. Sometimes it's because they've run into their own psychological dead ends. And sometimes it's because their audience applauds and therefore reinforces them for producing certain types of self-portraits, which prevents them, consciously or unconsciously, from expressing other things about themselves.

It helps to think of these dead ends as part of the self-portrait process. Often, below the surface of conscious awareness, in what psychologists call "subconscious incubation." Something about oneself is forming and waiting to break through. You might discover it by paying attention to what you're thinking and feeling, regardless of the feedback you receive from others. You might detect it in some visual or

psychological motif that unexpectedly appears in your self-portrait. Follow that motif to see where it takes you.

For some people, creating and sharing many self-portraits online might become a substitute for living in the "real" world. When people feel disconnected from others or from themselves, they might try to create more satisfying relationships and a more rewarding identity in cyberspace. Ideally, one learns to balance and integrate the offline and online self. Sharing self-portraits with friends and relatives, both online and offline, helps serve that goal.

When pursuing the self-reflective process of creating self-portraits, we're not always sure where we're headed. We're not sure what we're becoming in our photos. It can be a slow, complicated process with unexpected twists and turns. In that sense, it's a lot like life.

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