Why the selfie matters? A first-person story

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Abstract: This paper is a retrospective of the author's artistic production, written in first person. Selfies have been central to her work for the past eight years. The process of her selfie-making comes from a tradition of self-portraiture and performance, especially inspired by women artists in different periods who disguised themselves to convey a persona, such as the case of Cindy Sherman. In the art pieces described in the paper, the selfie plays different roles, one as an online archive and then as a fragmented self-portrait; the selfie also flirts with AI in two collaborative works discussing the selfie as an object of self-significance. The future of the selfie regarding the artist's production is part of the conclusion of this paper.

Keywords: selfie, self-portrait, digital, performance, artistic production.

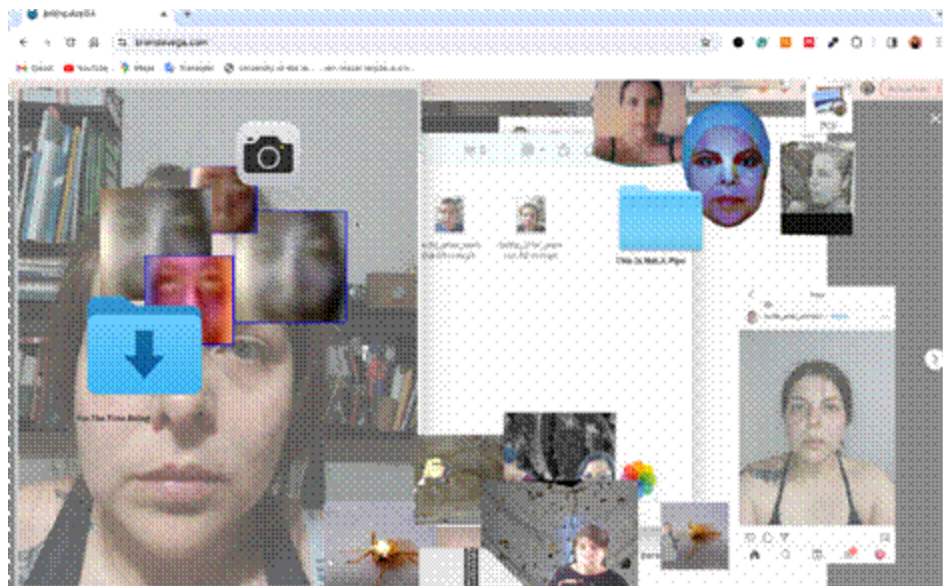# Introduction: The Selfie in My Artistic Production

Figure 1
Screenshot of Brenda Vega's Website 2023 www.brendavega.com
www.brendavega.com

Figure 1. Screenshot of Brenda Vega's Website, 2023.

Selfie-making is relatively easy. Grab your cellphone and open the camera app. Rotate the camera towards your face and press the shutter button. Remember to smile, pose, and look at the camera. While writing these words, I followed these steps: I took a photo of myself and then looked at my own image, contemplating the act of being the subject and the object of my creation.

There is an interesting common ground in selfies, and that is that anybody can take one. Nowadays, it is the most ubiquitous form of self-portraiture and is so banal. I look at my image, and there I am, looking at myself or looking at others looking at themselves through their devices, giving likes and comments and shares–you must think I am banal; well, I prefer to think otherwise because I do not think the artists who I esteem and who use the medium are banal. Alternatively, authors who have published books about selfies try to figure out the same content that I am chasing, too: that selfies are more than what is presented to humans and that they can be analyzed in different ways because, as I said before, everybody can do it. Thus, everybody has an opinion on them. Nevertheless, do they have the answers they are looking for?

Author Claire Raymond (2021, p. 1) suggests that selfies are connected to dreams because they inhabit some unique form of identity; they become unconscious if one is a regular selfie-taker. In

an additional remark, I concur with her idea that the selfie is a 21st-century phenomenon embedded in social media, and anything before that is not a selfie, not even Cindy Sherman's self-portraits, which resemble selfie practices. Then there is AI [used by social media platforms], which is also part of selfie-making because the data produced by this image is seen by technology first, and then by humans, who are its final consumers; the selfie is visible and always social.

The selfie could be philosophical, aesthetic, famous, banal, extreme, and witty. It exists as several objects at once. Eler says that "its boundaries aren't known yet" (2017) due to its controversial status since its inception. Humans assist the technology that creates the selfie but need help comprehending it thoroughly.

To some extent, the selfie runs beyond any tradition of self-portraiture as the future of image-making. My face, body, and technology are performing at the same time. A performance of time, presence, and self. Why is it essential to put forth the selfie as art? This question has surrounded me for the past few years. To try to give some answers, I want to address my interest in selfie-making, not only from my artistic point of view and the works I have engaged in but also with the inspiration of artists, especially women artists who use self-representation as their medium of choice, who have engaged in selfie-making, even though [selfies] have been in and out of fashion during these past ten years.

To describe some of the projects to which I have dedicated more than eight years of artistic practice, I want to unravel the auto-ethnographic work of my practice, which suggests a retrospective insight that will assist me in determining the current state of my practice and why it seems more distant from the selfie.

My artistic method for producing selfies comes from different categories and a multiplicity of ideas. First, I will discuss my ongoing project, *selfie_after_workout*, an Instagram account created amid the pandemic in May 2020. It is a digital archive that tries to persist in time and on the web, where millions of images are uploaded daily.

Then, I will talk about my project *For the time being* (2021), inserting my dialogues in what is called the "algorithmic self," a term used by author Claire Raymond, and whose theories refer to an algorithmic gaze, "the effect that being seen first, last, and always by AI" (p.65). In this instance, I want to add to the discussion my project *Object-selfie-machine* created in 2019, in which numbers, collaboration, and engagement were the core of this artwork.

In two different art pieces, I have engaged with a fragmented version of the self-portrait; at a moment in my artistic career, I thought this was a futuristic take on the selfie: the hologram. In the pieces *Fragments of the Digital Self* (2017) and *This is not a pipe*

(2021), I engage with the paradox of representation, the hologram as a deceptive device that portrays a speck, a piece of the self portrayed with the aid of technology. My holograms are usually a floating head reciting words that come from manifestos while making human gestures representing the duality of the "connected self," aiming to create a tension where both analog and digital meet to navigate what is called Post- Internet Art, art made after the Internet, not about the Internet or in it.

The Artist as Curator

At this turning point, I encountered different artists who motivated me to create an expanding dialogue in my artistic practice. In my Master in Photography studies at the London College of Communication in London, back in 2015, I was enthralled when I first tried to make sense of the selfie as an art form. In particular, I got inspiration from the groundbreaking work *Untitled Film Stills* by Cindy Sherman, evoking a sense of "copies without originals," a catalog of images criticizing the stereotypical female body portrayed in mid-century films and contemporary mass media.

In her body of work, self-representation is at its core; she constructs her characters using different cultural codes that mainly entail identity, celebrity status, and gender. The disguise these images portray blends with voyeurism and vulnerability; these self-portraits could be called proto-selfies as their characteristics are somewhat similar. The exaggeration of her features in her images is sometimes grotesque, portraying vanity, glamour, objectification, ugliness, and excess.

Following the tradition of the artists as curators that Duchamp started at the beginning of the 20th century (Filipovic, 2017, p. 9), Sherman works as a curator for her projects; she constructs her images as series; the title of each one varies, most times she names them *Untitled*, followed by the number of the piece. She classifies her artworks as part of a reality that, although hyperbolic, blends perfectly with how humans live these times. In 2024, Cindy Sherman actively used Instagram as an art platform; she moved beyond the analog in the nineteen nineties and used the technology at hand, for instance, selfies, which allow people to be their own curators of their images. Her Instagram selfies continue her tradition; they are over the top, and lately, she incorporated not only filters that transform the human face or the background but AI, something that she calls "AI studies":

I don't know that I'd use it [AI] as a tool, but I'm getting ideas from it. I'm using Lensa, which is where you choose a group of images, typically selfies, and you feed them into this program, and they make avatars out of the selfies.

Generally, I think they are trying to make really attractive avatars of your face. But because the images that I've given them are these altered images, the results are just so much more surprising. Some of the characters seem to have two hands growing out of one arm, or the face seems kind of chopped up. (Sherman, as cited in Shaw, 2023)

Upon my visit to *Electronic Superhighway* (2016-1966), an exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery curated by Omar Kholeif in London in 2016, I came across a monumental show featuring over 100 artists from the 1960s to the present day who discussed "the impact of computer and Internet technologies" (2016). Amalia Ulman was one of them. I became interested in this artist after seeing her prints of the four-month Instagram project *Excellences & Perfections* (2014-15) at the Whitechapel. In this project, the artist engaged in an online performance in which she disguised herself as a young woman who yearns to be famous. Therefore, she changed her appearance to one more appealing to the male gaze [or at least she fictionalized some of those changes]. She used her online persona to draw attention and increase her followers, selling herself as a brand and influencer with a privileged lifestyle. It worked. She followed Cindy Sherman's tradition in this performance, utilizing the Internet and selfies as her communication medium.

Amalia Ulman curated her durational performance during a specific period when her online audience was naturally growing due to the interest in her digital persona; nobody suspected that the images belonged to an art project or were, in a way, fake. Her project was successful mainly because it was part of a cultural phenomenon, as Dundjerovic ́s uggests that audiences respond to a specific type of technology that is attached to their every day (2023, p. 16). Therefore, whoever is behind the screen consuming these images sees Instagram as one more task done for the day; the endless and constant browsing is attached to the contemporary way of existing, of inhabiting a persona.

According to Mark Amerika *et al.*, (2019, pp. 20, 35), a persona is a performative character evolving in the process of an auto-curatorial environment. This persona possesses an aura, although not bound by the classical Benjaminian notion, but as an alternative where the original is already digital and can change its appearance to blend within the network apparatus.

The artists Sherman and Ulman are personas for the online world, both the subject and the object of their creations. Their narratives start with a woman in front of their camera, distracted by their own image or perhaps by something more captivating that goes beyond the lens. The digital manifestation of their beings is connected to an invisible yet growing audience, which is part of the construction of their digital identities and art-making.

The Selfie as an Online Archive

Figure 2
selfie_after_workout AHT Gallery February 2024
AHT Gallery

Figure 2. *selfie_after_workout*, AHT Gallery, February 2024.

I engaged in an ongoing project born out of confinement at the beginning of the lockdown due to COVID-19. This account showcases my face after working out. For this project, I follow Sherman's tradition of performing in front of the camera. At the same time, I get closer to Ulman's steps of using Instagram and selfies as her primary mediums for art creation.

The project *selfie_after_workout*, 2020-ongoing, is a work made to be shared mainly through its Instagram account. The project has been shown in two different spaces in various forms. First, in the "No Lugar" Gallery in Quito, during the midst of the pandemic, in October 2020, the group show *Secondary Effects* invited artists to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways. My take was this account shown on a cellphone attached to the gallery wall where people could browse through my [up to that point] 140 selfies. The second iteration of this project within the gallery's boundaries was recently at the Art Gallery at the University of Texas at Dallas, where I am a Ph. D. student in Visual and Performing Arts. This time, I

offered a different outcome. I utilized a photographic background to project a video reel of all the selfies I have taken so far; by February

2024, there were almost 700 selfies. Again, I exhibited this project in June 2024 at the Site131 Gallery in Dallas, Texas, as part of the group show *Foreign Affairs*, curated by the artist and academic John Pomara.

The selfies are not intentionally posed: they show the fragility of the author, the sweat, the fatigue. They are inspired in some way by the work of Rineke Dijkstra's durational projects that depict the inevitable changes of life and sometimes human suffering after a significant event; I also take inspiration from the photographic series of Roni Horn's *You are the Weather*, 1994, in which the artist took daily photos of Icelandic artist Margrét Haraldsdóttir Blöndal in six weeks while she was in water. The photos are almost identical but never the same.

Photos are the production of memories we humans preserve. Therefore, they depend on the meaning we give them, trying to preserve and, at the same time, "destroy or exclude [...] both remembrance and forgetting" (Duganne et al., 2020). Derrida, the "deconstruction" philosopher who wrote *The Archive Fever* in 1995, referred in this book to an uncontrollable desire for the archive to return to its origin because of a nostalgic and repetitive longing. Furthermore, a printed photograph is divided into an archive and the original, so I question the digital image's role in this scenario, more precisely, a digital archive of self-portraits destined to be seen in social media only.

Intriguingly, the digital archive is meant to be seen in the past tense, first seen by AI, then by the human gaze. The originality of these images gets lost in the middle of everyday spam; it is considered an image, but also a screenshot, a duplicate, an algorithmic and temporal depiction of the self, or what Joanna Zylinska would call "imaging after photography" (2023, p.2). These new representations in her view are a form of mediation, without removing any remnant of the medium itself. Then, what is the future of the digital archive, the diary that puts forth thousands of influencers who use their image to sell an unattainable lifestyle for most online users? Zylinska's research looks at the future of the photographic medium and, more broadly, the human relationship with technology in an unforeseen future involving climatic changes and planetary wars. (2023, p. 4)

The Hologram. A fragmented self-portrait.

In *Fragments of the Digital Self* (2017), I used fragmentation to portray disconnection; the more we are connected, the more the bits and pieces of information get displaced, mistaken, reused, and

detached from their original meaning. Being overwhelmingly connected is the opposite of being whole. In these pieces, I used only my head and moved my lips to recite a manifesto that would not be heard. There is a growing tension in the existence of this new self, detached from its body and aiming to communicate to an unfamiliar audience, to whoever is ready to listen:

The digital self is defined through interaction, and without it no longer exists,

The digital self oscillates with its constant online performance, doesn't have a single shape,

The digital self seeks stardom through a potentially increasing audience,

The digital self needs affirmation, attention, something real, Ignorance is a condition of the digital self.
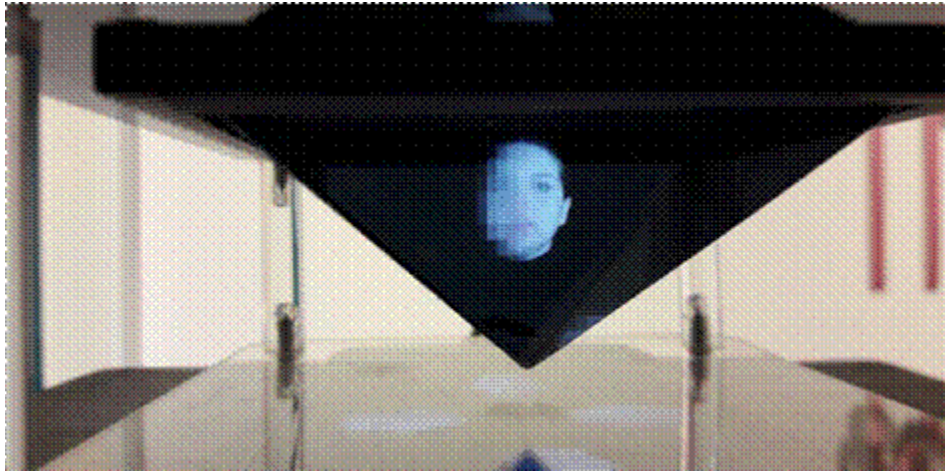

Figure 3
Fragments of the Digital Self Arte Galería 2017
+Arte Galería

Figure 3. *Fragments of the Digital Self*, +Arte Galería, 2017.

In this artwork, I created a small hologram that is visible through a transparent pyramidal shape on top of a cellphone screen, a very DIY hologram. The image was a video of my head reciting the manifesto above; the small portrayal of my face allowed the piece to confront me with a provocative presence; half of my face was glitched. This face is harmed by broken pixels, and the void of the future is represented by the black background, possibly emulating the final selfportrait by Robert Mapplethorpe, where his hand holds a skull cane while his face in the back is out of focus, floating with nothing left behind but impending death.

Popular culture has used holographic representation to portray a future where the body is somewhere between space and time, transported into different places at once, especially to communicate

an urgent message, like Princess Leia's plea for Obi-Wan Kenobi's help through R2D2 in the Star Wars Movie. In contemporary art, the use of holographic figures has been employed; such is the case of James Bridle's Homo Sacer; in this piece, a virtual assistant delivers a message regarding international law concerning "the notion of citizenship: who has the right to belong where, and under what circumstances that right can be removed" (2014). This piece aims to show a looping message that cannot be replied to or debated. Bridle uses the hologram as a way to understand the banality of these technological forms made to deliver quick messages and grasp our momentary attention; he says:

The hologram is the ultimate 21st-century worker: fully virtualized, pre-programmed, untiring, and spectacular. People stop and photograph them, marvel at their uncanny glow, and even when this reaction is bewilderment and disorientation, it is enough: the message gets through. (James Bridle / Homo Sacer, 2014)

Agreeing with Bridle's notion of the use of the hologram as a blank space, a capitalistic trait of nowadays, where there is no contestation, just a one-way message; the holographic self-representation is perhaps a lack of self, a cyborg, a hybrid of data and image, to leave behind the two-dimensional representation of the human, and to present a future where the void is part of the technological rush that shapes the 21st century's changing representation of the self.

AI and the Selfie: Object-Selfie-Machine (2019) and For the Time Being (2021)

These artworks were made with the collaboration of David Villacis, Ph. D. in Applied

Mathematics, who was enthusiastic about my ideas and the possible outcomes of the artworks with his technical vision. With his expertise in machine learning, he trained the computer with artificial intelligence to obtain a specific outcome–to tell it what to do. For instance, the piece *Object-Selfie-Machine* was commissioned for the *Reprogramar la(s) Materia(s)* exhibition, part of the celebrations for the 150 years of the creation of the Universidad Politecnica Nacional del Ecuador (EPN). I worked with Dr. Villacis for six months to create this piece based on the question "What holds greater significance: the selfie or the person?"

The artwork raises this question to invite the audience to take a selfie as part of an artistic installation. It is not just any digital self-portrait. It is the creation of a new visual context—every time the audience (in this case, the university students) walks through the Chemistry Hall, they face the artwork and opt to take a selfie. The

background of this image is artificially created from the images provided by the research archives from different departments of EPN.

The program recognizes a person using a deep convolutional network and training the algorithm with photographs of thousands of people. It isolates them from its background, creating a new picture, a real-time techno collage, an analog-digital-interactive piece that can be shared instantly through Instagram @epnselfie.

The idea stems from a personal approach to the selfie as an object of self-significance. It goes beyond interactivity with human beings or what they do or understand about it. Then, the audience realizes that in order for the selfie to exist, artificial intelligence was put into place.

My next collaborative piece with Dr. Villacis was *For the Time Being*. This project was inspired by my Master's dissertation, "The Disappearing Present: Technology's Anticipation of the Performative Self," 2016. In it, I problematize the state of the self when using technology. The self appears, disappears, performs in different ways, takes a selfie, and gets fulfillment by being inside a screen in a vertical frame; the digital self is inside an image. This train of thought led me to think about the self as an object—this piece dialogues with concepts from "object-oriented ontology" proposed by Graham Harman.

Under Harman's thinking, an object has an autonomous existence apart from its various relations (2020, p. 2). To be considered an object, it must meet two simple criteria: "undermining" and "overmining". The first criterion refers to what an object is made of, and the latter refers to what it does. The selfie meets these two reductions as it would be the first problematization around the thing, and the being due to the act of taking a selfie, its content is the same. The selfie-taker is simultaneously the object and the subject (Harman, 2020).

The artwork in question was brought to life in a gallery context. The idea for a new algorithm was to create a selfie from digital images of objects. Dr. Villacis trained the computer with artificial intelligence to extract the attributes from an image bank of objects, such as flowers, to reconstruct them as a selfie taken in real-time. Consequently, the person who takes the selfie will become an object because the artwork reconstructs the face (or the notion of a face) and gives it a new meaning, a new self, which moves away from human significance, a very abstract selfie.
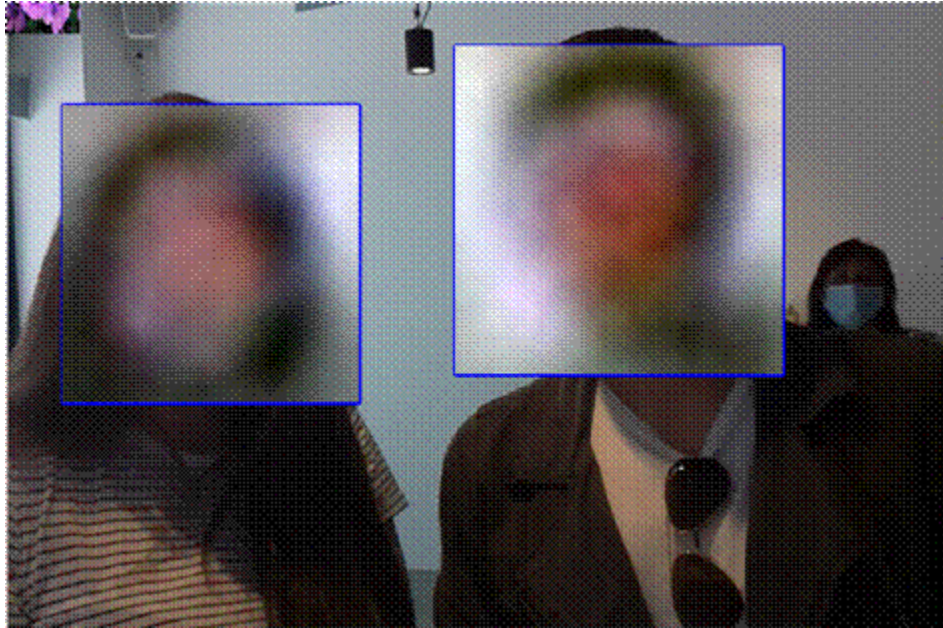
Figure 4
For the Time Being audience interaction 2021 realtime selfie Arte Galería Taller Quito
+Arte Galería Taller

Figure 4. *For the Time Being*, audience interaction, 2021, real-time selfie. +Arte Galería Taller, Quito.

Conclusion: Let's not Jump onto a Screen

In the essay "The Selfie Beyond its Aesthetics: An Object with its Own Agency" (2023), I concluded that the future of the selfie is an image produced by AI. The selfie is, exists, and mutates from self-representation and performance. Its future fuses into the continuous and changing human-machine conversation, now allowing it to be the image/object of the first and second decade of the 21st century to give way to a new and complex panorama.

Less than two years ago, Artificial Intelligence had a global rebound, just as ubiquitous as the selfie was ten years ago. Hence, the conversation turns to what humans can do with the help of the moment's technology. However, what can the machine do without any human agency involved? This ontological turn somehow changes things because the so-called "intelligence" has surpassed humans and can control creativity. This intelligence takes a selfie that uploads to social networks and likes itself. That may be a reasonable outcome for this multifaceted image/object. However, in my artistic practice, I do not predict the use of AI shortly.

When I entered the Ph. D. program, I realized that my ideas started to shift in a direction where the instantaneity of the selfie and

the digital object per se was no longer appealing. In my practice, I neglected the slowness of the processes and the reconnection to the self in different forms and iterations, not just the versions of the digital image.

"The Disappearing Self" is a central question in my work. I have realized I am interested in the suspension of time because my concept of disappearance involves inhabiting both frozen and current time, how video manipulates this idea, and how self-representation through alternate photographic processes makes an image fade away, part of its nature. Indeed, I have slowed down the process.

Why, in the first place, did I get interested in my research topic? I was feeling the need to discuss the selfie as part of our outgrowing attachment to technology; as Conrad Murray says, "The selfie [...] is most commonly regarded as a social problem – and a sign that society has become too obsessed with technology" (2021, p. 1). Nevertheless, society is tired of using technology as well. Tung-Hui Hu, in his book *Digital Lethargy, Dispatches from an Age of Disconnection* (2022), discusses the concept of digital lethargy as the state of being passive, avoiding decision-making and not showing one's true self, performing constantly in different versions of [our]selves (vii), making the digital self lethargic. This is the core of why my current work is introducing an alternative world without the Internet–leaving behind the rush to consume and experience the world with the mediation of a small screen. Perhaps I was being lethargic all this time, consuming from my selfies and disappearing inside my art. **post(s)**

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