Fulcrum

selfie as ritual.

a.savtchenko-belskaia

Coming from nothing, going nowhere, here to stay. The selfie blurs distinctions between public and private, and contributes to a cultural environment "without history." Online, the past maintains no causal authority over the present. The user is encapsulated in now-ness, direct experience deferred by endless links and phantom ideals. As the invariable pursuit of an ever-receding object of desire—selfie is the performance of the urgency of now, affirmation to keep at bay the unease of a broken connection. An image without time, arguably has no significant genealogy—it's no longer a static object, but a pattern of behaviour to stabilise and homogenise relations to self and the public sphere in the space of technology.

What's at stake is nothing less than autonomous subjectivity.

Dan Graham anticipated the emancipatory potential of reciprocal media to offset the asymmetrical imposition of information by capital—the agency to interpenetrate social orders and provide a decentralised system for "individuals, families, and extant cultural systems potential for self-determination." In particular, Graham's work articulates the centrality of the gaze in ordering social relations where communication is established not through direct contact, but through the mediation by technology. If technology serves as extension of aspects of man, the selfie is 'looking' extended into digital space.

Yet, individuals rarely take advantage of the emancipatory potential in self-representation, choosing instead from existing prevalent stereotypes. In return for visibility, a hashtag taxonomy of #justbeingme, #bestbody spontaneously prescribes shared ideals in an incessant and globalised popularity contest spurred by coded neoliberal values (I like yours if you like mine). Choosing a favourable angle for your profile is hardly an emancipatory manoeuvre. As legal historian Lawrence Friedman puts it, "people are firm believers in free will. But they choose their politics, their dress, their manners, their very identity, from a menu they had no hand in writing. They are constrained by forces they are not even conscious of."

The "I" does not exist in a vacuum but in relation to a particular environment. To an unprecedented degree, that environment is online sharing platforms. It is a paradigm that affects everybody and predisposes individuals to automatically think and act in certain ways by capitalising on aspects of the structure of awareness. The mirror stage is extended into the digital realm, locating one's relation to the self as primarily to that of an object. This enables capital to propagate the (saleable) product aspects of culture at the expense of the existential.

But selfies are fun (sincerely trying not to look ironic in this). You can share with friends :) extend your arm, check your best side. Your device reverses your image, like looking in a mirror. Mirrors make feedback—you project yourself onto a reflective surface, it projects your image back to you. A closed loop. Tap and draw in to examine. It's in limbo, incomplete until others see it. When satisfied, #beforetheparty and share. They used to be way uncool but now, a little vanity is innocent. You can always look good (ideal object) and it lifts your self-esteem when friends comment "oh my god, you babe," "fuck you're hot."

The selfie is a sequence of actions performed regularly and invariably—a ritual. The space of the selfie facilitates an ongoing performance. Performance of the self, of the commonplace, ultimately of memory, is the dynamic relational counterpose to static Modern forms. To remain valid it has to be continually re-enacted.

Screens and media windows are the elements, nay frameworks, that mediate separated spatial units and frame a conventional perspective of one unit's relation to the other. Now windows function like mirrors. Online a user encounters themselves (before a plethora of curios) in their own profile and filter bubble. Self-awareness is enacted only through the awareness that someone else might be looking at you. On reflection, the space of the selfie is isolation radicalised and masked in the ongoing performance of the self.

Foucault's disciplinary mechanism reads like an apt account of social media. The selfie replaces perspectival order as "individuals are inserted in a fixed place, movements are supervised, events are recorded, and an uninterrupted work of writing [the endless scroll] lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterises him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him." As it locks the subject in a perpetually looped gaze, the selfie structures the subject's relation to the public as well as creating an index of control over the private sphere. It catalogues activities, thoughts, feelings and regulates an individual's alignment with an economically favourable relation to the self and to the other. This is not to say we are all constituted by this specific phenomenon alone, but that the popularity of selfie makes apparent an ongoing restructuring of the self as a thing which only has meaning when exposed, that exists only to be looked at. And that if we are to afford images the kind of agency as seems apt in our day, the sneaky self-gratifying snap is no longer so innocent.

Spontaneous surveillance is something we are anyway aware (and guilty) of. More poignant is the old caution that technological extension (in this case, the self extended into the digital environment via the phone camera) also results in the amputation or modification of some other extension. The popularity of selfie is evidence of the waning value (currency) of autonomous active subjectivity altogether. Whether such subjectivity is possible at all is an ongoing investigation, but if it is, it certainly involves a profound scepticism toward dominant forms and marketable iconography.

Perhaps we are free to experiment with ways of representing ourselves. But we do so only within the framework of a system driven not by a values of moral and democratic self-determination, but by an aggressive neoliberal agenda propagated through the alignment of psychological structures with the structure of information in the mediated realm. In that case, we still have our sense of humour, but is it sufficient?

Alexandra Savtchenko-Belskaia is a student at the Architectural Association.

commodifying personhood.

j.self

Come on now, old broom, get dressed;
these old rags will do just fine!
You're a slave in any case;
and today you will be mine!

Goethe

The word "Instagram" is a post-hipster portmanteau for "instant camera telegram." The anachronistic irony of this appellation (which is indeed integral to the culture of the app itself) can hardly be lost on the reader.

Establishing the origin of the selfie is highly significant, as is its specific usage in this publication. What is meant here is a self-portrait defined by its circulation in reciprocal ("social") media and appearing alongside its own hashtag. On these terms, the first selfie was posted to Instagram on January 16, 2011 (by @jennlee, see reverse). There are currently about 57 million selfies in existence. The selfie is just 40 months old, and yet it is impossible to imagine a world without it. This is because epochal technologies (like telephony, photography or the internet) retroactively and irrevocably reframe all of history. Having learnt writing, for example, we cannot programme our mind to forget script, even if a particular language is illegible.

We cannot escape the selfie.

And this means we *cannot but* participate in advancing this wholly new fungible personhood: we can only accelerate the commercial self-exploitation of our own image. This escalating madness is the unstoppable animated broom of Goethe's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* — the hydra's head of marching clones, each as strong, and twice as fast, as the original. The selfie is a dizzying, sickening compulsion, an absurd loop, a hammering vertigo atomising the soul.

At least Goethe's apprentice, when his terrifying crescendo threatened to flood everything, was delivered from disaster by his master. But for us, there is no magician: the self has already drowned. To have even a possibility of salvation, we must look to the logic of Instagram itself: imbecilic irony. There is hope as long as we insist on our own ridiculousness, and radicalise #jokes to its most extreme #wtf.